

# Chapter 1

## The Four Elements Hotel

So, what's your name?

*Excuse me?*

I know nothing about you. I'd like to remedy that.  
So... what's your name?

*...Ink. My name is Ink.*

Oh? What an unusual name...  
And where are you from, Ink?

*I'm from Bellbridge. Still there, unfortunately. I'm enrolled in the local university.*

Ah, Bellbridge. Quaint little town, isn't it? Nice and quiet.

*For the most part, yeah. Quiet.*

Do you like it there?

*No, not really. The second I graduate, I'm outta here.  
Until then, my life is going to consist of good books and cheap beer.*

...I see.  
(Short pause)  
Say, do you hear the wind?

*Kinda. I can hear you just fine, but the wind sounds sort of... muffled. Distant.*

Doesn't make a whole lot of sense, does it?

*I'm dreaming. Things don't have to make sense.*

Oh? How can you be so sure that you're dreaming?

(Ink appears on screen)

*Well, for starters, I'm looking myself square in the eye right now. I mean, unless there are two of me, that isn't possible.*

*And there's only one Ink Greer. Trust me. I checked.*

???: Um... hello?

Oh! Someone's calling for you, it seems.

???: Hey, wake up.

Thanks for the chat.

???: Oh, come on...

Ink's cheek *stung*.

(screen blurs into hotel room)

Ink found himself sitting upright on a cheap mattress, half-buried in sheets and sore all over. He went for a twisting stretch, placing a hand on his aching back.

*I ought to give myself a round of applause. Falling asleep fully clothed, jacket and everything? That's a new low. I must've passed right out.*

Ink took a moment to compose himself. As he wiped the sweat from his face, his eyes were drawn to a figure sitting next to him.

(Aether appears)

It was a girl. Still drowsy, Ink stared at her in a hazy stupor.

???: Morning, stranger. Sorry about the whole pinching-you-awake thing. You're a heavy sleeper, I guess.

Anyway, I know this is sort of sudden, but, um....

I was hoping you'd know what's going on. Where are we, exactly?

The question caught Ink off guard. He did his best to ignore what he assumed was a hangover, and tried to come up with an answer.

*Wait a sec... where AM I?*

(Looks around room)

*... A hotel?*

*It's a little old fashioned, but there's no mistaking it. How the hell did I wind up in a hotel? Either I got smashed last night or...*

???: Hey, are you okay?

You seem really out of it.

**Ink:** Y-Yeah, I'm fine. I'm just a bit disoriented, that's all.

Ink examined this new companion. Who was she?

*Did I sleep with her or something? I mean, that'd be the obvious assumption. I guess there's only one way of knowing for sure...*

**Ink:** Listen, uh... do you remember anything from last night?

???: Oh! Well, um...

The girl trailed off. Ink couldn't help but steal an admiring glance during the silence.

*She sure is cute, whoever she is. I wonder where we met...*

Ink was desperate to know more about her. He could make a quick guess - judging from her age and appearance, he had a hunch that she too was a student at Bellbridge University. *We probably met on campus. No, wait, that couldn't have been it. If we got a room, then we must have met downtown somewhere. Why can't I remember anything?*

???: I'm sorry. I can't remember a single thing about last night... and I'm pretty sure I don't know you, either.

*She can't remember anything either, huh? Give me a break...*

Ink managed to crack a smile in spite of his frustration. The least he could do was try to say something to try and quell the uneasy feeling in his gut.

\*\*\*\*\*CHOICE TREE 1\*\*\*\*\*

Choice 1a: "Might as well introduce myself. I'm Ink."

**Ink:** Might as well introduce myself. I'm Ink.

???: Well... it's nice to meet you, Ink.

Choice 1b: "Well... this is awkward!"

**Ink:** Well... this is awkward!

Admittedly it was a poor attempt to lighten the mood, but it seemed to have done the trick.

**Ink:** Maybe we got off on the wrong foot. I'm Ink.

???: Well then... it's nice to meet you, Ink.

Choice 1c: "This isn't what it looks like."

**Ink:** This isn't what it looks like.

???: Pardon me?

**Ink:** I understand that waking up next to a man you don't know in an unfamiliar place might seem a little... sketchy. But I swear that I don't know any more about what's going than you do. You can trust me, I promise.

???: I believe you, don't worry. You don't seem like the kind of guy who'd try something - and anyway, you look pretty scared. No offense.

**Ink:** Well, thanks for the vote of confidence. If it helps at all, my name is Ink.

???: Well then... it's nice to meet you, Ink.

\*\*\*\*\*END CHOICES\*\*\*\*\*

**Ink:** Heh. You know, I don't get 'nice to meet you' all that often. Most people just comment on how weird my name is.

???: If it makes you feel any better, my name's pretty weird, too. I'm Aether.

