

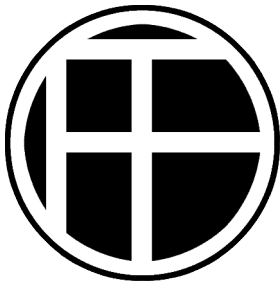
Mistakes Were Made

Work in Progress
Alpha v1.0.1
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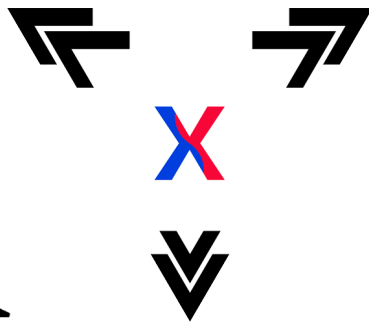
Sophia Knight

Alpha v1.0.1 Change Log

Added internal hyperlinks to Table of Contents
Added hyperlinks to and from the main text and its respective optional content



ZEALT



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WARNING

THIS IS ABOUT GAMING AND YOU MAY ENJOY IT.

– Travis “Samox” Beauchamp, *The Smash Brothers*

GL HF

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Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds; look on my works, ye Mighty, and
Despair.

Suggested Reading Tips:

- Ludo (plural: ludi): Optional details, description, character awareness, et cetera^{1,2,3...} located at bottom of page.
- Logbook entries: Optional chapters^X, artifacts, lore, data, documents, other optional content encountered or collected, et cetera^{A,B,C...} located in Logbook.

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Little Failures



Thousands Root for Favorite Failures at Packed Stadium

— *October 1, 2016*

Yesterday, thousands upon thousands of eSports fanatics found themselves at the 2016 League of Legends World Championship at Cologne, Germany's WASD Stadium. Fans cheered on as the best European team assisted Korea in winning yet another world championship.

"We're ecstatic and truly humbled to see such a positive turnout," commented Riot Games' Dustin "Redbeard" Beck, "and we're ready to see Korea win by default, once again because genetics, bro."

Sources suggest that while these players have now been competing for years and for hundreds of thousands of dollars, some parents still disagree with the path their children have taken.

"I am disappointed that my son has taken to playing video games for a living," said the father of Zealt's Matthew "Rinns" Larsson. "We raised him on the values and traditions that have worked for years, but his decision to stray is upsetting. I guess our parenting just wasn't good enough and now we have to deal with our little failure."

Rumors have surfaced that at the Analyst Desk, OGN caster Duncan "Montezuma" Mykles collected the tears of Pierce "Hyperdrift" Peng (who favored Zealt to emerge victorious). Sources predict that Montezuma will add his newly acquired tears to his multi-million dollar hype train, which he conducts on a daily basis commuting to and from Korea.

Millions of failures around the world watched as the little failures from Europe lost to Korea's failures. Europe and America once again managed to lose out on the first place prize (\$2,500,000) after their year-long struggle to remain relevant in the eSports scene.

Part One

These three words were always the last thing an OASIS user saw before leaving the real world and entering the virtual one:

READY PLAYER ONE

– *Ready Player One*

I've begun to wonder if Donnelley's voyage here was as prosaic as it was presented. How disappointed not to have found the bones of the holy man! No wonder he hated the inhabitants so. To him, they must have seemed like barnacles mindlessly clinging to a mercy seat. Why cling so hard to the rock? Because it is the only thing that stops us from sliding into the ocean. . . .into oblivion.

– *Dear Esther*

eSports in 2014 might be reaching unprecedented popularity and stature around the world, yet one thing remains true – Korea is number one. If eSports were a game of Civilization, then Korea discovered the right eSports technologies first and built the Wonder.

– Rob Zacny

*They see you as small and helpless,
They see you as just a child,
Surprise when they find out that a warrior will soon run wild.*

*Prepare for your greatest moments,
Prepare for your finest hour,
The dream that you've always dreamed is suddenly about to flower.*

*We are lightning,
Straying from the thunder,
Miracles of ancient wonder.*

*This will be the day we've waited for.
This will be the day we open up the door.
I don't wanna hear your absolution,
Hope you're ready for a revolution.
Welcome to a world of new solutions.
Welcome to a world of bloody evolution.
In time your heart will open minds,
A story will be told,
And victory is in a simple soul. . .*

– RWBY, "[This Will Be the Day](#)" (Audio Warning)

Starting Technologies

1

Civilization

“Corporation, noun: An ingenious device for obtaining individual profit without individual responsibility.” Ambrose Bierce

Casual conversation, fused with the soft aroma of food, drifted throughout the restaurant. Echoes of an enduring and lively civilization filled the floor. Conversations and carefree laughter clashed and intertwined midair: the voices of the mothers and fathers pleased with and at ease with life, and the giggling of children too young to have any worries. A calm and familiar song played for all the customers of the restaurant, a song neither too boring to lull the people asleep nor too raunchy that may fall under the category of offensive. Within the confines of the orange-lit room, nothing in life could be better.

