

The sun begins to set over the island, orange light reflecting off the rippling water. Further inland, the shadows lengthen, and the island seems to become almost sinister in the evening light. Still, the string of lights around the tiki bar feels inviting even now, the generator humming away. Jonathan claps once again, the sound rippling as though the very island itself was clapping with him.

“The time has come,” he announces, “for your first night upon the island. This evening we have stocked each room full of items which may aid you in your coming battle tomorrow night. Please, take your pick before you have to return to your bungalows for curfew, as indicated by the sound of a bell. After all, it’s important you all get a good sleep so you’re in top condition for tomorrow night.”

Personally, you’ve already made your choice.

Jonathan points into the darkness of the island, beneath the trees. There’s a path leading inland, hard to follow in the shade from the trees, which block the light of the moon. On and on you go inward—the gloom makes the journey feel longer than it is, but you don’t stray from the path.

Eventually the path curves, and you find yourself in front of a screen door. Opening it, you find yourself in a small corridor... before another screen door. Beyond the second, however, you can see moonlight filtering in. You step through into the aviary. A large screen, maybe 50 feet high, extends above you. It’s unusually quiet, just with the sound of wind, and occasional rustling. Maybe most of the birds are asleep. In any case, a number of paths wind through the zone. In the moonlight you can see the flowers, which would no doubt be stunning in daylight, pepper bushes and trees along the paths. A man-made river runs a loop around the edge of the vast aviary, which one could drift down. Nothing to do now but look for items.

As you walk along the winding paths through the Aviary, a certain unexpected peace fills you. For once, you don’t feel like you want a drink. Maybe it’s the knowledge that no-one in this strange resort really knows you, and that no-one who knows you can follow you to this strange resort. Maybe it’s the moonlight, gently filtering through the transparent roof, mixed with the gentle humidity of the air, like being enveloped in a soft warm blanket that follows you wherever you go. Or maybe it’s the birds. Yeah, it’s probably the birds.

Even at this time of night, you can sense many pairs of curious eyes following you as you stroll along, as if you have all the time in the world. You’ve never had particularly good eyesight, but somehow a faint rustling and a dim outline of one of the many denizens of this place is enough for you to make out its species. Owls, Nighthawks, Nightingales and... Seagulls?

Yes, seagulls. Somehow the most alert and curious of the lot, staring directly at you. Why are there seagulls in a place like this? Why not... literally any other species other than the one tourists would *most* want to avoid? And how come they’re staring at you so... knowingly. You

think back to the dead gull you found in your pocket early today. Maybe showing that directly to resort staff was a bad idea, actually.

Suddenly, you hear a flapping off to your right. You shift your gaze over to a small creature perched next to a small wooden bench. Looks like one of the gulls has escaped! But how, and how come it's alone? You and the creature stare at each other for a few moments, and you feel a sudden pang in your heart.

"Looks like we both managed to escape our old lives, huh?" you say as you bend down and reach into your pockets. "But in the end, didn't make either of us less lonely." You find a couple forgotten, broken crackers and a pretzel buried deep in one of your articles of clothing and hold them out to the lonely gull. It enthusiastically hops towards you and snatches the pretzel out of your hand. As it does, you hear a small, plastic "*thump*" sound as it bumps past something hidden behind the bench.

"Huh?" You grunt and shift down to look, throwing the crackers on the path behind you for the gull to enjoy. It runs off to do so. The area behind the bench is hard to see, but reaching around, you find a sealed bottle of **Coconut Water** and a pair of **Binoculars**. Strange, who would drop these and just leave them here? *Heh*, you think to yourself. *Maybe it was the gull.*

You pick up the items and investigate them. You find the Coconut Water actually has a couple pieces of paper stuck to it. The first is a **Resort Reservation**. Looks fancy, maybe you could use this to get back in here, if you ever decided one day you really were looking to die. The second is a **Bar Bill**. Now this is something you're more familiar with. Scrawled on it are the vote values for a few of your fellow guests:

- **Paul. E. Woggins: 1 Vote**
- **Vegael: 5 Votes**
- **Shunny: 0 Votes**
- **Kal-El: 10 Votes**
- **Mr Clean: 2 Votes**
- **The Unnamed One: 0 Votes**

"*Heh*. Thanks, pal." You say to the gull without turning around as you start to pocket the various trinkets.