**Ink:** I must admit I haven't met anyone by the name of Aether before. I like it, though. Is it spelled A-E-T-H-E-R?

**Aether:** Yup! You wouldn't believe how many people pronounce it wrong.

The two shared a gentle laugh. Ink slumped back onto the headrest and sank into a comfortable silence.

**Aether:** Alright, Ink, let's retrace our steps a bit. What's the last thing you remember before waking up?

**Ink:** Let's see...

Ink scratched his head. The simple task of remembering was proving more difficult than he had anticipated.

*I guess I don't remember going to bed, so I can't rule out the possibility that I had gone out drinking. I've got a week off, after all.*

*Wait, what am I even saying? That doesn't make any sense.*

**Ink:** Hold on. I'm pretty sure today is the 19th. Most students have the week off.

**Aether:** Oh yeah! Were you out for a night on the town?

**Ink:** That's the thing - I told myself I wouldn't be going out this week. I was going to use the time to catch up on schoolwork. I'm pretty sure that last night I was holed up in my room, studying.

**Aether:** Weird.

**Ink:** I'm pretty lame, huh? What kind of student *actually* spends his week off studying? I usually don't-

**Aether:** No, that's not it.

If yesterday was the 19th, then I don't think I went out either.

*If neither of us were out last night, then what are we doing here? Is today even the 19th? I guess I had better make sure...*

(Aether disappears)

Ink lifted himself off the bed. It was only when he was standing up that he realized something was off.

Ink could usually feel the weight of his cell phone, wallet, and keys on his person, but today he felt especially light. He patted himself down, but it did no good: his jacket pockets had nothing in them.

Ink scanned the room, searching the bed, floor, and armoire for his belongings. He came up empty.

**Ink:** Damn! Where's all my stuff?

Curiously, Ink *did* find something tucked away in his jeans pocket. He reached for it.

(PDA appears)

The object that he pulled out was alien to him. The device, which resembled an old PDA, had the date written across the screen: **3/79**.

*3/79? What the hell?*

*No... that must be a 1, not a 7. Man, I'm out of it.*

*So it IS March 19th: that's one problem solved.*

*But what is this thing? And where's my phone?*

**Aether:** Don't tell me you've got one, too.

**Ink:** This isn't mine. My phone looks nothing like this.

(Aether appears with PDA)

*Oh, wow, she wasn't kidding. She's got the exact same model.*

**Aether:** My smartphone seems to have gotten swapped out for... one of these. Whatever it is.

**Ink:** Really? That is *too* weird.

**Aether:** Think they were handing them out somewhere? I *am* a sucker for free stuff.

**Ink:** I don't know about that...

Ink examined the PDA further. It appeared that the only menu option was "**Contact**".

**Ink:** This device has had, like, 99 percent of its features removed. it's only letting me go to the contacts menu. Err, scratch that, "Contact" menu. Singular.

**Aether:** I've seen rotary phones with more features than this ol' thing.

**Ink:** Heh. Well, let's see if "Contact" actually does anything...

(PDA appears on "Contact" menu)

Ink soon realized why the word Contact wasn't pluralized. There was but a single name in the Contact list: Sean Ward.

**Ink:** Sean! Finally, something familiar.

(Aether appears)

**Aether:** Sean? Who's that?

**Ink:** He's a good friend of mine. I'm gonna text him and see if he knows what happened last night. He might have the scoop on these PDAs as well.

**Aether:** Oh. I see.

**Ink:** Something the matter?

**Aether:** Nothing, really. It's just that the only person in *my* PDA's Contact list is my dad.

**Ink:** Did you shoot him a text?

**Aether:** Nah. He'd be pretty mad if I told him I woke up in a hotel with some boy I don't know.

**Ink:** Maybe you should send him something anyway. He might be worried about you.

**Aether:** Yeah. You're probably right.

(Aether disappears)

*Let's see if this thing actually works...*

(Fades to PDA screen)

Sean, this is Ink. You there?	
	Ink? What's with this?
What's with what?	

	What's with this PDA? Did you put it here?
What do you mean? Weren't you the one that left it with me?	
	What the hell are you talking about? This piece of junk was in my mailbox this morning, no return address.
	You're the only name in the Contact list, and it doesn't seem to be able to do anything except send and receive texts from you.
	I tried texting you earlier to ask you about it but you never got back to me.
	Am I wrong in assuming that this is from you?
	You still there, brah?
Yeah, I just don't know what to say. Is this some kind of prank?	
	Prank? you're the one who's pulling MY leg, buddy.
Cut the crap. Just tell me what happened last night.	
	I honestly have no idea what you're talking about. Not sure how I wound up with this thing. I assumed you knew something since your name was in the Contact list.
Let me get this straight. You somehow wound up with a PDA that doesn't belong to you, which you're using to message me right now. Is that correct?	
	Yup.
Then we're in the exact same situation. I also have a PDA of unknown origin that can only send and receive texts from YOU.	
	u srs?
Of course I'm serious! Are YOU being serious?	