Customers lined up to place their orders. For some it was simple: a burger, some fries, and a soda. For others, not quite so: four, no, six, no, eight burgers, two medium fries, four small sodas. Damn, a dollar short. Make that just two small fries, then. And then they would be irritated anytime they were politely asked to repeat their confusing order. Then there were those with special needs: no onions, please—and a please was rare—hold the tomatoes or no lettuce were common as well.

Taking the orders were those wishing they could be elsewhere, all wishing they could have it better. The high schooler, the least experienced of the bunch, was always assigned with the cleaning tasks so that he would never be in the position to spit into the burgers or pocket a few dollars in the collective blind spot of the cameras. The college students, all in need of four years' work experience before being eligible for an entry level position, dealt with the loud, hungry crowd. The college graduates¹ were here only because nowhere else would pay. They were the most skilled of the unskilled:² they knew at which precise temperatures and at which exact angle to handle the meat. All employed to do menial tasks for meager earnings, and at the mercy of the dollar, they were locked in place for the foreseeable future.

But they deserved their earnings because they were unskilled, and this was the best way to get started. And they were employed by good, kind people, with worthy, noble intentions. They ought to be grateful for this opportunity and for this income, it was the same job and pay their grandparents had. Besides, business was booming this quarter, with profits on the rise and labor aplenty. Never worry about the lack of labor:³ should we be in need of any, simply hire the next schmuck to enter the doors. You want a job? You need a job? Come one, come all, anyone can do this work, welcome aboard. It is important to always have a crew expendable.

1 they were adults, but clearly irresponsible if employed here

2 it was what their majors had prepared them for

3 corporate would say

No...necessary.

No...crucial.

No...vital!

It is vital to always have a crew expendable.

All those struggling to make it by need to figure things out on their own: their struggles are their own fault, no one else's. Don't come crying to us for a raise. We're in the business of serving food and making profits, not providing living wages. Don't be so selfish. Think of the company's wellbeing. Don't like it? Door's right there. Next!

The men and women behind the counter scurry about, performing their mind-numbing jobs to the laziest of their ability. The clock was the only thing keeping them sane, and each time they peered in its direction, they would be absolutely certain that each second had passed by twice as quickly as the one prior. Only three hours left until there's only one hour left before the half-hour left before my designated five-minute break,⁴ then just another hour before the last hour of the work day. All the while orders flooded in. The faces of the cashiers were bombarded with dialects and accents and teenagers and coins and profanity. The food was prepared and served and taken without so much as a thank you muttered in return.

But it was payday and they would finally reap the minimal fruits of their labor. The workers received a blue card with all of their earnings in it. Using the card would result in a fee. A fee each time they would check their remaining balance, each time they would withdraw funds, a fee for transferring funds from the card to any other account. But it was worthwhile because it saved the company paperwork and signatures and time and money and thus, in the long run, brought in more profit. It was a good move, an intelligent business decision, made by the intelligent, wealthy, educated men running the company who are never to be doubted.

Those who were done for the day walked out the doors of the restaurant and saw their evening counterparts entering to complete the work yet to be done. And evermore the cycle continued.

Exiting the doors onto the packed and busy streets, the workers dispersed and became part of the crowd. Upon steel pillars and platforms, metallic trains came to screeching halts.⁵ On the roads, vehicles of all sizes and of all purposes sped about in all directions as pedestrians flowed around them like water. A unifying song, a song without rhythm or melody, emanated from the drivers who honked their horns every chance they got. Every few blocks the city's anthem of emergency sirens reverberated across the streets and most people stopped in place and looked both ways⁶ before crossing at the red light.

