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The Elevator

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A Novel

THE ELEVATOR

Emma McMullen



Chapter 1 - You Win Some, You Lose Some

Her black pixie-cut hair feathered in the breeze. She was running through rough terrain, leaping from crystal to crystal avoiding pits of acidic waters. A team of these characters, Ghosthunters, traveled along their designated path, preparing their positions for when the enemy team attempts to come through this valley as well. They prepared their long-range crossbows which glinted in the sun with their vibrant orange and red colors. They split up on either side of the series of acidic lakes. Depending on the upgrades of the other team, they'd either come down through the water itself or be forced to jump from the crystals, how she did. Either way, they were going to be bottlenecked through this crevasse, and the raven-haired team would be waiting. Unless they'd already moved-in their air units. But they would be stupid to not wait until late game to do that. No, they'll have to come through the crevasse.

The game camera zoomed out and into another area of the map. Myeong dragged in a new character group – five muscular women carrying massive swords slung over their backs, her Infiltrators. They were moved to different hiding spots, concealed throughout the crystal forest, prepared to attack once the opponent's teams made their way across the acidic lakes – if any were left after the range characters intercepted them.

Myeong switched her view back to the base, a maze of glittering purple crystals. It was always a flip of a coin whether she would end up defending the base or attacking it, but she preferred defense. She zoomed in to see the interior of the base. A team of scrawny boys moved from computer to computer, scrambling to prepare and delegate resources – these were her Puppetmasters. It would be a while before all of the data had been harvested and could produce Myeong's late-game units. She was biding her time, knowing her strategy could outweigh even an all-in attack. Hopefully.

She moved her game camera back to check on the black-haired range players, but they were all hit with a forcefield put up by the opponent. With their diminished strength, they fell into the acidic water. Their pets, small purple bats with one large yellow eye, hung in the air aimlessly. The opponent team moved through the crevasse without incident. They had activated their late game. Myeong wasn't ready yet. She clicked back to her stronger characters, hidden still. She watched as two were incinerated by an assassin creeping through the woods. One swing of the sword from nearby muscle, and that threat was eliminated.

Myeong gritted her teeth. She moved in to micro-manage the players to meet the other team and debated whether or not to meet them head-on. She had an opportunity to use these melee units as range characters. It might just work. She shook her head. She wasn't comfortable making that move. She met the other team head-on, surrounding them. She was able to pick off some of the team, but others continued to roll slowly through the forest, health bar barely touched. She retreated one final muscle character back to the base, hoping to use her as a last-ditch effort if need be.

She recognized what would happen next. She clicked furiously at the boys running to prepare her late-game units which could defend against air units. A catapult rose out of the machine the boys worked on, and she directed them to put a protective force field on it. She could see the air units coming in a hoard from the distance. Myeong chewed her tongue. She directed the catapult to fire, but the control unit was micro-ed carefully, and they seamlessly dodged the purple flaming ball. She was out of units and needed to rely on the boys to prepare her final units. The air units' first line of defense came forward, maneuvering right on top of the base, squirting out an acid that disintegrated the force field. They flew away, and a new wave came in, dropping one creature,

the strongest unit in the game, right into her base. The creature was humanoid and was customized to wear a goat mask. Myeong watched, knowing it was over now. The creature began tearing apart her computers and killing her scrawny workers.

The air units dropped one final blow, a bomb. Her base exploded into flames.

Myeong typed "gg" into the chat.

The opponent typed back "good game".

"Fuck!" Myeong threw her headphones off, ruffling her short black hair. She went to click into a new queue for a game, but she thought better of it and logged out, instead.

She rolled back from her desk and shook her hands out. She closed her eyes to take a deep breath, then opened them again. Her desk was covered in old headphones and mouses, each of which were last year's models. It had a finished mahogany counter-top, mounted on fully automated legs that rose or dropped to suit her sitting or standing position perfectly to her taste. She simply pressed a button, and the desk came to her. Her monitors were mounted onto the walls, with arms that were balanced to move to whichever position she preferred. The screens were curved, each 50 inches in diagonal measurement. Perfect for the immersion she was looking for, especially in horror games. The water-cooled computer that sat by her side glowed with orange LEDs, highlighting the top-of-the-line motherboard, graphics card, and SSD. It whirled, barely audible.

Grabbing her phone, she texted Andi. "What are you up to?"

Within seconds, Andi sent back: "nothin much" then, "wbu," exchanging the greeting.

"I'm just BORED"

"Imao lets do smth" Andi always wanted to do something.

"What about Char?"

"...lets stop by the library?"

Myeong looked over to the monitor on her left. CruelCandy, a Korean Astrocraft player, discussed his win streak with a news anchor.

"Tell me, as an underdog, a new player, the odds stacked against you, how do you beat PartyPony, the best player in the world?"

He shrugged with a smile spreading across his face. "I just do."

"Come on. There's got to be more to it than that. Tell us your secrets."

He paused for a moment, thinking. Behind them, a crowd of fans screamed and cheered for him. "You really just have to take risks sometimes. I fail plenty because I take a risk when I shouldn't have. But mostly, I know when it's the right time to risk it, and then I do. That's why I always win." He laughed. "Well, most of the time. I'll say most of the time."

Andi texted again. "u comin???"

"Yeah, in a minute," Myeong sent back.

Myeong leaned down to re-tie her sneakers and cuff her torn jeans. She stood up, pushing her hair behind her eyes. Her room was decorated in framed, full-color scans of maps and characters in Astrocraft. Some of the designs were her own creation, namely a character she had dubbed Shadowdancer. The character was armed with four photon blasters, one strapped to each muscular calf, and two at her wide hips. Her expression was smoldering. Myeong stepped out of her room, blowing a kiss to the true-to-scale poster of Shadowdancer inside her door.

She walked down the hallway, decorated with a crystal chandelier and pictures of her as a toddler. Starting at age four, her mother dressed her up as

one of the purple bat pets, donning her with a glowing yellow eye on her tummy and wings attached to her arms.

Myeong popped her head around a door frame. "Hey, Mom." Her mother, Nari, sat at her own gaming desk, clicking on a mechanical keyboard relentlessly. "How's the map going?"

"Can't talk now, honey."

"Okay, I'm headed to Andi's."

Her mother clicked her bitten down nails along her desk, which was identical to Myeong, except twice the length. "What are you doing when you get there?"

"Playing Astrocraft." Andi paused, waiting for a response. "Most likely."

Nari continued to click.

"I played on your new map today."

Nari stopped clicking. She spun her chair around. "The crystal lava one?"

A glimmer lit up her eye.

"It was kind of fun." She shrugged.

"Thank you, honey. Come here." Nari opened her arms for a hug.

Myeong pushed her away lightly. "Mom," she whined.

Nari pulled her in anyway. "I'm sorry I'm so busy. I just have all these new deadlines, and it's getting tough to --"

"Mom, I want to leave. I'm going to Andi's. I told you that."

Nari sighed, closing her eyes. "Okay, dear. We can talk about it later."

Myeong turned on her heels. "Bye!"

"Bye, sweetheart." Nari blew her a kiss. "Have a good time. Stay out of trouble!" she called after her.

Myeong ran down the stairs, grabbing her neon orange from a crystal hook near the door. She ran across the cobblestone pathway in front of her

house and headed diagonally across an empty intersection toward the house where Andi and her brother, Charlie, lived. She ran directly to the backyard, where Andi and Charlie had a TV and gaming console set up.

"Yes!" Andi threw her arms in the air and jumped up, dancing around, taunting Charlie. "I won, you sucker!" she shouted.

Myeong hopped over the fence.

"Let's take a break," Charlie suggested. "I read an article from the CDC which explains that long term exposure to too much screen time damages your brain. Especially in young brains."

Myeong and Andi look at each other. Andi snorted, and Myeong covered her face.

Charlie stiffened up. "I make sure to play for a maximum of two hours per day. That is certainly adequate," he added, looking down.

Andi ruffled his hair with her magenta gel nails. "Maybe that's why you always lose!"

"You have a fair point, Charlie. There needs to be a balance." Myeong patted him on the back.

Myeong, Andi, and Charlie sat on the packed dirt, criss-cross, knee to knee in a triangle.

"Since Charlie doesn't want to play anymore, let's have a day out on the town. Where do you want to go first?" Myeong said, drawing a flower in the dirt with a crab apple stem.

"I, for one, would love to see what new displays the library is showing currently," Charlie said.

Andi laughed. "I'm sure you would."

"Well, what better ideas do you have if you're so smart?" Charlie crossed his arms.

"We could try to get into the Casino again!" Andi's eyes widened with excitement.

"Or we could just check out the new GameStop just down the street," Myeong suggested.

The siblings nodded in agreement.

The trio stood up and brushed their clothes off. Myeong had a new-found grass stain on the back of her yellow t-shirt, Andi had dirt caught on her lavender tennis skirt, and Charlie's khaki shorts were wrinkled with sweat.

Chapter 2 - Going to the Video Shop

They walked down Second Street toward Main. Main was a drive-through for one of the more major interstates through the area, but they were far enough out that it was rare for anyone to drive through, nonetheless. However, cars came through often enough that they looked both ways, unlike crossing Carpenter and First to get to where Andi and Charlie live. The brick buildings had ghostwriting on the sides, indicated what the purpose of the obsolete buildings used to be. Antique shops, baby clothing boutiques, loose-meat sandwich shops; all foreclosed on, all waiting to be demolished. Their signs were faded and weathered to death. Neon signs that once lit up were lucky to even have one letter that still worked, flickering and dusty. Along the main road, Crossing main and first, they approached the game store. The asphalt beneath their feet crunched and caused them to slide when they rode their bikes.

Myeong's sneakers and Charlie's Keens had enough traction, but Andi toted her worn-down signature hot pink docs that were studded with steel spikes on the toes. A pebble bounced off of one of the spikes and hit Myeong in the shin.

"Why do you have to wear those stupid things?" Myeong laughed.

"You never know when you'll need to stick a bitch." She cackled at that every time she said it.

They stepped into the overly-air conditioned lobby. A bell twinkled behind Myeong. The carpet was black with planets on it, and the ceiling wasn't visible for lack of light. Charlie's shirt glowed in the blacklight, and he shook his head, knowing it was a mistake to wear white.

The main desk was tucked behind some shelving, but Charlie knew it well, striding ahead. "Scrub!" Charlie shouted, running.

He stepped from behind the desk to catch Charlie in a hug.

"Well? How can I be of assistance?"

"We're just looking to waste some time," Myeong said.

"Ah, bored summer days, huh?" Dave asked.

The three friends nodded.

"And I have a game to renew!" Charlie said.

Dave put a scanner up to the spine of the disk holder. "Just this for you?"

Dave said out of habit.

Charlie nodded, putting the game disk back in his over-stuffed backpack.

"Well, I have some tasks that you could do around here if you would like.

We've got some old articles to sort through."

"Cool!" Charlie said, throwing his hands into the air.

"Still boring," Andi muttered as she went to examine the games on display labeled "clearance."

"Come on," Myeong said. "Let's do it. Remember: we're just here to waste some time before the stream at two o'clock."

Andi groaned.

Myeong turned to Dave. "Do you have a list or system you'd like us to use?"

He pointed to the back, where shelves of hard copy magazines and newspapers sat behind one lone computer. "There's a folder over there on the cart labeled 'to.be.sorted.' In the folder, there are a number of old newspaper and magazine articles. You can split them up and sort them by year they were published."

He extended a bottle of hand sanitizer. Each person took one pump of the vomit-inducing vanilla-scented gelatinous liquid and walked to the back. Charlie skipped ahead, leaving Myeong and Andi behind.

"What are you planning for Charlie's birthday?" Myeong asked Andi.

"I guess I wasn't really thinking of doing much. Maybe just hanging out?"

Myeong leaned down to tie her shoe. "He's going to be 10, we should really do something extra."

"I know." Andi tapped her foot. "What do you—"

Charlie called to them. "Come on."