This isn't another one of your jokes?	
	That's a negative, friendo. Trust me, I'm just as confused as you are.
Do you remember what you were doing last night?	
	Yeah, I was bar-hopping with some of my other friends. Nothing out of the ordinary. Don't remember running into you, though.
Well, if you're telling the truth, then someone must've given one of these to each of us.	
	Weird. Do you have any idea where they came from?
No, sorry. By the way, where are you right now?	
	Dorm.
And did anything out of the ordinary happen to you today?	
	Nah, I've just been shitposting you-know-where all morning. Why do you ask?
I'm in a hotel with some girl I've never met. Not sure how I got here.	
	ooo, who's the lucky lady? She must be real special if she got you to leave your room on a weekday. Proud of youuuuu~
Hey, it's not like that. I don't remember anything from last night. Neither does she.	
	Sure buddy ;)
	Come back to campus. I want to have a chat with you about your ladyfriend.
Once I get my bearings I'll be heading back. Anyway, text me if you remember anything about these PDAs. ttyl	

(PDA screen fades back out to hotel room)

Tucking the PDA back into his pocket, Ink turned to his new acquaintance.

(Aether appears)

Ink suspected that she may not have contacted her father at all, but supposed it was none of his business.

**Aether:** So, what now?

**Ink:** Just, uh... just give me a moment to think this through.

(Screen blacks out)

Ink sunk his head into his hands. He took a series of deep breaths as he mulled over what to do next.

*I need to figure out what happened to my wallet and phone before I do anything else. They aren't in this room - I know that much.*

*It isn't impossible that I left them in my dorm or at a bar, but without my phone it'll be hard to ask around about 'em. Man, this is going to be a huge pain in the ass...*

(Hotel room and Aether reappear)

**Ink:** You don't need to wait on me, you know.

**Aether:** I was sorta hoping we'd be able to figure out what happened last night. You know, like, together.

**Ink:** Right. I guess that's be the sensible thing to do.

**Aether:** Oh, don't look so glum. It'll be fun!

Think of it as a real-life mystery novel. We'd make a pretty badass crime-fighting duo, don'tcha think? You wanna be the grizzled detective or the quirky sidekick?

\*\*\*\*\*CHOICE TREE 2\*\*\*\*\*

Choice 2a: "Detective."

**Ink:** If I had to pick, I guess I'd be the Detective. Not sure if I'd consider myself *grizzled*, though.

**Aether:** I guess that makes me the sidekick. I don't mind if you take charge, but I'll be *real* upset if you don't come up with a snappy catchphrase!

Ink found himself smiling, Aether's enthusiasm was contagious.

**Ink:** Alright then, my trusty sidekick. I'm thinking we ought to head out. Is there anything else you need to take care of before we leave?

**Aether:** Nope! After you, detective.

Choice 2b: "Sidekick"

**Ink:** Sidekick is fine by me. I'd hate to steal your thunder.

**Aether:** Ooh, I've always wanted my own personal Robin!

**Ink:** You know, I'd always considered myself more of a Watson than a Robin.

**Aether:** Oh, whatever. Now what should I have you do first?

**Ink:** Hey, I signed up for 'Sidekick', not 'Slave'.

**Aether:** ...Baby steps.

Ink rolled his eyes, though he couldn't help but smile.

**Ink:** Well then, detective, I'm just about ready to leave this place. Is there anything else you need to take care of before we head out?

**Aether:** Nope. Let's book it.

\*\*\*\*\*END CHOICES\*\*\*\*\*

(Screen blacks out)

A frame on the wall caught Ink's attention as he was leaving.

(Four Elements panel appears)

**Ink:** The Four Elements Hotel, huh?

**Aether:** That's what it says. I don't suppose there's a Four Elements Hotel in Bellbridge?

**Ink:** Do you live in Bellbridge, by any chance?

**Aether:** Well, yeah. I'm a Psych student at Bellbridge U.

(Reverts back to Aether in hotel room)

*Hah! Looks like my guess was right... though I suppose it wasn't much of a stretch.*

**Ink:** You don't say! What year?

**Aether:** I'm just a freshman; I haven't even chosen a Psych specialization yet. I live in the dorms on campus.

**Ink:** Well then, it looks like we're headed in the same direction. Except...

**Aether:** "Except"? I'm not sure I like the way you said that.

(Turns back to Four Elements panel)

**Ink:** Except I'm sure that there's no hotel called *The Four Elements* anywhere in Bellbridge.

**Aether:** What? Where are we, then?

**Ink:** Beats me.

Ink pressed his palm hard against his forehead in an attempt to jog his memory, but all it did was worsen his headache. He let out a loud sigh.