4 only five of the hour or half-hour mandated by law, or they could pick up smoking as an excuse to need regular smoke breaks to be productive

5 recorded voices announced this stop and the next stop, and warned passengers to stand clear of the closing doors, please

6 and drivers checked their mirrors

People on the sidewalks were of all ages and creeds and dreams, but the things they most valued were not theirs. All cars on the street, and all that education they had earned, and all the homes in which they lived, still had to be paid off. All the vehicles parked at every street, all the local businesses who advertised their services on billboards and public transportation, all was debt. And best not let anything default else our education go out of business, else our public transportation no longer drive in profits, else our hospitals bleed negative income.

And of course the banks would be closing at precisely the same time the standard work day came to a close. The hours of operation were somehow always set to inconvenience those who worked steady jobs for questionable pay.

And of course, whenever it just so happened to be rush hour, the homeless would just so happen to be camped out in front of the restaurants and the bus stops and the subway stations and the jewelry stores and the bakeries and the markets.

Of course.

They would shake their cups so that their coins would ring, and please, they would plead, and God bless you, would say the more patriotic ones, and evermore until no one watched.⁷ Meanwhile the world walked on without even the slightest of a damn. But they only ignored the homeless because every penny donated meant another penny shy for food or water or rent, and another penny closer to end up like them.

As the employed made their way home, they would bear witness to the state of their crumbling neighborhoods. Countless streets housed entire apartment buildings boarded off with blue plywood and overgrown in foliage.⁸ Homes were colored of Rooms for Rent, and shaded of Price Reduced, and tinged of For Sale By Owner.

The evicted and derelict homes became canvases for graffiti artists, and had become plots of land solely for the purpose of garbage disposal.⁹ Three, four, five homes per block.

Outside the homes, parked cars read 4/S¹⁰ with ten digit numbers posted underneath. Six, seven, eight cars per block.¹¹

They closed the door behind themselves, the cold air faded away, and finally they were home, safe, and all the troubles of the world seemed to dissipate.

7 And when no one watched they would peer down and flick their thumbs around and tap away at the slim, bright screen. Day in and day out they would tap at the screen and drag around the pinch around. And as the working day drew to a close, they would text and ask for favors, just one more night and I'll find another place, just one more night, please. What about Jordan from our Sociology class, do you still have his number? We were roommates. Surely he'll have space for a night or two. Please.

8 with vines that climbed and hugged buildings from the very bottom to the very top

9 where insects and rodents would reproduce

10 or 4/\$ or 4S or 4:S or 4\$ or FS or F\$ or F:S

11 Years ago there would be music playing and chats and laughter and dancing in the streets, but those times were dead.

2

NeoTokyo

“What is happiness? The feeling that power increases—that resistance is overcome.” Friedrich Nietzsche

He walked up the flight of stairs, entered his room and dropped onto his bed. As he lay there, the grease that had accumulated on his hands and face and clothes were slipping onto his sheets. The red numbers on his desk changed from 5:39 to 5:52 to 6:18. For every number that changed, the room grew darker and darker, and the sounds outside softer and softer. At least it was finally Friday.

He took off his heavy, stained uniform and worked his way downstairs. He heard recorded laughter coming from the television, and then saw two blue-lit bodies sitting on the couch staring at the screen, empty bottles scattered across the floor, a sweating bottle tightly clasped in their hands. They took no note as he entered the bathroom.

The warm water dropped down on him, tapping against his skull, cleansing away the grime that had gathered that day, and slowly the filth trickled down. He kept the water on until it aged his fingertips.

He dried himself off and stood in the tub thinking many thoughts and pondering many ideas until he spontaneously sprang back into active consciousness.

Leaving the bathroom he headed towards the kitchen in the dark, making as little noise as possible. The refrigerator hummed loudly as he got nearer. Yellow light poured onto the walls behind him, but of course there was nothing there: two bottles of beer, a gallon of milk half empty, and a stick of butter half gone. Working his way back toward the stairs, a small creature ran into him.

He’s home! the thing would yell, passing by at such impeccable timing. He would push it against the wall just in time so its cries would be ignored. Go pick up some food! one parent would say. And do something productive today instead of just sitting in front of your computer all night long! would say the other. And bring those last two beers over before you go! Their empty gazes were glued to the television screen as they went bottoms up.

Of course.

Of course, of course, of course!

The cool air slapped his face as he walked down the street.¹ He took out a cigarette and held it between his lips for five, six, seven street tiles. His hand brought up the lighter and lit the cigarette. His lungs came to life and became jubilant, reunited with an old companion. He walked on, hands in pockets, sucking on the sweet, indulging stick, walking past the Chinese restaurant a few tiles before turning back.

What up? a familiar face in the dark would ask, holding out a fist.