The two girls quickened their pace to catch up with him, passing a section of science fiction movies organized in DVD and VCR cases.

Within moments, the floor was littered with papers, some copied onto sturdy paper, some the original artifact in page protectors.

"I think we might be here forever."

"Oh, here's something fun: Retiree Takes ," Andi said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Bet you I can find the most interesting one!"

"I've got a mudslide that consumed a whole ass playground."

Myeong laughed, picking up another article.

"What about you, Myeong?"

"Actually," Myeong paused. "This is interesting."

"Well, yeah they all are." Andi threw a page protector at her.

"No, this one." Myeong paused again. "What's the date today?"

Charlie looked at his digital glow-in-the-dark watch face. "The thirty-first."

"This took place twenty years ago," Myeong looked up at her friends.

"Today."

"Woah, that's kind of cool!" Charlie jumped up from his spot among the scattered documents, slipping on one of them. His eyes glimmered with interest.

"No way." Andi rolled her eyes to accompany her sarcasm. "That's so crazy." Andi slumped and put her head on the table.

“Okay, but take a look.”

“Wait.” Myeong pulled her face up the the document, despite being able to see just fine. “Look here.”

They squished together to read the article.

“It says here that 10 year old boy went missing at the Charleton amusement park on July 17th, 2010. Police investigated on Monday, but nothing could be found. The father of the boy, Doug Lambert, is devastated, saying “I just want my son back.” According to police reports, the boy was playing in the ball pit, and suddenly went under, and he reportedly never came back up. Some are suggesting that this story is a cover up for Doug either neglecting his son or accidentally killing him.”

“Where did it happen?”

“The Charleton amusement park, weren’t you listening?” Andi said.

“Just down the street.”

The friends all looked at each other.

“Let’s go check it out,” Myeong said.

The three friends approached Dave. “Have you heard about this abandoned amusement park?” Myeong asked.

Dave tapped the table with his light saber-shaped pen. “You’ll want more information. Go to the casino on third street. The bartender, he knows everything about the lore of this town.”

“They can’t even get in,” Charlie said, motioning to the girls. “Let alone,” he motioned to himself, “me.”

“True.” The librarian paused, pulling at his goatee. “I haven’t taken my break yet... I’ll walk you over there.”

Andi clapped. Myeong and Charlie looked at each other with a mix of curiosity and apprehension written on their faces.

Dave tossed his name tag on the desk and saluted the old woman sitting at the desk. "You have the conn."

Chapter 3 - A Librarian and Three Gamers Walk into a Bar

The bell rang as they entered the dark casino, which still smelled like cigarette smoke lingering from when it was legal.

"Howdy, what can I –" the bartender laid eyes on the children there with a full-grown man.

"We're not here for drinks or craps, just information," the librarian said.

The bartender set his towel down, looking at them with an eyebrow raised up to his receding hairline.

"What can you tell us about the abandoned amusement park at the end of third?" Myeong looked up at him with a morbid curiosity.

"Only that it's abandoned because a little boy disappeared there a while back. City sued the sh–poop out of them. But it still stands, and they say it's haunted by the ghost of that little boy. Wooooooo." He waved his hand in front of them. He motioned for them to lean in. "Some even say the boy didn't just wander off. Some say he got trapped in something and is still there to this day."

"What happened to his family?" Charlie asked.

"His family? Well, his father was devastated, of course, – Mother's not in the picture– but he's a recluse these days. Used to come in here sometimes, but no longer. Might be dead by now. No one knows where he went. Some say he haunts the amusement park with his son. Most common rumor though: something – not someone – something lives in the ball pit."

Myeong crossed her arms.

"Don't believe me?" He asked, slinging the towel back over his shoulder. "You can feel it in the air at that place. I recommend checking it out yourself."

Andi let out a squeak.

"Unless you're too chicken." He shrugged, walking away to help a customer snapping at him.

“Sorry guys,” the librarian said. “I guess you’ll have to go home. No one can go in or out of that place anymore.” Then, to the bartender, “Old fashioned, please.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Oh well. Maybe we’ll get ‘em next time. Guess we’re going home now, right friends of mine?” Andi motioned with her eyes toward the door.

“Thank you both.” Myeong said, and they rushed out as slowly as possible, trying to appear chill.

Chapter 4 - Keep Out

"Are you sure about this?" Charlie asked as the three friends walked down a gravel road.

"Hell yeah," Andi said jumping around to face him. "I'm in, anyway."

"Aren't you, Charlie?" Myeong asked.

Charlie groaned. "Guys come on. Do we really have to?"

Myeong and Andi stopped walking to glare at him.

"Fine," he muttered, rifling through his bag.

The red arches reached up toward the dark sky. Clouds, filled to the brim with condensation no doubt, blanketed every inch of the sky. It was getting ready to storm. Summers get the worst hailstorms, and today was no exception. Although it had cooled off since earlier that day, heat still radiated off of the metal beams. Rusty metal screeched against itself within all of this amusement park's abandoned attractions. The only barrier between them and the mysterious place was a chain-link fence. Charlie fished some wire cutters out of his backpack and snipped the fence easily.

"You know," he said. "We probably didn't need to do that. There are places that the fence is already busted."

"Yeah, but this way you're implicated, mister." Andi slapped him on the back.

They each shuffled through the thin space Charlie made, although Charlie's backpack got caught on the sharp edges. Myeong helped peel the pieces back, but Andi ran ahead.

"She only wants me around when I'm useful to her. Otherwise, I'm just in the way." Charlie tried to cross his arms, but cut himself on one of the rogue chainlink spindles. "Awesome. I love this." He groaned.

"Oh, that's not true. Sisters can sometimes just trick you into thinking that way." She cleared away the last of the metal bits. "Come on, now."

Charlie scraped his way out of the fence, and they both hurried to catch up to Andi who stood on the edge of the ball pit.

"Watch this, suckers!" She flipped backward into the plastic balls, which flew up all around her, bringing with them a cloud of dust.

Coughing, Myeong pushed the dusty netting aside. "Okay, wow, yes, great job, Andi 10/10 really." Myeong peered around looking for her. "Andi?"

Andi popped up from the center of the pit, face covered in dirt. "Come take a look." She motioned to the others. They scrambled over the wet balls to see what she had found.

"You know you're going to need at least a tetanus shot after that, right?" Charlie said.

"No way," Myeong said and waved Charlie over.

A door, a yard by a yard, sat minding its own business at the bottom of the ball pit. On it was spray painted:

KEEP!

OUT!

"Well," Myeong said. "That's ominous."

"Let's just walk away," Charlie said. "We can still just walk away."

"No way, loser," Andi tried to open it, but it was locked.

"Maybe it's for maintenance?" Myeong suggested.

"In a ball pit?" Charlie asked.

"Boring," Andi said. She plodded over to the side, pulling herself out.

"Myeong come on, let's go climb some shit."

Myeong waved her along. "Come on, Charlie, let's just try to have fun. What's the worst that could happen?"

"This whole place could collapse into a sink hole, and we could all die a horrible death."

Myeong laughed. "That's the spirit." She ran ahead to catch up with Andi, who was already a hundred yards away.

"I'm going to the top of this ferris wheel. You coming or what?"

"Absolutely not. I'll watch you die all on your own." Myeong looked back to see where Charlie was. He shuffled a few feet toward them reluctantly.

"Your loss." Andi leaped up to grab a chair. It rocked, knocking her back to the ground. Myeong rushed forward. Andi got back up, holding her head. "How happen can it go? It's on again but off. I never have but could do."

"Are you okay? What's going on?" Myeong grabbed at her hands to see the spot on her head.

Andi let out a giggle. "Got you."

"Cut that shit out. I was scared." Myeong rolled her eyes, turning back to find Charlie.

But Charlie was gone. Myeong's eyes focused on something peering over the top of the side of the ball pit. It wore a goat mask, covered in red and green fluids. It tilted its head suddenly and violently. The goat mask disappeared behind the wall.

"Charlie?" Myeong yelled.

Andi turned. "Myeong, where's Charlie?"

Myeong pointed silently at the ball pit.

"Charlie?" Andi sprinted.

"Andi, stop! I saw something," Myeong shouted. "I saw something..."

Andi was gone, and Myeong could only see dull, colored balls flying out of the pit. "Come help me! He must be in here somewhere."

Myeong snapped to attention and ran to help.

They both dug furiously, muscles burning, fingernails gritty with sweat and dirt. Myeong and Andi stopped. They looked down at the trap door.

"You don't think..." They looked up at each other, then dove down and yanked at the trap door.

Chapter 5 - The Elevator

The crawlspace was empty.

"Look." Myeong pointed at the ground. Puddles that filled cracks and crevices rippled. Someone had just been there. "Let's go." They sprinted, following the path into the dark.

"What do you think we're going to find?" Andi bit at her nails as her other arm swung harder to compensate.

"I don't know." The two continued down the hallway, sneakers and boots slapping the concrete as they went.

Finally, they an elevator door came into view. "What do we do?" Andi looked to Myeong.

Myeong shook her head.

The elevator doors opened with a ding, slowly revealing the dimly-lit inside.

The pair ran toward the elevator, without a plan of what to do once they got there. They skidded to a halt inches from the elevator, panting.

"What floor do we go to?" Andi asked, breathing heavily.

Myeong shook her head. "There's no way to know."

They stepped inside, and the doors slammed, trapping them. The walls were covered in fluttering moths and stink bugs, making the walls appear to be flowing like a liquid. The two girls looked at each other, faces filled with shock and fear.

"What floor do we go to?" Andi asked again, shakily prepping her knuckles for pressing a button.

Myeong's face grew redder. "I told you," she said with a level voice. "I don't know."

"Well, we have to do something!" Andi threw up her hands, punching the ceiling.

Myeong's hands shook into clenched fists. "Don't you think I know --"

The elevator lurched. It started to move on its own: flying up, then dropping down. At times, it even seemed to go sideways, throwing the girls around in the small, rusty metal box.

Although the digital numbers which appeared above the doors flashed and got smaller and smaller, the panel of buttons flashed wildly, up and down. The elevator moved with the buttons, lurching up and down. The girls both rushed to the panel, pressing every button in an attempt to stop the elevator. Myeong pressed buttons in different patterns, counting up, then down again. Andi fought, slamming on the buttons, trying to pry the door open, yelling profanities. They slowed, coming to a stop. The elevator dinged. The doors slid open. A wall of smoke billowed out, which curled its fingers around the edges of the doors. From the smoke walked a young woman, who silently stepped into the elevator and turned on her heel to face the door as it slid closed. The smoke slipped back out without leaving a trace. She wore a hat that swallowed up her head, making it impossible to see any part of her face except her mouth, which smirked. On her chest sat a sparkling ruby brooch.

"What in the f--" Andi fell backward. Myeong shot her a look. She slinked along the sides of the elevator, bugs tickling her ears, careful not to touch or disturb the woman. The elevator shot up, then down, then to the left, which sent Myeong and Andi flying in various directions. The anonymous woman stayed firmly planted in the center of the elevator, unaffected by the sudden changes in direction.

The elevator stopped. The bell rang, and the doors squeaked open. The girls jumped out, swatting bugs from their hair and clothes.

A street, slick with a swirling mix oil and water, stretched out directly before them, pointing toward a glowing red cross hanging in the sky. The glowing symbol hung directly above a building made of shimmering, curved metal strips. Mixed metals: silver, copper, gold. Matte colors: maroon, orange, white, yellow. All twisting around each other to create a building that didn't seem to have a beginning nor an end, but curved around itself endlessly in an ellipsis. But closer to the pair, although the distance came and went, other buildings lined the street. These were rectangular, but still built of the raw and painted metal sheets. They were labelled by bright neon signs in shades of red, orange, and pink. Not one flickered except in a patterned display of moving lights. It was dark, but no moon hung in the sky, only the red cross, which grew larger by the second and gave everything on the street a red glow as if each building was made entirely of smoldered embers. The glow, which was predominantly red, glistened on the silent street. In the distance, a drum beat rhythmically in a gritty, syncopated pattern.