**Aether:** Maybe we should head to the reception desk. At the very least, we can find out what city we're in.

**Ink:** Yeah, good idea. With any luck, they'll have a lost and found, too.

(Screen blacks out)

With Aether in tow, Ink, cracked open the door and made his way into the hallway.

(Panorama of hallway)

A large, eerie-blue monitor was the first thing to grab Ink's attention. What was it doing in the hallway?

Transfixed on the screen, Ink was slow to notice that he and Aether, weren't alone. To the right of the monitor were two people, both of whom approached him.

(Rae appears on the right)

The one on the right was a disheveled man in his mid-twenties...

(Beth appears on the left)

and the one on the left was an elderly woman with a calm countenance. Ink stared right back at them, wide-eyed.

???: It looks like you were right.

???: Hmm...

The man sporting a hoodie looked back to the oversized monitor.

???: Would you two mind coming over here?

**Ink:** You mean... us?

???: Yeah. I need your help with something.

Ink and Aether edged closer to him at a slow pace, but the young man's request had Ink feeling uneasy. Before they arrived at the end of the hallway, Ink made a request of his own.

**Ink:** Could you maybe find someone else to help? I don't mean to be a pain, but my friend and I have had a bit of a rough night and need to get back home as soon as possible.

???: Psh. Yeah, well, good luck with that.

Ink scowled.

(Beth and Rae disappear and the screen zooms in on the hallway door)

Grabbing Aether by the wrist, he hurriedly cut between the two strangers. He reached for the door leading out.

(Screen vibrates slightly)

**Ink:** I-It's locked?

(Comes back to hallway with Rae on the right)

???: See, what'd I tell 'ya?

**Ink:** Then this can't be the right way out of the hotel. Come on, we should check the other side of the hall.

(Beth appears on the left)

???: We've already had a look around. The doors are all locked, I'm afraid. They can only be opened from the other side.

As much as Ink wanted to believe the old woman was just pulling his leg, the sternness in her voice suggested otherwise.

**Ink:** Then what, we're trapped here?

???: For now. I tried kicking the door down but I wasn't getting anywhere fast. Sucker's sealed tight.

**Ink:** Where are the staff? Does the front desk know that this part of the hotel has been sectioned off?

**???:** I haven't been able to get hold of any staff, but I doubt that anyone even works here anymore, so that's hardly a surprise.

I guess we've gotta wait for the last person to wake up.

**Ink:** Last person? What are you talking about?

The stranger let out a sigh and pointed to the screen.

(Moves to screen with handprint and text: "CONTESTANTS: 2/5")

*I wish I could do something other than ask questions, but this is officially starting to worry me.*

**Ink:** Contestants... two of five? What the hell does that mean?

(Reverts back to hallway with Beth and Rae)

**???:** I would assume that refers to us.

**Ink:** Couldn't be...

**???:** Put your hand on the, uh... thing.

Ink complied.

(Flashes to screen with handprint and text: "CONTESTANTS: 3/5")

The screen produced a quizzical beep, the display updated, and Ink's heart sank.

**Ink:** ... Three of five.

**???:** Well, that settles it. I guess you're a Contestant after all.

**Ink:** As a heads-up, I did *not* sign up for this. Whatever this is.

**???:** Yeah, and I bet you've never had your handprint taken, either. But there ya' go.

Anyway, it doesn't take a genius to figure out that the computer and door are connected. I'm thinking it'll unlock once it says five outta five.

Ink was at a loss for words. While he tried vainly to remember what he had done to wind up here...

(Screen flashes and Aether replaces Beth)

Aether placed her hand on the screen, which now read: "Contestants: 4/5".

**???:** Thanks.

**Aether:** I... I just want to go home.

It had taken a while for Ink to notice, but Aether had gone much quieter all of a sudden.

Was she scared, shy, or just bewildered? Whatever the case, Ink figured he had better try and get everyone acquainted in an attempt to cheer Aether up.

**Ink:** Um, if we're going to have to wait for a fifth person, we might as well introduce ourselves. I'm Ink.

**???:** Your name is Ink? I-N-K?

(Beth replaces Rae)

**???:** Is that your real name, or just a nickname?

**Ink:** It's the real deal! My full legal name is Ink Greer. I study English at Bellbridge University.

**Aether:** I go to Bellbridge University, too! I'm a first-year Psychology student.

(pause)

Oh, I forgot to say my name, didn't I? I'm Aether.

**Beth:** My name is **Beth**. Beth Marche.

It's a pleasure to meet you all, strange circumstances aside.

**Aether:** The pleasure's all mine, Beth.

Following Aether's lead, Ink shot the old woman a small nod and a phony smile.