A shrug, their fists bumped.

1 The yellow street lights hitting the desolate streets flickered on and off every now and then.

Yeah, life sucks on my end too, as they smoked outside the restaurant.

Sesame chicken! the short Chinese man behind the counter would yell. A'ight, I'll catch ya later, bro, he got his food² and disappeared into the night.

Ha'f a chicken wih pok fied wice an' chicken wih broccoli an' wie wice! He inhaled deeply and threw away what remained. Fo'teen fity! the tiny man would say. An' wememba... smoking *ba'* fo' you! Nomo' smoking! same as he had told the friend.

He hesitated at the doorway of his home, placed the bag inside and walked back to the nearest bodega. He withdrew all of the funds on the card that he got from work that day, paying twelve dollars³ for fees in the process in addition to the ATM's \$2.75 fee. Returning home, he checked his pockets to recall where he had left his cash and where he had left the now empty card.

What took you? We're starving! And where are those beers!?

He took out one of the styrofoam containers and dropped the bag on the table. Back in his room, the only light he could see were the red numbers on the desk: 7:43. He flicked the light switch and saw his room exactly as he had left it that morning: his garbage and papers exactly where they were, his boxes and books left untouched, his bed unmade, now with grease. Posters of his favorite games and musicians and animes and teams were mounted onto his walls.⁴ If only there was more wall than posters.

He sat down in his chair, put on his headset, and turned on his computer. He took out the blue card and laid it above his mouse. His monitors brightened, he typed his password, and his background came into focus. He opened up his browser and clicked a bookmark to Pandora, immediately his preferred music began to play.

He clicked another bookmark, instantly the page loaded. Twitch's featured stream was a speed runner. A blue man ran towards the right⁵ shooting peas out of his arm, he jumped and climbed ladders, a quick menu, the blue man turned gray and he would shoot out a white boomerang. A timer would show whether or not this was a new record and by how many seconds or milliseconds better or worse it was compared to the world record and the player's best record.

Below the featured content was a list of other games being streamed, all sorted by live viewers. First on the list was his game of choice: *League of Legends*.

No Sinik, no Inertia, no Crescendo, no Equinox, no Eumoda – players who consistently drew in tens of thousands of viewers. The current top streamer had around seven thousand viewers. Espada, Team Ampersand's mid laner, was a very strong player. Well known for his humorous and risky antics in game, Espada was a favored streamer for many excitable people.

2 the Chinese man mumbled something

3 almost two hours' work

4 some signed by the developers or writers or artists or animators or voice actors or other influential people in that field

5 they always ran right

He dashed toward a half-health Orianna with Spirit Rush, he dropped the Ignite, landed the Charm, dashed further forward to dodge the Command: Shockwave, Fox-Fires locked onto the low health target, he tossed out the orb, and dashed back toward safety, tanking two, three, four turret shots in the process. A blind monk emerged from the darkness. He waited for the precise moment to Flash away from the Sonic Wave. A webcam recorded his reactions throughout the course of the game and between his games while rap music played in the background.

“I Ignited her at the beginning because I knew I could get the kill even without starting off with Charm. If I didn’t juke the Ult with another dash I would’ve definitely died, though. At the same time I knew I couldn’t tank the turret for too long. If an enemy stays in the lane with that amount of health when she knows my abilities and summoner spells up, the jungler was clearly nearby. If I played that better I could’ve saved Flash, though. He could have probably dived me and he would have been fine, but didn’t know where my jungler was, so he probably didn’t want to go too ham.”

On discussion forums he could see many topics: statistics for this patch, YouTube clips of stupid or funny or creative things that people have done or have had happen to them, artwork of their favorite characters. The more active topics made their way to the top of the page: rumors of certain teams acquiring new players, rumors of new teams on the horizon, threads dedicated to an amazing play a Korean player just did a few hours ago. Jokes and praise and ridicule and criticism and toxicity from all over the world found its way onto the internet as communities trash talked, argued, and poked fun at everyone.