A group of figures exited the twisting building at the end of the street. A pair of them held a throne above their heads. A boy sat there, his head that of a goat.

A whoosh echoed behind the girls, and they turned to see the elevator – and the ground is was sitting freely on – stretch out to push it away from them. The woman stood facing them and waved stiffly.

“Do you think they can see us from here?” Andi panted.

“I don't know,” Myeong answered.

more here

“I'm s-s-sure they can,” a small voice whispered on Myeong's shoulder. Myeong turned to look at her shoulder and saw a snake, hardly an inch tall, tongue flicking.

"Oh my God!" Andi brought her hand up to swipe him away, but he lifted his tail and sent Andi staggering backwards.

Rolling his eyes, he said, "Please don't try to touch me. My rattler can, and will, wipe you out with one twitch."

Andi gulped.

"Who are you?" Myeong asked, shaking, as he floated up to hover in front of them.

"I'm called Gallifanacus 34,000."

"You're an under-viewer?" Andi asked. "Like from Astrocraft?"

He smiled. "You should leave now."

Andi crossed her arms. "We barely just got here. Why is everything twisting and turning all over the place?"

Myeong motioned to the elevator which was now as far a speck in the distance. "Can you show us how to get out?"

"Wait just a minute!" Andi yelled. "We aren't leaving without Charlie."

The snake looked amused.

Myeong sighed. "Charlie – my friend, her brother – was taken by a boy with a goat head."

He nodded them further into the alleyway.

"And we're not leaving without him," Andi said.

The snake motioned to the group of figures, which did, on average, appear to be growing nearer. "You mus-s-st leave."

Andi threw up her hands.

Myeong turned to Andi. "We won't be able to help Charlie if we're captured, too."

Andi paced away a step.

"Did you say you can show us how?" Myeong asked.

"I didn't, but I can."

"Well, spit it out," Andi said.

"Patience, little one," the snake hissed. "Patience."

"With all due respect, um, sir," Myeong said, "but we have no idea what's going on."

"Ah, yes. First-timers. I suppose it is that time again."

"What time?" Andi and Myeong asked in unison.

"I don't care to tell you, but since you look tasty, I'll entertain you a moment longer." He licked his lips. "Every twenty years, there is a time. A time when the elevator opens."

"20 years..." Myeong whispered.

"And when the elevator closes?" Andi asked.

The snake mimed looking at a watch on his tail. "You have approximately 16 hours to get out."

"How can we get out if the elevator keeps moving?" She pointed to the elevator, now, upside down in the sky.

"Stop saying that. We're not leaving without –"

Myeong put a hand up to shush Andi.

"This place works... differently. If you wish to move about this dimension unaffected, you'll need something like this." He motioned to his red rattler. "It contains a chip that causes the world to glitch and operate as usual right around the space you're in. You s-s-see, this dimension unpredictably expands, contracts, and shifts." As he said this, he demonstrated by disappearing behind a pebble and reappearing upside down in the air above Myeong's head. "Very different than your world, no?"

"What do you know about our world?" Andi said.

"I come from your world. I found my way here, and realized that, yes, I do like this place. This place where I can speak and prey upon anyone I please." He hissed in Andi's ear. "They never s-s-see me coming."

And he was gone.

"What did he say again about leaving?" Myeong asked.

"He didn't. Just that we need the chip"

"Remember," a voice echoed in their ears. "The elevator closes for the next twenty years, at midnight tomorrow."

"Just fucking help us then!" Andi shouted into the air.

Chapter 6 - A Truth and the Lie

Myeong nodded to the figures quickly approaching, though now upside down. She tugged Andi aside, hiding in an alleyway.

"Okay, let me think. What can we do?" Myeong leaned down to re-tie her shoes.

"Screw that under-viewer. I'm just going to run after that stupid elevator."

"Oh, really? Where is it right now?"

Andi stuck her head out, peering around. She huffed.

"Give me a second," Myeong said. "What can we do?" she muttered.

"Come on! We need to—"

"Okay, let's start with what we know." Myeong straightened up. "We know we need to get out of here by midnight tomorrow. We know we can't do that without the chip thing."

Andi nodded.

"We know we have no chance of saving Charlie if we don't get that chip and get out of here with him before the elevator closes."

"All according to the snake though..." Andi said.

"True. But what else should we trust?"

"Let's just get out there and start knocking some goat heads."

"Okay, you make a good point. We can't trust what the under-viewer says. But maybe we can work off of some of the information he gave us. Lies have a kernel of truth."

"What are you thinking?"

"Let's explore some. If we find information that confirms or contradicts what he said, we'll use that to determine if we can trust him."

Andi gave a small nod.

"What's something simple he told us? Just a fact?"

"I don't know..." Andi crossed her arms.

Myeong snapped. "What about the fact that he's an under-viewer?"

"He didn't actually confirm that," Andi said.

"I got the sense that he knew exactly what we were talking about at least. Astrocraft has something to do with this place. Just look at that building." Myeong pointed to the building at the end of the street. "Doesn't that look just like a processing base?"

Andi slumped onto the oily ground. "God, I wish Charlie was here. He would probably be blabbering something right now about glitches and chips and talking snakes and expanding dimensions."

"If we find anything else that ties this place to Astrocraft, we'll see if we can rely on at least pieces of what he mentioned," Myeong said. "Deal?" She stuck out her hand.

"Deal." Andi nearly yanked her shoulder out of place with an abrasive, reluctant hand shake.

"For now, all we should go with the fact that we need to be out by midnight. Even if it's a lie, it's better that we try to get out earlier rather than later," Myeong said. "This place gives me the creeps."

"Okay, what do we do?" Andi was increasingly stressed by Charlie's absence.

"We explore."

Myeong and Andi explored the city, realizing that it closely resembles their town. They headed back to the elevator, realizing they had little time to stay.

"Tell me what the slip says and I'll do it." Andi was poised at the elevator door, fingers ready to press the buttons which would hopefully send them to the dimension they intended to go to.

Myeong consulted the slip. "Okay, the slip says floor 4, then 2."

Andi quickly pressed the buttons, but despite the buttons suggesting that they would move up, the elevator plummeted. A panicked expression spread across Andi's face, and she spammed the buttons.

"Stop!" Myeong dove between Andi and the buttons. She grabbed her hands, which shook.

Andi was breathing heavily, sweat dripping down her temples.

"Maybe this is part of the system," Myeong said.

"We need to get to Charlie!" Andi shoved Myeong out of the way.

"Andi, stop!" She pushed her back. "We don't have a choice. We have to follow the directions. That's our only hope of getting back. If we mess up, who knows what will—" The elevator stopped abruptly, sending Myeong and Andi flying into the banisters.

The young woman walked into the elevator.

Andi and Myeong looked at each other in shock. Andi approached the women, face hardening. Myeong shot her a fierce look, waving the directions.

"What's the next direction?" Andi whispered to Myeong.

She motioned to the next lines of text. "Push the button for floor 6, 2, then 10."

Andi looked at Myeong, confused and bewildered. Myeong nodded.

Andi slinked back around, pressing the buttons in the according pattern. They lit up, this time in different blinking colors.

Andi nodded. There was nothing in the instructions about being quiet, but they knew not to talk to the woman, and it was imperative that they make it back to Charlie.

The bell rang. The door opened again. On the other side was a dirty concrete tunnel -- the one they used to find this elevator only a few hours prior.

Against all odds, they had made it. Myeong motioned to Andi, and they squeezed past. The woman opened her mouth to speak to them. They looked away knowing they were not allowed to look at her, lest she would take them away. Whatever that meant. "Where are you going?"

Andi glanced behind her as they sprinted out. "Bye, bitch."

The woman stayed put, but when Myeong looked back, she saw the woman's gleaming pitch black eyes as the doors closed behind them.

Chapter 7 - Planning How to Get Charlie

“Okay, first things first.” Myeong and Andi stood over a plastic folding table in Andi’s unfinished basement. An exposed lightbulb hung from the ceiling for dear life. “What do you know about the head quarters?”

“Uh...” Andi raised her eyebrows like a facial shrug.

“Yeah, you’re right. We don’t know much at all, huh.”

Andi shook her pigtails behind her. “This is going to sound crazy.” She looked Myeong in the eye. “It almost looks like a host helm in Astrocraft. Andi shuffled some scrap paper in the corner. “Look,” she pushed a blank side of paper toward Myeong, “draw the helm.”

Myeong picked up a broken pencil on the table. She sketched the curved top, the angular support beams.

“Yes! Look!” Andi pointed to one of the columns. “Doesn’t that look just like the one we hid behind to peek in?:”

“Okay, I’m seeing it. That’s good... So you think the interior might be similar to the Astrocraft map too?”

“I’m willing to bet it’s exactly the same.:

Myeong shook her head. “Come on. We have no real reason to think that.”

“No?” Andi crossed her arms. “What about the kill being almost identical to __map__? What about the weapons, suits, everything?”

“I just don't know. Why would the layouts be the same? There’s nothing about the video game in the urban legend about the elevator game.”

Andi slammed her hands on the table. “What other ideas do we have?”

Myeong nodded and pulled her phone out of her back pocket, and with a few short taps, the phone was ringing. “Hi, Mom.”

Myeong propped up her mom’s face so she could see both of them.

“Where are you?”

"Andi's house."

"I don't recognize that area."

"We're in their basement playing Astrocraft."

Nari sighed. "Of course." She paused. "Why do you call?"

Myeong looked to Andi, who nodded. "Was there ever a map for the inside of the host's helm? Maybe in Ap1?"

Nari put on her reading glasses. Her picture turned grey as she search through her digital files on her phone. "Yes, it was one of our original designs." Nari displayed the blueprints for them to see.

Myeong took a screenshot. "Thanks, Mom."

"Why are you asking me for this?"

"We're just playing the game."

"I don't understand."

"Okay, gotta go." Myeong hung up the phone. "Okay, now we've got the map."

Andi flopped down into a bean bag chair. "What do we do now?"

"What we always do. Go to the library."

The pair sprinted up the unfinished steps of Andi's dad's home.

"We're going to the library!" Andi called, throwing on her backpack. They rushed out the door.

"An event like a missing kid must be the kind of thing that makes it into the newspaper," Myeong said, as they ran after a bus. It halted, and they ran on, waving to the bus driver.

They grabbed a seat in the back.

"Do you think we could find old newspapers there?"

Myeong nodded. "For sure. Definitely. We'll just have to ask the librarian for help."

They hopped off at the next stop, and rushed into the public library.

They approached the librarian's desk. A woman with deep wrinkles glared at them from over her pointed cat-eye glasses. "How may I help y'all?" she asked with a raspy voice.

"We are hoping to see newspapers from the Hubris Tribune from ten years ago."

The librarian let out a loud laugh, then caught herself. "It's unlikely that we'll be able to find anything that far back, but you're welcome to it."

The girls nodded. "If we could at least try, that would be greatly appreciated," Myeong said.

"Hmm..." The librarian paused for a long time as she flicked through files on a computer whose fan whirled wildly. "Let's see... Here we go." She stuck a flash drive into the computer and tapped her acrylic nails on the counter. "This is what we have from that time. You can use any of the computers here to take a look at the scanned files. Return the flash drive within the hour. Please remember: this is a quiet environment. "

Myeong took the flash drive from her outstretched, wrinkly hand, and nodded.

They walked silently to a computer in the back corner, only the sound of ice clinking in a water bottle followed them.

Andi turned on the computer.

"Huh," Myeong said, looking at the flash drive. "It says 'do NOT download.' I wonder why that would be, it seems like it's just scans."

"That librarian is bonkers, that's all."

They filtered through the documents on the drive, and Myeong sighed. "I think we might be here forever."

“Ugh. They might not even have anything.” Andi slumped and put her head on the table.

“Wait.” Myeong pulled her face up the the computer, despite being able to see just fine. “Look here.”