(Rae replaces Beth)

**Rae:** My name's **Rae**. I'm a programmer. Freelance. If you want something done quickly and done right, I'm your guy.

**Ink:** You sound pretty sure of yourself. Are you famous or something?

**Rae:** I oughta be. I'm good at what I do. Real good.

**Aether:** Did you graduate from Bellbridge U? I hear good things about their Computer Science program.

**Rae:** I was enrolled there for a bit. I dropped out.

**Aether:** Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to...

**Rae:** You can stop right there. I don't want your pity.

I'm doin' just fine without a degree. If anything I should be pityin' *you* for attending that joke of a school.

**Ink:** Joke of a school?

**Rae:** You guys are too young to understand, but one day you'll come to realize that your school is absolute trash. I can think of a thousand better ways to spend your time... and a million better ways to spend your money.

Aether looked as though she had something to say but was too afraid to speak up. Ink would have loved to shut Rae up with a snappy retort for insulting his school, but was unable to come up with anything clever.

**Rae:** Just some friendly advice for 'ya. The people that run that school are th-

The sound of a closing door interrupted a mumbling Rae. Curious, Ink looked about the room.

(Aether and Rae disappear, screen moves off to the right, and Liza appears)

A girl, perhaps a few years younger than Ink, had emerged from a door to his right. She glared at Ink, then after a few seconds turned to Rae instead.

**???:** You.

(Rae appears on the left)

**Rae:** What?

**???:** You're Rae, I take it?

**Rae:** Yeah, that's me.

The new girl gave Rae a dirty look. She had a haughty air about her.

**Rae:** Wait, how do you know my name?

(Beth replaces Rae)

**Beth:** How long have you been eavesdropping on us?

**???:** Pretty much this whole time.

**Ink:** Eavesdropping? Why do that?

**???:** Isn't it obvious? When you've been kidnapped, the most important thing to do is to find out as much as you can about your captors!

You guys weren't saying anything useful though, though, so I thought I'd just let you know I was awake. You can ransom me off now. Chop chop.

(Aether replaces Beth)

**Aether:** What makes you think you were kidnapped? I don't see how you could come to that conclusion from listening to our conversation.

**???:** Well I certainly don't remember entering this hotel, which means that someone *brought* me here, disgusting as that thought may be.

**Ink:** Can you think of any reasons why someone would want to kidnap you?

**???:** I'm sure you're already aware of this, but my father and I are quite wealthy.

*Well, that was blunt.*

**???:** It's no use trying to trick by talking about "Contestants" or any of that nonsense. I had a feeling that someone would try this eventually. I've already notified my father, and he says he'll pay whatever you demand.

**Ink:** You've already notified him? How?

The girl reached into her bag and pulled out a familiar trinket.

**???:** The only thing this device seems to be able to do is contact my father. An intentional modification, I'm sure.

(Rae replaces Aether)

**Rae:** You've got one too, huh? Man, it's just my luck...

(Beth replaces Liza)

**Beth:** Oh, is that what these things are?

**Ink:** Wait, so *everyone* was given a PDA?

(Beth and Rae disappear)

Silence. The Contestants all eyed each other.

**Ink:** Just to make sure, does anyone have *any* idea how they wound up here?

(Aether appears on the left)

**Aether:** No.

(Rae replaces Aether)

**Rae:** Nope.

(Beth replaces Rae)

**Beth:** I'm afraid not.

**Ink:** Nobody? Awesome. Just awesome.

(Liza reappears on the right)

???: For the record, it isn't too late to admit you kidnapped me. Acting clueless... how predictable.

*I can't blame her for being cautious, but there's a fine line between caution and paranoia. Let's see if I can get her to open up a little.*

**Ink:** Could you at least tell us your name?

**Liza:** It's Liza. Though we all know you didn't have to ask.

**Rae:** Cool. Liza, could you put your hand on that screen there?

(Screen vibrates shortly)

**Liza:** Absolutely not!

Why would I help my captors?

**Rae:** We didn't kidnap you, okay? Get that through your skull.

**Liza:** That's a laugh. Do you really expect me to believe some smarmy thug like you?

(Screen shakes)

**Rae:** You wanna say that again?!

Just put your hand on the screen so we can open the damn door!

**Liza:** You know what? I don't like your attitude.

**Rae:** *My* attitude?! You're the one who isn't cooperating! Seriously, could you *be* any more obnoxious?!

**Liza:** Well now I'm *definitely* not opening the door. it's probably some sort of kidnapper scheme, anyway.

**Ink:** Liza, did you ever consider that the rest of us might also have been kidnapped?

**Rae:** Exactly! Maybe I'm getting ransomed off, too. Ever think of that?

**Liza:** Yeah, because when I think of people who would be worth abducting, the first thing that comes to mind is "debt-addled university dropout".