"A thank you? For what?" The gull replies.

The gull replies?! Wait a minute. You whip around suddenly. That's no gull, it's another type of bird entirely. You see Queen Elissandra, your fellow cultist, standing before you, picking a couple of stray twigs out of her dress. When did she get here? Guess someone so dainty wouldn't be one to make much noise.

Seeing the look of surprise played out across your face, she chuckles.

"Apologies, sir. I didn't mean to startle you? Who were you talking to, and what's that in your hand?"

"Hmmm?", you reply, quickly pretending to be something other than a man transfixed by nocturnal seagulls. "Oh, no-one. And uh... nothing." you continue as you finish pocketing the items. You might be allies, but you don't have to share everything you've got with every dame you run across.

"How are you doing on this fine night, Eli- I mean, ma'am?" You smile as you correct yourself. Better to be formal for now, you think. "Found anything good?"

"I haven't if you haven't!" She retorts playfully. "Except for a man in a strange red shirt!" You blush a little, despite yourself. You always did have a soft spot for people who... weren't immediately disgusted by every aspect of your being.

"Shall we go on? I'm afraid there's not much that can be observed in this light, but this place does have a certain air of tranquility, no?" She beckons you to follow as she begins to walk deeper into the enclosure. You follow, not like you had much else to do at the moment.

The two of you spend some time walking together in silence. Elissandra occasionally peers beyond the mesh, squinting to try and make out any of its inhabitants, but seems to have difficulty doing so. You, on the other hand, are acutely aware of the various denizens tracking your progress. After a while, the silence begins to make you uncomfortable, and you attempt to make conversation.

"So... Eli." You go for a more casual address this time, might make for some more interesting conversation. "You got much waiting for you back home? You know, for when you get outta here?"

"Oh my, yes!" She responds quickly. "I have my entire kingdom waiting for me! It is imperative I return there as soon as possible, or all of Azuria could suffer the consequences! Not to mention my family and servants must be worried sick about me!"

"Oh, yeah. That's uh... rough, buddy." You aren't entirely sure how to console her. You're used to talking to people whose lives have more meaning than yours, but this might be a little too steep of a gradient for even you to navigate. "I'm uh... sure we're going to get out of this." You add, with as much faux confidence as you can muster. *That was a stupid thing to say*, you think to yourself. Maybe breaking the silence was a bad idea. For the first time tonight, you begin to wish you had a drink.

"Good heavens!" Elissandra's shriek whips you out of your state of self-pity and you tense up. Could it be another guest, trying to attack? That strange envelope did say this was some sort of death game after all. Even if you don't fully believe it yourself, you know that at the very least,

some of the others do. But didn't the letter you received also say that bloodshed wasn't allowed tonight?

You turn to follow Elissandra's gaze, as she stands transfixed by something coming closer from behind the screen. It's.. it's...

"It's a phoenix!" she gasps under her breath. She begins, as if in a trance, to move towards the bird as it continues to approach. You follow suit, analysing the creature. It has an iridescent sheen and a faint glow about it, certainly like no bird you've ever seen. But all the same, it doesn't take you long to recognise the species.

"That ain't no phoenix, that's a pheasant." You tell her, bluntly, as you reach down and pick up a long stick off the ground.

You reach through the bars with your stick and prod the creatures' plumage. She gasps, but you stop her with a raise of your hand. "Look," you say as a clump of it breaks off with a small *crack* and falls to the ground. "The coat is fake." Puzzled, she bends down to inspect the clump. Looking more closely, you both see it's clearly just a bunch of imitation feathers painted with some kind of luminous substance, glued together, then loosely attached to the poor creature's back and wings, to be removed at some later time.

"Oh..." The disappointed woman murmurs to herself. "I guess I shouldn't have expected anything more from such a place as this. How lousy..."

You both let out a *sigh* in unison. And to think, you had almost started to believe in this whole fantastical "death game" thing. The night really must be getting to you. Maybe you ought to just head to sleep before you make everything even worse. As if sensing your thoughts, the ringing of a small bell notifies you that the exploration phase is over. The two of you make your way back to the tiki bar, guided by the strings of lights. In the dim light you stroll back to your bungalow, the boardwalk creaking under your feet. The door is unlocked. It doesn't take long for you to pass out atop your luxurious bed, awaiting the next day.

To be continued...