They squished together to read the article.

“It says here that a boy about 13 years old went missing at the Charleton amusement park on July 17th, 1995. Police investigated on Monday, but nothing could be found. The father of the boy, Doug Lambert, is devastated, saying “I just want my son back.”According to police reports, the boy was playing in the ball pit, and suddenly went under, and he reported ly never came back up. Some are suggesting that this story is a cover up for Doug either not paying attention to his son, or accidentally killing him.”

The two girls looked at each other, faces blanched and tired.

Myeong continued: “Doug has been known to be a heavy drinker, as many of you know, and this could be when he finally snapped. It’s impossible to know; however, sources say this is highly likely. Doug can be contacted at (308) 475-6811 or you can find him at 305 Lilac Lane.”

“Oh my god, they doxed him! It has his address right here!”

The librarian shushed them.

Myeong whispered, “Do you think he still lives there?”

“I don’t know... he might not. That was a decade ago at this point. I would think he might want to leave the place his son went missing.”

“Do you think it’s worth a try at least?”

“Maybe.”

“We need to show him this.”

“Well, you saw, it says not to download anything.”

“Just do it. Do you want Charlie back or not?”

Myeong sighed and went to download it normally, screen shot, etc., but nothing worked. "See? It won't work."

"Don't be a sissy. Work your magic and get it to download!"

"Shhhhhh!" The librarian hissed.

"Be quiet at least, we aren't supposed to be doing this at all." Myeong took out her phone and took a photo of the clip. "Let's go."

"Your time is up." The librarian stood behind them, glasses all the way down at the end of her nose.

"Thank you. We were just finishing up." Myeong ejected the flash drive and handed it to the librarian.

"And what were you doing with that camera? These articles need to stay _"

"Just taking a picture of us, ma'am." Andi whipped out her phone. "Smile!" The picture snapped, and the librarian's face looked odd in the image.

They went to take the elevator out, but the librarian shrieked "Can't y'all see it says Out of Order?"

The whole library turned to look at the hypocritical librarian.

An Out of Order sign appeared on the door of the elevator.

"Sorry," Andi said. They turned to the right and took the stairs down to the main level.

"We definitely need to go see if he's still there. He could be the key to figuring this whole thing out."

They ran out of the library.

Chapter 8 - Doug

"Here goes nothing." Myeong knocked on the door of the single-story dilapidated home. "Douglas Adams?"

"No one's home!" a voice cried from deep within the house.

Myeong and Andi looked at each other in shock and excitement.

"Please, sir, we need your help."

"No one needs anything from me anymore. Go away." He was adamant, but the voice drew closer to the door.

"We found an article about you in the newspaper," Myeong said.

Nothing. The man was silent.

Andi gulped. "We saw how they shared your address. That has to be illegal or something. Shit's messed up."

"Didn't stop you from using it to find and harass me, did it?" The raspy voice was just on the other side of the door now. He breathed through the crack between the door and the frame. They could smell something sharp—whiskey—on this breath.

"I'm sorry sir—" Myeong started.

"Listen. My fucking brother is missing," Andi shouted, punching the door.

"Don't you dare swear at me." The man's voice retreated.

Myeong threw Andi a desperate look. "Wait!"

The man's steps stopped.

"We have something you might recognize!"

Andi retrieved the faded spacecraft action figure from her bag.

He cracked the door open, chain lock taught, only his eye and scruffy eyebrow peeking through. "Give me that!" he hissed.

"No!" Andi grabbed at it.

"Please..." The man stumbled backward as she yanked it out of his hands, like children playing tug of war. "Please." His raspy voice turned to a sob.

Andi's demeanor changed immediately. She and Myeong exchanged a look of pity.

"Sir?" Myeong ventured. "What does it—" she pulled it from Andi's now limp hands, "What does it mean to you?"

"It was my son's!" he cried out. He collapsed to the floor. "It was a present for his birthday."

"Sir," Myeong said. "We need your help." She reached the object through the slit in the door.

The man's shaky hands reached for it. "Thank you." He opened the door slowly and held the toy tightly to his chest. "Call me Doug."

He stepped aside to let them in. His house was plastered with newspaper articles and photographs with red string connecting them all to a center point. A photo of a young boy.

Doug motioned at two armchairs filled with old pizza boxes and diet Pepsi cans. Myeong and Andi smiled and sat on the edges of the seats so as to not disturb the pile behind them.

"Tea?" he asked.

"Please," they said in unison.

He stepped away to prepare their beverages, and the two girls leaned toward each other. "What do we do now?" Andi whispered.

"I honestly didn't think we'd get this far... We'll figure it out. Follow my lead." Myeong said.

"Here we are." Doug set two delicate, floral teacups down on the floor in front of them.

"Thank you," they both said.

"I put cream in one and sugar in the other." He shrugged. I wasn't sure what you wanted, so that's what I went for."

"It's great. Thank you." Myeong took a sip from the cream-only cup.

Andi sniffed her sugar-only serving.

"So," Doug frowned. "What would you ladies like to know?"

Andi curled her lip at the term "ladies," but Myeong jumped in.

"We know it's probably hard to talk about, but we want to know more about your son."

He sighed and shook his head. "I see. Where to start..."

"Honestly, sir, we are in bit of a time crunch."

"Did you say your brother was missing?" he asked Andi.

"Yes, obviously that is why we're here."

"It's not obvious to me," he said sipping his tea. "What do you need from me?"

"Sir, we need to know more about your son's disappearance because Charlier, my friend, her brother, disappeared in a similar way. We are trying to get him back," Myeong said.

Doug stirred his tea. "I'm afraid I can't be of much use to you."

Andi threw up her arms and stood up. "Great, our only lead and he can't help." She turned to Doug. "Listen, Doug, my brother went missing in the amusement park, just like your son. Exactly 12 years later. I find it highly unlikely that they isn't any kind of connection there." Andi slumped back down.

"What she's trying to say is that... you're the only person that can help us. Run us through the night it happened. Please."

He nodded. "Very well. Here's what happened – what you can't find in the paper."

"I was on a walk with my son –"

"Late at night?"

"He would only fall asleep in the car, so we would often take drives to different areas of town around his bedtime. He wanted to go to the amusement park that day, and I thought that would be a plenty long drive, and he would likely be asleep by the time we got there. Instead, he was wide awake, excited to play in the ball pit."

At the mention of the word, Andi and Myeong looked at each other with wide eyes.

"Does that mean something to you?"

Andi and Myeong broke the stare. "Please, go on," Myeong responded.

"Well, one moment he was there, and the next, he wasn't. I dove into the ball pit, thinking he may have slipped beneath the surface, but he was gone. I threw all of the balls out of the pit, just to be sure, but... It didn't matter. He was gone." He and Andi shed tears of understanding.

"And you're sure he didn't run off? Maybe he crawled out of the ball pit and –" Myeong was cut off.

"I'm sure of what I saw." Doug raised his voice.

"And what is it that you saw?"

"Just... an ear. The ear of an animal. I'm not sure other than that."

"Thank you sir," Myeong said.

"Thank you so much," Andi said, shaking his hand.

They walked toward the door and opened it.

"Before you go," Doug said, "take this."

He handed Andi the action figure.

"Thank you," Andi said and put the toy in Myeong's backpack.

Andi and Myeong took off running, back to the library.

Chapter 9 - Preparation

Myeong and Andi stepped into the library, a wave of air conditioning slapping them across the face with refreshment.

"Okay, we're going to need... What are we going to need?" Andi asked as they sat down at a table in the corner.

"Step 1: we need to get back. We'll need the elevator instructions to get back," Myeong said.

"Well," Andi said, pulling out a crumpled paper, "We have the instructions from Buddy."

"Right, but we're not even sure if we can trust his instructions yet."

"Okay, so where do we find the real instructions?"

Myeong motioned to the bookshelves. "Somewhere in here. I'm sure of it."

Myeong and Andi dug into the library catalogue, looking for anything related to the elevator game, until they finally came across an article about Korean superstitions.

"Great. What does it say?" Andi asked.

"It has the directions clearly here. Myeong put her flash drive into the computer, overrode the software that prohibits downloads, and they hurried out of the library.

"What do we need to get next?" Andi asked.

Myeong paused.

"I'm concerned about the elevator lady, personally. I think it would be smart to bring weapons."

"Hm, I guess you're right," Myeong said. "What did you have in mind?"

"Taser?"

"Perfect. Where do we find one?"

"Don't worry, I have a couple."

And they were on their way to Andi's condo.

"Now be quiet. We may be able to sneak in without my dad hearing."

The two of them tiptoed through the dust-covered garage, stepping around recycling from five years ago, rotten with milk and other remnants. There was a lawn mover, which hadn't been used for years either, by the look of the lawn: mostly overgrown by crabgrass.

"They should be in the basement," Andi whispered.

They crept through the condo, down to the basement, where Andi and Myeong spent most of their time. Once inside, Andi eased the door shut, and they both breathed a sign of relief.

"Maybe we should take a second and compare the instructions we have from each source." Myeong suggested.

"Sure. Good idea," Andi said.

As they compared the instructions, they noticed there were discrepancies between the instructions.

"Well, how the heck will we know which one is the right one?"

"It might be that neither of them are correct."

"Well, then how will we get through?"

"I don't know."

"Uh oh."

"What?"

"It's rare that you say you don't know what to do. I'm nervous about how this will go."

"Now you're sounding like Charlie." They laughed.

"Myeong?"

"Yes?"

"I miss him."

"I do too." They leaned their heads against each other, sighing. "I do too."

They sat for a minute in silence, when Andi wiped away a tear. "Well, let's get this shit figured out so we can get him back. No point sitting here moping."

"If you need to talk about how you feel, it's okay –"

"I don't want to talk. I want to act. Let's go. What else do we need?" They laid out the materials that they had on the table.

Myeong sighed. "We have the map of the base, from my mom."

"Check," Andi said, packing it in Myeong's bag.

"We have the instructions from Buddy. And the ones from online which I have transferred from my flash drive onto my phone."

"Check," Andi said.

"We have tasers."

"Check." Andi packed one in each one of their bags. "Let's also grab some food as we leave. Other than that, what else?"

"I have my normal pack of supplies, including a wind-up portable charger, flashlight, leather man, hair bands, and ibuprofen. Other than that, I think we are as ready as we can be."

"Great, let's go."

"Okay."

As they crept out of the home, they stopped by the fridge and grabbed two cans of apple juice and a jar of peanut butter.

"Odd choice of food," Myeong said as they headed out the door.

"What can I say? It's all we had that seemed right."

"What didn't seem right?"

"Bud Light and hamburger helper?"

"Fair enough."

"Are we ready?"

"I think we are," said Myeong.

They stepped out of the home and walked along the street to the park's gate.

"Well, here we are," Myeong said. "Let's give this a try."

They walked into the amusement park, wind whipping through the rusty metal pieces, causing them to screech against each other. Just like the first night, it started to rain, and they found themselves at the ball pit.

"Let's see if we can get in."

They slid into the ball pit, pushing balls out of the way, when they saw a trap door, just like the first night.

"Let's go."

Andi pulled up the trap door, and they both dropped inside.

Myeong clicked on her flashlight, and they walked down the tiled hallway, watching the beam of light bounce from one side to the other like a ball. Slowly, they approached the elevator, which was still covered in muck and grime. They stepped inside, as it was already open for them, waiting.

"Alright, get the instructions out," Myeong said.

Myeong stood beside the elevator buttons, instructions in hand.

Andi pulled out her taser and nodded.

Myeong pushed the button for floor number four, and the elevator lurched to a start, barely closing the crooked doors in time. Myeong continued to press the buttons for floors 2, 6, 2, and 10.

"So now, we have a major discrepancy," Myeong said.

"What is it?"

"Buddy's instructions say to go to floor 1, but the library's instructions say to go to floor 5."

"I don't get it... who do we believe?"