You know what my father says about people like you? He says that people who quit shouldn't even bother to try.

(Screen shakes)

**Rae:** Oh, fuck off! You don't know a single thing about me!

(Screen shakes again)

**Beth:** Stop! Both of you!

(Rae and Liza are replaced by Beth in the middle)

Beth who had remained quiet for a time, interjected with surprising ferocity.

Her rage disappeared as quickly as it had manifested.

**Beth:** I don't think yelling at one another is going to get us anywhere.

Liza... even if we were your captors, why would we trap ourselves in the same room as you?

Wouldn't we want you to avoid seeing our faces?

(Beth moves to the left and Liza appears on the right)

**Liza:** But... I...

... I suppose you have a point.

(Rae replaces Liza)

**Beth:** And Rae... would you mind being a bit more courteous to the young lady? She's in the same situation as the rest of us. I'm sure you can understand how stressful this is.

**Rae:** Yeah, whatever.

**Beth:** Now will you two apologize to each other?

(Rae moves to the left and Liza reappears on the right)

The two mumbled something at each other. Ink doubted either of them had actually said the word "sorry", but Beth seemed happy enough that they were finished arguing.

(Rae and Liza are replaced by Beth in the middle)

**Beth:** Wonderful! Now, Liza, could you place your hand on the computer screen, please?

(Screen vibrates slightly)

Silently, Liza did as she was asked.

(Screen reverts to monitor)

The screen went blank. Then, out of nowhere, (pause, then Sent comes in) *it* appeared.

**Beth:** Oh my. What on Earth is that?

**Ink:** It's uncanny as hell, whatever it is.

**Beth:** Hello? Who are you?

The terminal made a low humming sound before a hollow, synthetic voice took over.

**???:** Please note that the following message is a recording that will only play once. It is advisable that you pay attention.

**Aether:** Did that thing say something?

**Liza:** Shut up! Didn't you hear it? It's about to speak.

**???:** Salutation, Contestants. I pray you all had a most wonderful sleep!

You're probably wondering why you're here. Actually, you're probably wondering many things. Fret not, Contestants, for I have the answers you seek!

Regrettably, I cannot divulge anything right now. you've only all just woken up and I'm afraid some of the things I have to share are rather... complicated.

This is not the time nor the place to provide Contestants with information, and for that, I must apologize! I am sorry! So very sorry!

In order to prove to everyone that I am, in fact, very sorry, I've arranged a fun little puzzle for my favourite Contestants! I am, of course, referring to the five of you.

I think it will break the ice quite nicely: please do your best to solve it!

Your instructions can be found in the top right corner of the screen.

Once you think you've solved it, please press the "Check Solution" button, then place your hand on the screen to confirm your answer.

Good luck and have fun, Contestants!

... Oh, and I suppose I should mention that the door to the next room won't unlock until you've completed the puzzle. So yes, the puzzle is more or less mandatory.

(Sent leaves and the puzzle appears on-screen)

**Beth:** What are those?

**Rae:** Weren't you listening? It's a puzzle. Looks tile-based.

**Aether:** But why? It seems so unnecessary...

**Rae:** Well, that thing did call us 'Contestants'. It's pretty clear that his is some sort of game.

**Liza:** This is stupid. Please tell me none of you *actually* intend to go through with this.

**Ink:** Listen, I don't really know what's going on, but I want to get out of here as fast as possible. I'm giving this thing a go. It can't hurt to try, right?

(Screen blacks out, then fades into puzzle screen.)

[Hints section]

Ask: Aether

Hint 1

**Aether:** Hmm...

**Ink:** Any ideas?

**Aether:** Well, that strange polygonal face said that the instructions would be in the top-right corner of the screen...

**Ink:** Then I guess our instructions are to turn a square into a cross.

**Aether:** Uh-huh. But it doesn't look like the pieces can fit together to make one...

**Ink:** Do you think they got the pieces wrong?

**Aether:** No, this was deliberate, I'm sure.

**Ink:** Then there has got to be some sort of catch...

Hint 2

**Aether:** Oh!

**Ink:** What is it? Did you figure it out?

**Aether:** I said that out loud, didn't I?

**Ink:** Are you... going to explain?

**Aether:** I don't know, it's really kind of silly...

**Ink:** Hey, if it's something that could be useful, you should mention it.

**Aether:** Well, you know that one video game?

**Ink:** I know a lot of video games. There are, like, thousands of them.

**Aether:** Oh, well it's that one where you're stacking the blocks. Stacky? Block Stacky? You could totally use the white squares to make the pieces from that game.