Cryo420 Posted 3 hours ago

I don't think Dendra had the best performance las season but if Royale can stup up their game im sure they can pull of first place this season. Maybe not internationally but at least in NA.

coooldude17 Posted 3 hours ago

Dude, Dendra is fucking horrible. Royale should kick him and pick up a better player, Dasher could do way better then Dendra. Hell fucking Marlworlf could do better on roayal then on fucking arcadia. If royale's management had any idea how to form and run a good team they'd definetly could get Marlworlf as quick as possible

ehugz Posted 2 hours ago

The only reason you think MW would be a good replacement for Dendra is because you're only thinking of stats and numbers but youre completely forgetting about the way Arcadia plays. MW is only able to put up good scores and win some games because Arcadia's playstyle is more often then not high risk, high reward. If he can get some kills he can make game changing plays simply because roamy assassins are difficult as hell to deal with. Marlwolf just knows when it's best to leave lane and knows hwo to decieve

the person he's lining against. If MW is targeted and fails for the first ten minutes of the game Arcadia loses hands down. Royale's success would not improve if they had MW because as a team Royale is far more aggressive if there's even a 80% chance of winning a skirmish.

Since nothing was happening he decided to stream. He began his broadcast and all his social media pages instantaneously announced that he had gone live. In a matter of minutes three hundred viewers were drawn in.⁶

"Hello," he said lazily into his headset's microphone as he waved lazily at his webcam. "I'm eating right now, so I'll just answer questions for a while before I get into a game." Twitch chat filled up with comments and questions and faces typed in by his viewers.

"Chinese food. Chicken with broccoli. The place near here is pretty good I guess, but I mean, I haven't really tasted much of the cooking from a lot of other different Chinese restaurants. I'm sure they're mostly the same." He skimmed past the stupid questions and silly comments until he found something worth answering.

"Mmm, I'm not too sure about all that talk about replacing Dendra. I mean, you have to consider the vastly different playstyles of the teams competing that season and this upcoming season. I think it's extremely stupid to not take teams in general into consideration. Every player has his strengths and weaknesses. You can look at numbers all you want, but ultimately you need the context of how the games played out and how the team played as a unit before criticizing a single player for poor performance or praising another for immaculate performance."

He chewed with a closed mouth and lifted his microphone away as he continued reading questions.

"M'drinking water. Not much of a fan of soda all the time. Maybe once a week I'll drink some soda or something."

"Where do I live? Check the FAQ below."

"Uh, yes, I do have a fortune cookie... 'Learn Chinese, Spring.' Choon, teean. Choontyan. Help, I can't pronounce. 'It is very possible that you will achieve greatness in your lifetime.' Well, isn't that comforting news?" he asked his viewers as he tossed the paper into the air.

"Am I gay? Really? You assholes. I'm just gonna add that to the FAQ this time around."

"Alright, I'll start playing in a bit, let me get some more water while I log on. I'm gonna play some ads for a minute or so. Thanks to those of you not using Ad-Block, keep being awesome."

He went downstairs careful to place his feet as close to the edges of the steps as possible. Moving as quietly and as unnoticeable as a slithering solid snake, he refilled

⁶ three thousand viewers a few minutes later

his cup and took a few sips on the way back. The loud television competed with the loud smacking of lips and the loud chewing of food while blue light bounced off the monitor.

The eyes of the mouths were fixed on the screen, which displayed a pair of lovers kissing under a chestnut tree.⁷ The channel would then resume the broadcast: a pundit would be angered about jobs being taken by non-Americans, and talk about an incompetent politician in the East whose country had a poor understanding and execution of democracy.⁸ He also spoke of a senator who, earlier that week, had stated that the only way anyone could fail and be poor in this country was if they were lazy and didn't do their fair share of work. Anyone can make it in this country, he had said, and ultimately nothing stood in the way other than sheer determination.

Melting back into the cover of darkness, he made his way upstairs, again taking gentle, precise steps. Back in his room, the younger brother was clicking around with the mouse.

"Get out," he sighed as he pushed the kid out, locking the door, and "Oh hi," as he rested his hands back on his mouse and keyboard.⁹

A tab with the name DeusRex blinked orange in the game's window.

(20:29) DeusRex: yo lets duo

NeoTokyo: lol, why?

DeusRex: u and me close

(20:30) NeoTokyo: Sounds legit, inivite me

"So it looks like Rex wants to chill for a bit. I know you guys like our crazy-stupid teamwork and shenanigans."

(20:32) DeusRex: get on raidcall

"You wanna dick around or play to win, Toke?" a laid back voice asked from his headset.

"I'm down for whatever, man," he responded holding his left Shift key.

"Alright then, we dickin' around. Time to make some YouTube worthy plays."

They got into the matchmaking queue and waited for the system to find suitable teammates and opponents of the same or similar skill level.¹⁰ Music poured into his ears as he played a typing game to ensure his fingers remained quick and precise. With only a few mistakes made, he scored 151 words per minute with a typing accuracy of 93.4%. He moved on to another game to test his accuracy and reflexes with his mouse: a rhythm game where he had to keep up with the beat and melody of the music. The more difficult songs were the faster ones he preferred.