"I think the pattern of numbers makes more sense with this floor being 5. Floor 1 seems to represent the real world, with floor 10 representing the other world. 5 is right in the middle, do you see what I mean?"

"Yeah, that makes sense. Let's do floor 5 next."

Myeong pressed the floor 5 button, and as they arrived, the same woman walked in from before.

Myeong motioned to Andi to be quiet, and Andi nodded, waving her off.

Myeong pressed the button for floor 1, the final step, and they started moving up instead. Myeong and Andi could instantly feel it. They were headed to the other world.

Chapter 10 - Back in the Saddle again

As they stepped out of the elevator, they saw as it opened into a holographic, almost beautiful place. The army was walking right toward them, and they instinctively dodged to the alcoves on each side of the outside of the elevator. The army marched past with a somewhat disjointed step, looking similar to an all-in on the Astrocraft map, but missed the mark due to the lack of uniformity. Myeong and Andi were already breathing heavily. The woman from the elevator stretched out her neck to look both ways at them, but they didn't look back, and she curled back into the elevator, closing the doors behind her.

"Jesus," Andi said.

"Yep," Myeong responded.

Once the army had passed, they went to explore the buildings one by one, taking a look in the window first, then opening the door. The first building they entered looked like Doug's house almost identically. The next building looked almost exactly like the library. The third building was the arcade. As they looked into the first building, and saw Buddy sitting there, they stormed in, ready to fight a small animal.

"Listen, listen," he said. "It's dangerous here. I didn't want you getting hurt so I lied."

"To protect us?"

"Yes."

"Funny way of showing it," Andi scoffed. "We almost didn't make it back. We would have lost our chance to save Charlie. All because you wanted to 'help' us."

"Okay, I understand," he said, and started to shimmer to disappearing.

"Wait," Myeong said. "We need your help. We don't know how to acquire the stone you mentioned we need in order to keep our wits about us here."

"It sounds like we can help each other then."

"How do you want re-payment then?" Andi snapped.

"We can settle that later. You two are in my debt for now."

"Great, so how do we get the rock?"

"First of all, you're both wrong, it's not a rock nor a stone." He paused.

"Well?"

"It's a computer chip, disguised as something else. They can look like a lot of different things."

Myeong and Andi stared at him.

"That's all I can share for now. Goodbye." And he disappeared.

"What? That's all we get?"

A voice popped up above them. "Use this..." a monocle lowered from the ceiling. Myeong reached out to grab it. "You'll know it when you see it."

"You'll know it when you see my ass," Andi muttered.

Myeong placed the monocle on her eye socket. She blinked to see that everything was in a monochromatic black and white. "Huh," she said, handing it to Andi.

"Let's get going on finding this thing I guess." They stepped out onto the street to see that the ground, like last time, would not allow them to stand up straight. Instead, they were falling down, having difficulty telling where the other person was.

"Andi!" Myeong reached into her bag and pulled out the rope. When they seemed to swing past each other, she handing an end of the rope to Andi. It created an instant grounding source. They were able to see each other now, and the world seemed to move around them as a pair. "Let's just get into the next

building over,” Myeong called, but her words were lost. She just led Andi through to what appeared to be the next building. She yanked herself up to the door, and threw it open. Myeong and Andi flopped onto the floor, holding their heads, reeling from the disorientation of the outside. Myeong put on the monocle and saw a small orange dot through the floor of the next floor up. They couldn’t hear anyone in there and had no reason to believe someone would be there, but they took out their tasers again and readied themselves for a fight. As they climbed the flight of stairs, they came into a room that was dripping with an odorous liquid.

“Ugh what is that?” Andi said.

“I have no idea, but it looks... unsafe, judging by the holes it has carved in those metal boxes.”

“But did you see the chip up here somewhere?”

“Yes, I think so.” Myeong leaned forward to see if she could look closer at what looked like an old computer. She put the monocle back on. “It’s definitely this old computer.”

“How will you get –”

Myeong had already made a plan of how to get through and was jumping from clear spot to clear spot, avoiding the drips from the ceiling until she landed, on her top toes, in a spot beside the computer. She muttered to herself and leaned forward to find a way to discover the chip. There was a button that lay on the bottom left corner of the plastic border. “Eject,” Myeong muttered to herself. She pushed the button, and a computer chip slid out from the bottom of the machine. She looked back at Andi and grinned. Putting on the monocle again, she checked on last time to see that it was the computer chip. She reached out, grabbed it, and hopped back to the dry area.

"Very impressive," Andi said in a neutral tone. "But it's only one. There's two of us."

"Maybe one of us can wear this one, and then whoever it is will lead the other person," Myeong said.

"Glad you already thought through everything," Andi said, crossing her arms.

"Andi," Myeong turned her palms to the ceiling.

Andi took a deep breath.

"Please don't—"

"Let's find the other one so we don't need to lead each other around anymore. Okay?"

"Okay." Myeong shook her head. "Will you wear the chip until we find the next one?"

"You're the one that should wear it. You're more clever than I am."

"Andi, come on. I know not having Charlie is having an effect on you. It's having an effect on me too. We need to stick together though. We won't get him back if we are bickering."

"I know, you're right. Just give me a second. Go ahead," she said.

Myeong walked to the door and opened it to the twisting world outside. Myeong clicked the computer chip into the adaptor Buddy had given them. The world came to a halt and it became clear that everything was just as solid as the real world, it just looked confusing to them for a bit.

"Let's go," Andi said, tying the rope around her wrist. "I might throw up on you though, so watch out."

Myeong laughed and led her into the world outside. They were just heading to the next building over. Myeong was simply walking straight forward, but Andi was twisting and turning as if she was being hit by different moving

walls. Myeong peeked in the window of the next building down, and they walked inside. The exterior looked like any house on the side of the road in their town, but the inside was like the arcade back home. Myeong put the monocle in place and glanced around the building, but didn't see anything.

"I don't see anything here. I'm not sure where the chip might be."

"Ugh great. Let's just keep looking I guess."

"This place is huge." The ceiling was vaulted, and the stairwells led to balconies overlooking the main floor. The girls went walking around the building, looking through the aisles of books. Finally, they came to a computer lab. Every computer appeared to have a computer chip in it, and Andi snatched one and connected it to the adaptor.

"Now we can both find our way around."

Chapter 12 - Changeling

“Do you remember the changeling strategy Charlie was telling us about the other day?”

“Andi, we’re working on getting him back right now –”

“You’re not listening. Changelings.”

Myeong’s eyes went from narrow to wide with smile lines. “Andi! That’s perfect. Good thinking.”

“Alright, if we use the changeling capacity to make our suits appear to be similar to those of the army, do you think they will be able to tell?”

“It’s hard to know. Part of the benefit of the changeling capacity is that it enchants the surrounding people and characters so they can’t see or sense your true identity at all. I’m thinking on if that will transfer to in-person or not.”

Andi shrugged and leaned back in the chair.

“Let’s just try it right now.”

Andi and Myeong stood up.

“Turn on your suit with your goggles and all,” Myeong said. “Now I just need to input the changeling capacities...” Myeong pasted code for the changeling function into her watch from the processor she had already written it in for Astrocraft games. “With a couple adjustments,” she said, still typing, “this **should** work. What do I look like right now?”

“Right now?” Andi paused. “Just like you I guess? Nothing special.”

Myeong dropped her hands sarcastically. “Wow real nice Andi. Guess I’m just not special.” They laughed.

“Okay,” Myeong said as she turned on the changeling capacity. On the watch screen, she selected an overlord appearance. “What do I look like now?”

“Archibald!” Andi laughed. “Do you remember how we named the first overlord that spawns in the game?”

Myeong nodded.

“Charlie loved the name, but we both hated it.” Andi’s smile shrunk into a frown. “You look like an overlord. It works.”

Myeong reached over to give Andi’s hand a squeeze. “Are you ready to try it out for real?”

Andi paused. “What are the consequences if we fail? Have you thought about that?”

Myeong nodded. “Of course. I’ve determined from the research that, if we mess up, we lose everything. You die here, you die in real life. We’ll just have to be really careful. This has to work.”

Andi nodded and flattened her suit down, readjusting her weapon. “If all else fails, we’ll fight our way out.”

Myeong smiled, but when Andi turned around to leave, she muttered “Let’s hope it doesn’t get to that point. If it does... we may already be dead.”

“Here they come,” Andi whispered. “Tell me the plan again.”

“We sneak in at the very back and follow exactly their pattern of walking: straight back, high knees, mostly in sync.”

“Let me just take a picture of one.” Myeong videoed the patrol walking past, which rendered a three dimensional vector of their appearance. Myeong imported it to the changeling capacity, and shared it with Andi’s watch. “Put it on.”

The girls turned on their suits with changeling capacity on for the uniforms of the patrol. They exchanged thumbs up, and at the last second, Myeong pulled Andi into a shaky hug. “It’s going to be okay. Remember: we’re doing this for Charlie.”

The end of the patrol group passed, and they slipped behind the last pair, marching side by side, in tandem with the army.

The group turned fully around at the elevator, and there was a moment that the leader passed by Andi and Myeong. They simultaneously stopped breathing until he was out of eye-shot. He didn't even glance over. So far, so good. They were on the home stretch now, back to the base.

Chapter 13 - In the Base

The army approached the front of the building, and the king split off, heading in through the grand pillars, while the group of soldiers took a turn around to the back door. Everyone filed into a small room whose walls were covered in tanks of green liquid. Each person laid down into the liquid one at a time, as if they had assigned spots.

In order to fit in, Myeong and Andi followed suit by laying down in two of the empty tanks, but Myeong kept her head out of the water. She was terrified of what would happen if she put her head down.

All at once, every tank was filled with electricity, shocking Myeong and Andi for a moment. Both briefly passed out, falling into the liquid for a second. They both came sputtering awake a few seconds later.

Upon remembering what was going on, they froze, fearing that they would be found out. However, the rest of the army was contained and oblivious. Myeong and Andi crawled out of their tanks. What was that? Why aren't we dead?"

The electric charge ran through the liquid again.

"It looks like it's on a timer, but I don't understand."

"You're good with science stuff. What is going on with all this? Why the FUCK are there people laying in these tanks? And where is Charlie?"

"I don't know how to answer your questions, but I do know that this liquid appears to conduct electricity, but it looks like it doesn't conduct it to the same level as water would. So we're alive because it's a complete foreign substance that I've never encountered before."

"Great."

"And, I think the army is mostly robots. Did you notice how their joints squeaked as we walked? I don't think they are made of flesh."

“And Charlie?”

“I’m not sure.” They both started looking through each tank.

“Charlie!” Andi cried out.

Myeong slapped a hand over her mouth. “What are you thinking?” she whispered in her ear. “We don’t know who else might be in here. We don’t know anything about this place.” She looked at Charlie there, hanging in the liquid. They both reached in to pull him out of the liquid.

He didn’t move. No more than three long seconds passed before Andi laid over him. “What’s going on?”

“I’m sorry. I’m not sure.”

“Any ideas at all?”

“Well, do you remember the patch back a couple years ago that included a storyline about a liquid called fell?”

“Yeah, I never played through it because there was no hand to hand combat.”

“Right, it was more of a puzzle game. You had to shut down the power to the whole facility in order to turn off the electricity that kept the fell churning. Or something like that... It ended up being highly unpopular, so they didn’t bring the full version into the game the following year, but –”

“Okay, how is this helping Charlie?”

“I think we have to put him back.”

“Why?” Andi looked up panicked.

“I’m wondering if we can’t remove him from the electricity because he is dependent on it somehow. We need to put him back.”

They heaved him back into the liquid, suspended identically to the robots in the other tanks. Myeong flinched.

A tear slipped down each of their cheeks.

"We need to go. We're too exposed here."

"Let me leave a sign for him. Show him we're here for him."

Myeong nodded.

Andi lifted up Charlie's hand and took out her pen. She wrote "Hang in there." on his wrist.

The girls crept out of the room into more dimly lit hallways.