**Ink:** ...

**Aether:** That wasn't very helpful, was it? I'm sorry: I don't really play video games...

**Ink:** No, it's plenty helpful!

**Aether:** Really? I knew it!

*I'm not sure that bit of advice will help me, but I'd hate to shoot down her idea so quickly.*

Hint 3

**Aether:** Sorry, I haven't thought of anything yet.

**Ink:** Oh... that's okay. I was just checking up on you.

**Aether:** Don't be afraid to ask one of the others for help! I'm sure they've all got their own thoughts on this puzzle.

*She might be right about that. I'll see what the others think.*

Ask: Beth

Hint 1

**Beth:** I would like to help if I can, Ink.

**Ink:** Awesome, Beth. I'd appreciate it.

**Beth:** So, is this some kind of jigsaw puzzle?

**Ink:** I guess so. But something seems very odd about it.

**Beth:** Absolutely. How are even supposed to move the pieces?

**Ink:** Oh, uh... it's a touch screen. I can switch the location of any two pieces around just by tapping one, then tapping the other. I, uh, thought that would be pretty obvious.

**Beth:** Sorry! I'm ashamed to say that I'm not very up to date on these things...

**Ink:** No, it's fine...

**Beth:** And then, once we've solved it, we press the "Check Solution" button?

**Ink:** That's the gist of it. I don't think there's a limit to how many times we can check for a solution, so we shouldn't be afraid to try out answers.

**Beth:** I see. Thank you, Ink.

*I know she wanted to help, but this is kind of distracting.*

Hint 2

**Beth:** You know, I used to solve jigsaw puzzles with my grandchildren all the time!

**Ink:** That's, err... wonderful, Beth.

**Beth:** You know what the best way of going about them is? You need to go for the corners first, then slowly work your way to the center.

**Ink:** Go for the corners first, huh...?

**Beth:** Mhmm. Though I'm not sure which ones are supposed to be corner pieces...

**Ink:** Don't worry: I still think what you said is important... probably.

Hint 3

**Beth:** Remember, start with the corners then work your way inward from there.

**Ink:** Thanks, Beth. I'll keep that in mind.

Ask: Rae

Hint 1

**Ink:** So, what does a top-notch computer programmer think of this puzzle?

**Rae:** I'd say it's pretty obvious that there's some kind of trick to it.

**Ink:** Yeah, that's what I was thinking. It said to assemble a cross, but you can't do so using only four squares.

**Rae:** Right. Oh, and by the way, Ink, me being a programmer doesn't increase the likelihood of me being able to solve this puzzle.

**Ink:** Oh? Why not?

**Rae:** Programming is all about logic, structure and general problem solving: this seems more like a riddle than anything. Something meant to trick people.

**Ink:** Ah, well if that's the case, then forget I said anything.

**Rae:** Nah, don't worry. I'm going to figure it out anyway.

**Ink:** Is that so?

**Rae:** I've got enough mental muscle for the five of us. Riddles are easy.

*Let's see if he can put his money where his mouth is...*

Hint 2

**Ink:** Any ideas yet?

**Rae:** I'm not sure we're supposed to use these tiles to build a cross.

**Ink:** But the screen says-

**Rae:** Yeah, I see what it says. But, like you said, you can't build a cross with only four tiles.

You'd need at least five: one in the middle and then one in each space adjacent to it.

So now I'm thinking there must be some other way to build a cross.

**Ink:** So I need to make a cross... without actually making a cross?

**Rae:** Somethin' like that.

Hint 3

**Ink:** Any luck?

**Rae:** Nah... though I did notice somethin' odd about this hotel.

**Ink:** What's that?

**Rae:** Were there any windows in your room? 'Cause there weren't any in the one I woke up in. There aren't any in this hallway either.

**Ink:** Now that you mention it, no there weren't any windows... but is it that big of a deal?

**Rae:** It doesn't feel right.

**Ink:** I guess it *is* kind of unsettling.

**Rae:** Say... when you think of a window, what shape is it?

**Ink:** Well, when I picture one in my head, it's a square. Or rectangular.

**Rae:** And this window you're picturing... does it have a cross in the middle?

**Ink:** Yeah, actually, it does. But that's just the frame.

What are you trying to say?

**Rae:** I think I've just figured out the trick behind this puzzle.

Hint 4

**Ink:** You sounded like you were on the verge of a breakthrough.

**Rae:** I am. I know the solution.

**Ink:** Seriously?! How do you solve it?

**Rae:** Negative space.

We've been trying too hard to make a cross out of the white pieces. What we should've been doing is trying to make a square out of the dark pieces.

Put the white pieces in the corners. That should do the trick.

It's a dumb solution if you ask me, but I'm pretty sure that's the right answer. Give it a try, why don'tcha?

Hint 5

**Rae:** So, have you tried that negative space trick?

**Ink:** Uh... no, not yet.

**Rae:** Well, what are you waiting for?

Just put one of the white squares in each of the four corners. That should do the trick.