"We're safer here," Myeong said. "The only way to solve the problem of him being reliant on the electricity would be to retrieve whatever is causing that and flip it around so that the effects were reversed. But I don't know how to do that yet. I just know that a central electricity source might be a part of this base's design. We need to keep that in mind."

Andi collapsed in a corner, shaking and crying. "I can't do this. It's too much."

"Hey, hey." Myeong knelt down next to her. "What's going on in your head?" She asked gently, but her hand tightened around her weapon. They were still exposed.

"I'm terrified that it's too late. I miss my dad and the real world. I just want it all to be over. I'll stay here in this corner. I'm hidden plenty. Just come back and find me when you've saved the day."

"Saved the day?"

"Yes, you always have some fucking plan for everything. That's not always good, you know. Plans will only get you so far, but you still manage to fix everything every time anyway. You fix all of my mistakes. Everything I do wrong, you do right."

"I need you." Myeong said it softly. "I need your help. I need your support."

"Yeah, right."

“Who else is going to tank the fights? And you think I’m suddenly going to be as good at melee combat as you?”

A smile started to appear in the corners of Andi’s lips.

“Remember when you got your nipples pierced?”

Andi nodded.

“What did you say to yourself to get through it?”

“I’m a bad bitch, and I can do this.”

“Exactly. We can do this. But we can only do it together.” She leaned forward and hugged Andi, then stood up and reached out a hand for her to grab. “Come on. We’ve got a brother to save.”

As the two girls slinked down the hallways, looking for a place to hide out, Andi spoke up. “You know how you said we don’t know anything about this place?”

“Yes. We don’t know what we’re doing here.”

“But that’s not true,” Andi said. “We know it’s modeled after the base –”

“We guessed that. We don’t know that for sure.”

Andi sighed. “Just listen to me and don’t interrupt for once!”

Myeong dropped her head and was silent.

“We know this place is likely modeled after Astrocraft’s first edition barracks.” Andi reached for the map in Myeong’s pocket.

Myeong stepped away and took it out herself. “What exactly are we looking for?” She unfurled it.

“Well, maybe we can try and identify where we are. What’s around us?”

“Just some pillars and a marble floor.”

“Yes, but does it have anything about that on the map?”

“Jesus, no, it’s more about layout—nothing about materials.”

“Okay,” Myeong tucked her hair behind her ears. “Let’s just think for a second. Where did we come from to get here? How many hallways did we turn down when we were running?”

“I’m not sure!”

“Think!” Andi threw up her hands.

“I don’t think we actually turned at all, but we seemed to be on an incline the whole time, right?”

Andi lifted her arm and sniffed. “Yeah, that checks out. I always sweat the smelliest running up an incline.”

Myeong managed to let out a little giggle.

Andi looked at her with forgiveness.

“We can’t keep fighting while we’re trying to find him. We just need to stick together. That’s the only way we can make this work.”

Andi nodded. “So is there anything about an incline or different levels on the map?”

Myeong turned to show her. “There’s some shading, but it’s difficult to tell.”

Andi groaned. “This is useless.”

Myeong leaned in to inspect the schematic. “Maybe we can get our bearings by finding a landmark.”

Andi peered at the image to see. “Here. That’s a crazy looking statue. That’s pretty recognizable.”

“Nice one. What else is there?”

The characteristic gleam of the weapons the minions use bounced off the tile wall onto Andi’s face.

Myeong’s eyes widened. “We need to go.” They started to run, but the fleet was gaining on them. Myeong and Andi leaned up against a side wall,

hoping to hide in the slim shadow. A suctioning sound came from beyond them, and the world went black. They were falling. Falling down, definitely, but it felt slower, like floating. Myeong found herself sure that she was falling, but unsure of everything else.

“Andi?” She whispered, barely audible.

A fleshy arm wrapped itself around her ankle, and even from there, Myeong could smell the B.O. “Andi!”

“What happened? Where are we? What happens when we hit the ground? Is there a ground to hit anywhere down there?”

“Slow down, this is probably designed based on something in the game, too.”

“Let’s start with what happened! We were just standing there, and we got sucked up into a vacuum.”

“It was like a vacuum. Do you remember that hidden key that Charlie found? In the sanctuary?”

“He was so proud of that.”

“Exactly; he couldn’t wait to show us. But do you remember what happened when we all got there?”

“We went through a portal into a mini-game. Just like all of the hidden keys.”

“What if we’re headed to a mini-game? Of sorts.”

Andi paused. “What would that even mean?”

“We have to play.”

Chapter 15 - IDK but it's gonna be good

"Okay, we're looking for some kind of control center. Anything that seems like it would have control over the whole base... or even this whole dimension," Myeong said.

As they turned the corner, they saw exactly that. A white oval protruded into a foyer they didn't know could fit into this building. Two guards stood inside, and they appeared to be robots as well.

"Think they're robots or flesh?" Andi said.

"Bots," Myeong responded. "Look at their joints again. So obvious when you see the elbows. As they approached the window, they stopped to decide how to move forward.

"There's got to be a way to distract them. Maybe we can draw them out—"

"I'm going in." Andi stepped outside of the invisibility realm and charged into the room. The guards turned just in time for her to slice off both of their heads with her axe. Andi waved Myeong in.

She stormed into the room. "You used force without consulting me. We have to communicate about these things."

"You're kidding. We need to communicate?"

"Yes!"

"More like you need to give me permission."

"Yeah, I —" Myeong stopped. "I'm sorry. You're absolutely right. I wasn't looking for discussion. I was looking to be the sole leader. But I'm not."

"We're a team. Like you said."

"You're right."

"Let's take a look at what we have here."

Both girls looked down at the control panels.

"We need to find something that shuts down the system without it being a hard shut down. We want the system to go to sleep so we can reboot it without Charlie included," Myeong said.

"How about this?" Andi pointed to a series of levers that indicated that all could shut down the system if all were used or if only the first lever is pushed, it would cause the system to go to sleep.

"Great. So here's the plan I'm thinking of: We put the system to sleep, rewire Charlie's tank to send a shock of electricity that carries the code for him to wake up."

"Good. I'll go down to the room to wait for him," Andi volunteered.

"No! I mean, no. I would really like for us to stick together at all costs. We'll hope he sees the note on his hand and knows to continue to play along until we can find him and bring him home."

Andi nodded. "Fair enough."

"I hope this works," Myeong muttered. "We'll only have about a minute." She pulled down the first lever, which turned the lights from bright to dim but not entirely off. Working through the levels of the building that appeared from the hologram screen, she quickly found the room with the tanks. "Which one was Charlie's tank?"

"Bottom of the wall?" Andi said.

"Okay, bottom of the wall... maybe fourth from the back?"

"Sounds fine to me."

"We have to be sure," Myeong sighed, her hands shaking.

"Okay, yes, fourth from the back, bottom of the wall."

Myeong clicked on the tank to see if any settings would pop up.

"The lever is coming back down."

"Go hold it! I'm not even close to ready."

Andi went to pull the lever back down, but it wouldn't budge. "It's not moving. We have to hurry."

Myeong navigated through settings and found a button which read "hard refresh." "Do you think hard refresh sounds right?"

"It has to be, doesn't it? We don't have time to choose something else."

The guards on the ground twitched.

"What if it causes him brain damage?"

"Life over limb, Myeong! We have to go!"

Myeong pressed hard refresh on the tank and all the power went out.

The guards started moving more, and Myeong and Andi ran out of the control center. They had surely garnered the attention of anyone sentient in the building from creating a full power outage. They ran.

"What have we done?" Myeong asked. "It's over, we destroyed our chance of getting him back. It's over."

"What are you talking about?" Andi said, wheezing. "We don't know what did or didn't work yet."

"Where do we go? They have to be looking for us."

"Where would we normally go in an Astrocraft game to meet up?"

"Lookout post?"

"Doesn't seem to be an equivalent here."

"There's no where else that makes sense."

"You're right. We need to find an equivalent. And we need to make sure that Charlie will find the equivalent, too."

"Here," Andi shoved Myeong into an alcove.

"Let's look at the map again."

"Honestly, there's not way that he created this whole place and they didn't create a lookout post. There's no way."

Myeong opened the map from her watch, and they found that at the top of the building, there was a latch, which appeared to lead to nothing.

"Where does it go?"

"Maybe a lookout post."

They looked at each other and grinned.

"Let's go."

They peered out of the alcove and jumped back onto the tile where they continued to run in the direction the map led them.

"Here," Myeong motioned to a fire-escape-ladder-looking thing.

They started to climb, when they heard a group of angry people coming around the corner. They hurried, then froze, hoping the group wouldn't see them. The king turned the corner.

"We need to find them! Whoever it is that attacked my guards will pay." They stormed past.

A small boy started to walk slower than the rest, then looked up at the girls and nodded, giving them a sign.

"That's Charlie," Andi whispered with excitement and fear. "It worked."

"And now he probably knows where to meet us when he gets the chance to break free."

They kept climbing until they came out the top of the building and opened the hatch.

"This looks just like lookout post."

"Now what do we do?" Andi asked.

"We wait for him."

Chapter 16 - Getting Charlie Back

"Charlie!" Andi lunged over to him as he popped out of the hatch. "We did it!"

"We just need to get out of here. Come on! Let's get to the elevator," Myeong said.

"I'm so glad to be back with you guys," Charlie said, eyes watering. "I was so scared."

All three of them hugged.

"We aren't out of the woods yet," Myeong said. "Let's go."

They peered over the edge of the building.

"That's a long way down," Andi said, stating the obvious.

"Maybe we can climb?" Charlie suggested.

"Wait, there's a group of them down there," Myeong said.

"They're surrounding the building..." Andi took a step back.

"Where's the king? Where's the king?"

A scrape echoed behind them. "The King's right here." He motioned for his guards. "Seize them," he said calmly.

Andi tried to fight, but they were too strong.

"Let's go," he said, and they dragged them down the ladder.

Chapter 16 - Getting Charlie Back and also TRAPPED

All three of them were in individual cells, separated by a cinderblock wall. Myeong was in the corner of her cell, testing the strength of the bricks. "We've lost everything. Everything," she said. "What can we do?"

"They said they're going to turn us into his minions at day break. I can't stand the thought of that," Charlie said. "I can never go back." Charlie held onto the steel bars of his cell.

"We wouldn't even be here if it weren't for you, Myeong," Andi said, slumped in the corner of her cell.

Myeong whipped around. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"It's supposed to mean that –"

Buddy popped his head in through the steel bars on Myeong's cell wall. "I can see that you are in some trouble here. You could challenge him to a astrocraft battle. He won't be able to resist," Buddy said. "But make the stakes high."

"That could work..." Myeong said. "We're good at Astrocraft. Will there be computers?"

"Not exactly—" Buddy said, then froze. "I hear something..." then he stalked away.

"Thanks for nothing," Myeong muttered to herself.

Myeong laid down on her back. "Here's what we'll do, we can challenge him to a duel – astrocraft-style. If we're able to negotiate the rules, we could say we're all going to fight him, and he can bring whatever fighters he wants too. It can be all three of us on the ground."

"Guard?" Myeong called.

A robot wheeled onto the scene.

"We're ready to talk."

The robot indicated something like a nod. He projected a hologram of the back of the goat-man's head. A beep sounded. He said "Hm?" and turned around. He briefly moved his beady eyes over a message, and said, "I heard you were interested in talking." He paused. "And what is it you have to say?"

"We'll play you. Astrocraft. 3 v. 3." Myeong's voice didn't shake.

"Too easy. Let's play 3 versus... as many players as I want."

Myeong didn't respond, not wanting to ruin their chance to deal.

"What if you lose?" he asked.

"You get to keep us here, transition us into robots if you want. Charlie will become your right hand man, like you wanted."

"And if you somehow win?"

"All three of us get to return to our world and stay there."

"Deal." He extended his hand. "We'll start the timer in one hour." The guard snapped and unlocked all of their doors, and they made a break for the exit door. As they stepped outside, the town turned into the game itself, LED trees and obstacles.

Chapter 17 - Preparation for the fight

"We'll need to communicate with each other."

"Headsets," Andi said. "I saw some in the arcade house. Some kind of headset anyway. We'll probably have to do some scavenging for parts so that we can each have some kind of armor and some kind of weapon."

Myeong looked at her suit laying in its case. It was lit up by LED lights that surrounded it on all sides. Myeong opened the door to her suit and pulled it out.

She slipped on the new suit and sure enough, it hung on her and she wondered how she would even run. She found a watch in the case as well and tapped it, but with no indication of life from the watch, she shook her head.

"How will we navigate?" Myeong said.

"The watches!" Charlie called, waving his in the air.

"No, mine's busted."

"Damn," Andi said. "Do our phones work now?"

They all instinctively pulled out their phones.

"Nothing," Myeong said. "You?"

Andi and Charlie shook their heads.

"Black screens," Charlie said.

"Most importantly," Andi said, "How will we fight?"

"Ugh," Charlie said. "My strong suit never was hand to hand combat."

"We'll try to keep you out of the fight as much as possible," Myeong said.

"But listen, Andi's right. We'll need at least the basic build of units."

"Tank," Andi said.

"Healer," Charlie said.

"DPS," Myeong said.

"I'm happy tank and do melee damage," Andi said.

Myeong nodded. "I'll do range damage, and Charlie?"

"I'll heal."

"Good, Charlie. But that's not your only job. We need you to keep an eye on everything going on in the game. You keep us informed of what's going on, okay?" She put her hand on his shoulder.

Charlie nodded.

"We can do this," Andi said. "We're good at the game."

"But we've never played in person!" Charlie said. "How do we know we're good at this game? And what build are they using anyway?"

"We don't know that yet, but—" Myeong started.

"Exactly!"

"But we do know a good macro game will beat any micro they throw at us."

"How do we even manage our macroeconomics when there's no gas or minerals?" Charlie threw up his hands.

"We play smart," Myeong said. "We stick together at all costs and we don't take any unnecessary risks."

Andi finished strapping on her boots. "Charlie, you've made it this far. We need your knowledge to keep us going while we play."

Charlie shook his head.

"What's our time?" Myeong asked.

"We have ten minutes left to prepare."

"Everyone have everything?"

"We just need weapons," Andi said, lugging in a pile of weapons.

Andi pulled out the largest axe in the pile and smiled, turning it over in her hands. Charlie grabbed for the lightning rod, which would help him recharge their suits for armor protection. Myeong reached for the crossbow,

then thought better of it. She hesitantly put her hand out to grab the ray gun. It was always more powerful than she thought she could handle, and it tended to leave the user less in control. It's got more power, but is less precise. She turned it over in her hands.

"Myeong, we have to go." Andi said, walking toward the door with Charlie.

"Right." Myeong put the ray gun into her belt loop and trudged out after them.

Chapter 18 - The Fight

They approached the street, where there was a clearing that was outlined in neon red strips.

"Okay, let's get into positions."

Charlie nodded, climbing the nearest tree. "I'll stay up in the trees and toward the middle where I can see more." He moved on ahead, jumping from tree to tree.

"I'll stay right in front on the ground, ready to attack," Andi said.

"And I'll be right behind you Andi, but in the trees too," Myeong said.

Myeong and Andi stepped up to the neon strip on the elevator side of this other world.

The timer ticked. One minute left.

"You guys?" Charlie said through the headset. "I'm kind of scared."

Andi buzzed in. "We all are Charlie. You're so brave to stay here and fight with us. Ya big dweeb."

"We can't do it without you," Myeong said.

The timer began with a long beep. Their suits cinched and expanded around their bodies, their watches lit up, and their weapons made a mechanical click and started glowing with energy.

If the live action version was anything like the video game, the other team would be let out from the opposite side of the map.

Myeong and Andi stepped forward into the playing field.

"Three targets in sight," Charlie said. While his friends were engaged in combat, he would heal them.

Myeong felt a tap of vibration from her watch. She looked to see a picture of three robots wheeling toward them from just behind the tree line.

"I'm moving up," Myeong said. She loved the control of being in such a high place that no one could see her, but she could see all. This would definitely be possible with these new trees.

She found a particularly tall one, and pulled herself up by the hand and foot holds created by the bark. She never looked down until she got to the top, as a general rule. Instead she would look up, and through the tree branches she could see the sky. It was black and the red clouds shifted across it. Normally in the video game, those clouds looked white against blue sky and more pixelated than these did. She had almost reached the tree house that hung from the branches of this tree. Once the rungs of the top ladder were even with her in elevation, she threw herself to the rope. Her hands scraped against the rope's rough texture. She got her grip steady and pulled herself up the rope, through the hole in the underside of the treehouse, and up into it. Conveniently, a scope was bolted into the railing.

Although this tree house was not the greatest cover, with its open top and several inches of space between slabs of wood, it would work just fine. She stood up, and before taking the scope, she looked down over the edge. It was a staggering distance down, which tree branches completely blocking her sight of the bottom. Her head spun, and her heart raced with excitement. Myeong took up the scope and looked through it, surveying the area. Off in a clearing, Andi was fighting the three opponents with little effort. Myeong turned to look out at the rest of the terrain. The tree house swung in the wind, and she held her balance, but the scope swung around, and as it did, about half way through, beneath her, she saw what looked to be a blue dot amongst some of the taller trees. She thought for a moment that perhaps it was the sign of a kind NPC, but then she heard it: the sound of a long range weapon making a hole in the

wood an inch from her left foot. She jolted back to align her self with the side closest to the tree. But there was no cover or any way to get down.

She pulled her weapon from behind her back and held it as a shield in front of her body as she scooted back toward the scope. She grabbed it for just a moment long enough to see that there were still three people fighting her friends in the clearing. But what was this opponent doing? Why did their team have more than the standard amount: three? She lurched back and as she slid down into the hole, she knew she would only have a moment before she was hit by a shot. She let go of the wooden tree house and grabbed hold of the rope just long enough to let it swing her back toward the tree. She hugged the trunk and expertly shielded herself with the gun while also pulling herself around to the other side, where she could hopefully be out of the way of the shooter. Letting go of the tree with one hand, she spoke into the watch.

"Dictate text to Charlie and Andi." The watch perked up and opened the messaging platform.

"There are more of them."

Myeong hadn't heard any sounds of weapons since she started climbing down the tree. Not from the opponents, or the mysterious extras, or even her own teammates. She continued climbing.

Another gun shot sounded and this time shot up at her. She looked down from the tree to see that the blue dot was directly beneath her. Her grip faltered, and in a last ditch effort, she pushed off from the tree. She flew through the air a little longer than she expected without losing any altitude. She looked down to see that there was a tree, and she maneuvered through the sky to get to it. As she fell, and to some extent, flew, she noticed her health bar on her watch go down dramatically. In looking down at her watch for too long, she hit a tree and scrambled to grab onto it. She latched onto it and watched

as her health bar rose. She searched to see if anyone was lurking beneath her as a blue dot. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, slowing her spinning mind.

A message popped up on her watch. "Andi is down need backup."

She landed in a mud puddle, sopping wet.

The light had somehow gotten darker and by now there was a faint silver glow filtering through the thick canopy that marked Myeong's path.

She ran to meet Andi back at the main spot, which she wasn't far from.

Myeong used her ray gun to easily knock out the three robots that had surrounded Andi. She got Andi up, grabbing her hand. They moved forward.

"Charlie, we need you back with us," Myeong spoke into her mic.

"Be right there," Charlie responded. "We've got three more coming in about 1 minute."

"Thanks, Charlie," Myeong said.

"Fuck, did I lose a life?" Andi said, brushing herself off.

"Yeah, but you still have two." Andi said.

"I'm here." Charlie moved with them from inside the trees.

"We need to move forward," Andi said.

"Let's do that. Andi, you can be ready to fight when we run into the other players. Charlie, you can... Charlie what's going on?"

Charlie's face had turned a grayish blue. With a shaky hand, he pointed straight up. It was a full moon.

"I don't know what that --" Myeong started to ask.

Andi leapt over the edge of the neon structure, motioning for the others to follow, and then she ran off into the dense trees.

"Charlie." Myeong and Charlie followed Andi in a crouched position.

"Charlie, what's the full moon mean?"

"In the game, it's a special event that allows each of the players to possess one power or skill. I always like to have the night vision, particularly because I think it's fitting because it's actually night when the full moon rises and ---"

Myeong motioned for him to move it along. "What would that translate to in here?"

"I have no idea." Charlie gulped his dry-mouth.

"But I definitely don't feel any different from normal. When are we... What should I... How would it...?"

"I don't know." Charlie hurried along in his crouch.

"What do you know?" Andi intended it to be a rude rhetorical question, but Charlie responded.

"I know that the most coveted skill is invisibility, and that the moon being that shade of white means we all have it," Charlie said. "Including them."

On cue, Andi screamed. Charlie and Myeong ran forward, but when they got to where she was, she was gone.

Myeong and Charlie moved so they were back to back. "Are we able to see those on our same team when they are invisible?" Myeong asked.

"Not necessarily," he answered, but the air was quiet except for their heavy breathing.

Andi came stumbling out of the trees.

"What happened?" Myeong asked.

"They let me go. I don't know."

"Something's wrong," Charlie said.

"Buddy told me something – he won't let us go, even if we win fair and square. We need to find a way out. We can't trust him to let us out just because we win," Myeong said.

"Where are they?" Andi asked. Charlie was tending to her wounds.

"And what are they getting ready to do?" Myeong muttered.

"We need to get Andi health. " Charlie said, "Her suit is losing power."

"My other house," Myeong said, and they moved quickly toward it.

The door was ajar. Myeong's home was dark, apparently empty.

"Let's just get the health and go," Andi said, ready to force her way in despite her injuries.

Myeong put her hand up. "No, let's wait." She waved Andi and Charlie to the back of the glowing home. The concrete and cobblestones that dotted the grass were shimmering and floating above the ground. The grass was surrounded by flowers, whose petals waved in the breeze.

"There's a door back here -- we never use it though. I doubt anyone knows about it."

"Wait, let's think about this!" Charlie shouted.

Myeong and Andi shushed him. "What are you yelling about now?" Andi threw her arms up.

"We're running out of time," Myeong pointed to the clock tower in the distance.

"Here's the health," Charlie said. He handed the cylinder to Andi, and she opened it and smeared the glowing substance inside over the tears in her suit.

"Let's go," she said.

They snuck out the back door, further from the playing field which seemed to not really be the place they were playing anyway.

"We need to get back to the base," Myeong said.

"What? Why?" Andi asked. "We're doing fine out here."

Charlie shook his head, looking at all the tears in her suit. "I could help us navigate within the base. What are you thinking Myeong?"

"I'm thinking we need to start getting creative."

Chapter 19 - The base again

They ran toward the base, and slowed as they approached.

“Remember – he’s still a child in his mind. He could... throw a fit,” Andi said, lifting her weapon.

“Exactly, he’s innocent. We don’t hurt him. End of discussion.”

“Myeong, how are we going to win if –” Charlie threw his hands up in the air.

“I said no discussion.”

“Well, we could...” Charlie started.

“And we’re not cheating,” Myeong said. Charlie looked up at her, and she shot him a look. “We’re not.” She took a deep breath. “We’re just not.”

The other two showed each other a quick look.

“Guys,” Myeong smiled. “Please. Trust me. We can do this fair and square.”

“Well then tell us your plan, as I’m sure you have one,” Andi said, crossing her arms.

“We need to enter the base and get back to the control center where they are controlling the power. We need to kick the power so all we can see is the elevator glowing. We need to get out,” Myeong said. “And yes, I do happen to have a plan this time.”

“We’ll split off and cover you from the front,” Andi grabbed Charlie and pulled him along with her.