**Ink:** Right. I'm on it.

Ask: Liza

Hint 1

**Ink:** Hey Liza, any thoughts on this puzzle?

**Liza:** No.

**Ink:** Is that all you're going to say?

**Liza:** Yup.

**Ink:** Can't you at least try to be a bit more supportive?

**Liza:** Listen, this isn't my problem. You figure it out.

**Ink:** You know if we don't get this door open, we're stuck here, right?

**Liza:** I don't want to be disturbed right now, okay?! How much more obvious do you need me to make it?!

**Ink:** Okay, okay, sorry I asked...

Hint 2

**Ink:** Hey Liza...

**Liza:** What did I tell you? I don't want to help with this stupid puzzle.

**Ink:** Okay, okay! Sheesh...

*For someone who doesn't want to help, she sure is staring at that screen pretty intently.*

[End hints]

(Monitor appears)

{If you asked Rae for hints up until hint 3}

**Ink:** There! Got it!

**Liza:** ... Wait, how is that the solution?

**Ink:** If you look at the negative space in the center of the puzzle, you can make out a cross.

**Aether:** Oh, I get it! I never thought of doing it that way. Neat!

(Monitor blanks out)

**Ink:** That wasn't so bad...

{If you went beyond hint 3 for Rae}

**Ink:** So that was the solution. Good thinking, Rae.

**Rae:** Honestly, it was pretty easy to figure out.

**Liza:** ... Wait, how is that the solution?

**Rae:** Negative space. The white squares in the four corners sculpt a cross into the dark space in the middle.

**Liza:** I still don't see it...

(Monitor blanks out)

**Ink:** Well, at least we're not stuck here anymore.

{Narratives rejoin here}

(After short pause, Sent appears)

**???:** Well done, Contestants! Well done, indeed!

**Rae:** You again...

**???:** Please note that this is once again a recording and that it will only play once.

**Rae:** Hmph.

**???:** It appears that you've solved the puzzle I left for you. I pray that you all had fun.

I'm sure you're all eager to know why you're here. The truth is...

...that this cramped hallway is ill-suited for such a conversation. I know, I know. I got your hopes up for nothing, and for that I am truly sorry. Truly! Allow me to make it up to you.

Voila! The door is now unlocked. The next room is a fine little lounge; a much more fitting place to disclose the rules of our wonderful game.

I shall await you there. Go! Move forward!

... Or you could die.

(Sent leaves)

It was clear that the polygonal figure wasn't coming back, but Ink had trouble turning away. That last message had left him more confused and troubled than ever.

(Reverts to hallway view)

The sound of a door opening managed to redirect Ink, gaze. As he looked about the room, he realized that they were one Contestant short.

*I guess Rae already split.*

Beth and Liza followed him shortly thereafter.

(Aether appears)

**Aether:** Ink?

**Ink:** Yeah?

**Aether:** Did you think that guy was being serious when he said 'or you could die'?

**Ink:** Don't let it get to you, Aether. Hopefully this is just some jerk's idea of a joke. A cruel and needlessly complicated joke.

**Aether:** If it is a joke, it sure isn't funny.

**Ink:** Yeah. Definitely not funny.

*But if it isn't funny, then why do I feel like laughing all of a sudden?*

*Is it because none of this makes a lick of sense?*

*... Sure. Let's go with that.*

*Maybe this is all just a strange dream...*

(Screen trembles)

**Aether:** Omigosh! Ink!

**Ink:** Hmm? What is it?

**Aether:** You're bleeding!

Instinctively, Ink brought a hand to his nose. Sure enough, he felt a slick-warm substance that could only have been his own blood.

**Ink:** Weird. Didn't even feel it.

Ink stared at the blood on his hand, more curious than concerned.

(Screen shakes violently then starts graying out a little)

Then he felt it.

There was a heavy, throbbing pain in his chest. Growing, rising...

**Aether:** What's wrong? You don't look so good...

**Ink:** It feels like there's something... inside...

(Screen shakes slightly)

**Aether:** "I-Inside"? What do you mean, "inside"?!

Ink couldn't focus enough to reply.

Something was pounding against his ribcage from within. He felt as if his heart was fighting to escape his body.

**Ink:** Wh- what's happen-

(Screen blacks out)

Argh!

Trying to talk was useless - Ink couldn't finish a thought, much less speak one. It had only been a few seconds, but the pain had already overtaken all other feeling.

Caught in agony, Ink clutched his chest, shut his eyes, and nearly, blacked out.

(Screen flashes red)

He vomited.

(After a short pause, screen fades into Ink holding his bloody hand in front of him)

**Ink:** What the actual fuck?!

Ink stared at his hand, terrified.

*What happened to me?*

**End Chapter**