Andi and Charlie went on ahead, and Myeong readied herself to fight. She was reminded of what she herself had said: he wouldn’t be playing fair. Why should they?

“Charlie, are there any cheat codes associated with invisibility?” Myeong asked into the mic on her headset .

He laughed. “Of course there are, what kind are you thinking?”

“One that will help us win.”

“Hm,” he said. “I think our best bet is to all switch to invisibility at exactly the same time. If all three units on one team switch to invisibility at the same time, the other team loses their invisibility. Does that make sense?”

“Sure,” Andi said.

“How do we make sure to do it all at exactly the same time?”

“Most times it’s done by accident. I’m not sure how we would do it.”

“What if I code a couple lines that turn on our invisibility and send that code as an encrypted virus in a message that automatically opens?” Myeong suggested.

“That could work...” Charlie started.

Andi shrugged.

“You’re right. It’s a long shot, but maybe worth a try.” Myeong said. She started typing up the code on her wrist.

“Is everyone in position?” Myeong asked via message.

“yup” Andi typed back.

“ready” Charlie responded.

“Sending code”

The code sent to everyone and she felt her suit go invisible.

“How do we know if it worked?” Myeong messaged.

“idk”

“idk”

“Great,” Myeong whispered to herself.

Myeong had reached the doors. “I’m going in anyway. We’ll give it our best shot.”

Meyong went in the front doors and turned toward the computer room according to the blueprint from her mom.

Myeong entered the cramped computer room. The walls shimmered as the red and blue and green rectangular lights lit up. The room glittered with the switches from the supercomputer the room was encased in. She sat down in a short, padded chair that sat in the center of the room in front of a desk with a monitor, keyboard, and mouse. The door to the room slid closed behind her.

A phrase was left up on the screen. "Amplification glitch."

She furrowed her brows. "What is amplification glitch?" she typed.

"Error 177"

"What is Error 177"

"Classified. Verify identity."

Myeong leaned in toward the screen and typed, "Override."

"Action invalid."

The door quietly slid open.

"Fuck," Myeong said aloud. She sat back in the chair.

Buddy leaned down beside her.

"What's this full moon glitch? It was pulled up when I got in here but..."

The expression on Buddy's face was one of deceit.

"You bitch." She shoved him against the wall by the collar. "What are you hiding?"

He grimaced.

She threw him to the ground. "Do you know something that can help us?"

Buddy leaped to try to get away.

"Ah, ah, ah," Myeong said, as she pinned him again. "Nice try, but I'm getting some answers."

"I only try to help," he replied.

"What do you get out of all of this? Out of deceiving us?"

He wriggled out of her grip. He pointed a hand at her heart.

Myeong grabbed at her chest. She lifted her laser gun and squeezed the trigger.

Buddy fell to the ground, writhing on his back.

Myeong leaned down to kneel over him. "How do you defeat him? How can we win?"

"You can't," he replied.

She punched him square between the eyes.

"You can't. His design is perfect."

She put an arm over his throat, starting to crush it.

"Last words?" he asked.

"What?" Myeong asked.

"I can't lie to you about your chances, but..." he gasped, "just remember that the base reflects any power directed at it." He gasped again. "That's the key to the amplification glitch." He passed out.

Myeong tapped the watch on her wrist. She typed out a message for Andi and Charlie. "We're going to blow up the base. We'll take our chances in the elevator. Blow up the base."

"fuck yeah," Andi typed back.

"I don't know, you guys, sounds like a dangerous plan. could go horribly wrong..." Charlie typed.

"We don't have a choice," Myeong said.

Chapter 20 - Near the End

“we’ll rig up the building, you go find the king” Andi typed.

Myeong nodded, assuring herself. She slinked through the hallways, searching for the throne room, where the king would be waiting for her, if he followed the structure of a usual late game Astrocraft build.

When she found the throne room at the center of the building, it was empty.

“Something’s wrong,” Myeong said into the mic. “You need to leave. Now. Get in the elevator and go.”

“What? No, we need to help you with blowing up the base?,” Andi said.

“Go I said!” Myeong yelled into the mic, taking out her taser. She made her way to the mechanical room.

Myeong methodically typed in the self-destruction code for the base. She followed along with her finger, reading the instructions. Once the cap unlocked from the final lever, using all of her body weight and strength, she pushed it up.

A voice echoed around her: “T-minus ten minutes to self-destruction. T-minus 10 minutes.”

Myeong raked her hand through her hair as she ran down the hallway, but steam burst out of the vents around her and blinded her at every step. She held her laser gun.

The cacophony of two sounds: her heartbeat and the blaring alarm, pounded in her ears. She ran, holding Ridley's case with both hands as it smashed into her shins with every step. Her eyes were stretched open wide, and she was snapping to attention in all directions, from side to side and in front of

her.

She had arrived at the elevator room, but where the glass elevator should have been sitting, waiting for its next occupant, there was nothing. She had no hope of escaping that way as she had planned to, now. Myeong heaved a shallow breath and turned around to run in the opposite direction. She was heading back to the control room where the self-destruct equipment was, when she collapsed onto a wall. Sweat dripped down her chin and frizz gradually erupted in her straight, black hair. Her vision was blurry. Flashing lights. Wailing siren. "T-minus one minute to reverse self-destruction directive. T-minus one minute." She turned her head, just slightly.

There, she saw the corner of a short, stiff, furry ear, peeking around the corner.

Dropping Ridley, Myeong sprinted back to the control room, arms and legs burning as she heard:

"30 seconds."

"Come on, come on, come on," Myeong muttered to herself, using all of her might to push the levers back up.

"20 seconds."

"Fuck! Come on!" Myeong raked back her sweaty, frizzy hair. She restrained the urge to punch the lever and give up and instead took one last push to try and reverse the order.

"10 seconds."

"No! No no no," she says, inches away from returning the final lever to its original position.

"9 seconds."

She pushed hard, biting her lip.

"8 seconds."

She let go, unable to continue.

"7 seconds."

She saw a loose pipe...

"6 seconds."

... and ripped it off the wall.

"5 seconds."

She slammed the pipe into the lever.

"4 seconds."

It moved, but only a millimeter.

"3 seconds."

She pulled back for one final strike.

"2 seconds."

She swung and hit the lever dead on.

"1 second."

She relaxed, heaving.

"Self-destruct order irreversible. T-minus five minutes to self-destruction."

"What?" Myeong's eyes widen. "No! I fixed it. It won't..." She stumbled back and forth around the room, flipping switches and pressing buttons at random. She raced back out into the hallway. "Fuck! Fuck you!" She punched the wall as she ran past it.

As she sprinted back to the elevator room, hoping to find that it had reappeared, she saw the cat. "Ridley." She grabbed the case, limping again. Her muscles had long since given up burning and instead were frozen, seizing up with every attempted movement. Sweat dripped off of her fingertips.

"T-minus 3 minutes to self-destruction. You have 3 minutes to evacuate."

Myeong took a deep breath. Eyes narrowed and focused, she checked every side of her, consistently in a pattered motion.

"T-minus 2 minutes to self-destruction. You have 2 minutes to evacuate."

She continued to run through flashes of blindingly bright and pitch black space filled with the fog of sprays of steam clouding her vision in every direction.

The elevator was there. She pulled herself in. Checking behind her, she threw the carrying case onto the floor.

"T-minus 1 minute to self-destruction. You have 1 minute to evacuate."

Myeong wildly pressed every button on the panel, unsure of what would set it off.

"T-minus 30 seconds. 30 seconds to evacuate."

She took one deep breath in through her teeth, and shook her head. She took a paper out of her pocket, an instruction manual for the elevator. Shaking, she couldn't make out a single word on the page. Forcing her fingers, she held the paper still. Nothing about emergency evacuations or a self-destructing base or immediate emergencies.

"10 seconds."

Starting to cry, she threw the document to the ground. She examined the buttons again, trying to understand each one. Her hands shook.

"5 seconds."

Suddenly, she pressed her full body weight against all of the buttons at once. The elevator sprang off the ground, hurtling itself straight up.

"4 seconds."

The base receded into the distance below her.

"3. 2. 1."

She relaxed, heaving. She fell to the ground, wiping away the grime on the bottom of the glass elevator to reveal the base she had just escaped.

The base exploded into layers of red, orange, pink. A shock wave expanded from the explosion, and hit the elevator, causing the frame of the elevator to whine against its seams. Finally, everything was flooded with a white light. As the white light dissipated, Myeong sighed, dropping her shoulders.

Myeong laid down on the elevator floor, and stared at the dimension that receded into the distance. Myeong restrained a sob, lips quivering.

She sighed, rolling over to see Ridley in his carrying case.

“Shh. Shh. Shh. Shh,” she said, petting him.

She laid down on her back, staring up at the vast darkness surrounding her now.

With a loud bang, the elevator swung violently to the side.

“Ahh!” Myeong wiped away the grime of the elevator wall and came face to face with the beady goat eyes. His arm was raised to hit the elevator wall again.

The goat man scrambled up to the top of the elevator, stabbing at the glass with his horns.

She pressed a series of buttons on the elevator increasingly rapidly and feverishly. The elevator spun and halted suddenly, but the goat man hung on. Finally, she pressed a final series of buttons, and the elevator turned on its side, and the doors opened up. Wind whipped around her as she pulled herself up and crawled out of the elevator, onto the top. As she did so, it tilted back to its upright position. She stood on the top of the elevator, shoes sticky with the filth of the elevator. There, she stared down the goat man.

Myeong gasped for breath. She retrieved her laser gun and the mirror from her pocket. Aiming her laser gun at the reflective surface of the base, she

fired. She put the mirror up to catch the glint of the blazer bouncing off. This created a blast of energy that bounced back and forth between the mirror and the base, each bounce amplifying the power of the laser. She held the mirror still, making sure to maintain the beam.

Looking in his eye one last time, she pushed the goat man off the edge of the elevator, into the red stream of light connected between the crystal and the cross. The man's body fell, his arms and legs flailing. As he hit the beam of light, Myeong's vision was once again blinded by white light.

As the light receded again, Myeong crawled back into the elevator and laid down on the filthy ground. Tears and sweat dribbled off her face around a slight smile.

"I got you, you son of a bitch," she whispered.

Chapter 21 - The End

The elevator shot out of the ground that acted as the ceiling for the alternate dimension, crashing and shattering around her. As she erupted from the ground, so did an explosion of fire.

Meyong was thrown into the air away from the explosion and tumbled along the dusty ground. She rolled to a stop, breathing heavily.

Andi and Charlie were standing there, waiting for her. They ran toward Myeong and she crawled toward them. They held each other with scraped, shaking arms.

A reporting van turned the corner to the amusement park, nearly keeling over.

A woman stumbled out of the van, a microphone in hand. "Get over there!" she screamed at the camera man.

They got into position for no more than a second when the woman started speaking. "Here at channel four, we heard an explosion just down the street, and rushed here to get on the scene first, for you, our viewers." Her eyes fell on the three kids, covered in dusty dirt, staring at her. "And here we have three witnesses of the scene itself. Children! –" she motioned at the camera man to run behind her "What exactly did you see? Where did the explosion come from?" Then, hearing herself, she said "And also are you hurt?" She put the mic in front of Myeong's face.

"We just got here actually, not sure," she responded.

Andi and Charlie laughed.

A few other members of the community came running through the gates to see what had happened. Among them were Andi and Charlie's dad and Myeong's mom. They paused to look around, then saw their children.

"We were so worried," Nari said, pushing the reporter out of the way. "We just ran into each other down the street to see if you were at the other's home. Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

John held Andi and Charlie tightly. "You scared me, you two."

"How did you end up here anyway? And so dirty?" Nari asked after a moment.

"It's a long story," Myeong said.

Andi and Charlie laughed and shook their heads.

"We're just glad to be back," she said.

Nari and John helped their children up and walked away from the explosion back home.

Hours later, when everyone, even the reporter, had left and the fire was put out by rain, a woman crawled out of the rubble, holding her wide-brimmed hat, smiling wide.