7 one wore a ring, the other did not

8 the pundit of course wore a red, white, and blue tie so that the audience would not doubt the spokesman's Americanness

9 The blue card he had set near his mouse was gone. Fool me once, mom and dad, shame on you, fool me twice...

10 which took a few minutes since they both ranked quite highly

A match was found and some familiar names showed up on their team.

amp Toxiform: tokyo ban LB pls

DeusRex: Let me jungle, I got this shit

“Try’n leave Lee open.”

Aleor: phyros u mind if I mid? D: i wanna practice ahri

Royale Phyros: :/

Royale Phyros: ://///

Royale Phyros: sure go ahead

amp Toxiform: don’t worry ill support u phy

“I think they heard you, Rex,”

“The scumbags. They *did* show Lee and Renekton early... guess I’ll go a bit tanky so we can dive the shit out of ‘em. Kinda just wanna rush double Sunfires and proxy or push all game.”

Warlord Shen NeoTokyo	Popstar Ahri Aleor	Woad Ashe Royale Phyros	Charred Maokai DeusRex	Janna amp Toxiform
Mafia Graves Pompow	Renekton ButTrauma	Zyra RefleX	Justicar Syndra amp Espada	Bee Sin SimJim

Teams and champions locked in. They quickly loaded into the game, browsing social media while the slow loaders caught up to 100%.

[00:02] NeoTokyo (Shen) purchased Warding Totem (Trinket)

[00:03] DeusRex (Maokai) purchased Warding Totem (Trinket)

[00:03] Royale Phyros (Ashe) purchased Warding Totem (Trinket)

[00:06] [All] ButTrauma (Renekton): tokyo, prepare urs

[00:08] [All] NeoTokyo (Shen): lol

[00:10] [All] NeoTokyo (Shen): I’ve taped it closed

[00:13] [All] ButTrauma (Renekton): you think

[00:13] Aleor (Ahri) purchased Warding Totem (Trinket)

[00:15] [All] ButTrauma (Renekton): i can’t

[00:15] [All] ButTrauma (Renekton): break through tape?

[00:16] amp Toxiform (Janna) purchased Scrying Orb (Trinket)

[00:16] amp Toxiform (Janna) purchased Stealth Ward

“You should gank him early. Teach him who needs the tape,”

[00:18] [All] NeoTokyo (Shen): it’s duct tape, super durable

[00:19] [All] Aleor (Ahri): lol

[00:19] [All] ButTrauma (Renekton): lol

“That’s Daze’s smurf, right? It’s like you guys are made for each otha. You should change the answer to your new FAQ question, you two flirt like you’re married.”

“You should be marriage counselor—who helps online couples get the most out of cybering.”

“Ehh...” a ping dropped in the fog of war at the bottom right quadrant of the minimap, “Come to their Blue. Might need taunt.”

[01:20] amp Toxiform (Janna): q or e?

[01:24] DeusRex (Maokai): Q if they show up

[01:25] DeusRex (Maokai): otherwise e

“I’m going to bail if they show up with more than two people. You’re gonna get us killed just for Blue. I has a feel.”

“Nah, man, they’re either going our Blue or their Red. Sim won’t consider the Tree invade.”

“Wanna bet?”

“...nah, nevermind.”

[01:47] amp Toxiform (Janna): doesn’t look like their comgin

“I’m headin’ top,”

[02:03] [All] ButTrauma (Renekton): where u hiding, tokyeo?

“Let me get four before I go up,”

“Lee’s probably here. Also he has no wards.”

“Ah, I see ‘im. Comin’, comin’, come to tri—tri, tri, tri. Let me block the next Q.”

“He has no Ignite.”

[06:26] [All] SimJim (Lee Sin): y u so fat tree? : |

“You goin’ back?”

“Yeah, gonna wait a few seconds for a pink.”

[07:03] [All] DeusRex (Maokai): sorry

[07:05] [All] DeusRex (Maokai): i drank my milk

[07:06] [All] DeusRex (Maokai): and ate my vegetables

[07:07] [All] DeusRex (Maokai): growing up

[07:53] [All] RefleX (Zyra): But I heard milk makes you shrink

[07:58] [All] SimJim (Lee Sin): I’m pretty sure that’s just you

[08:21] [All] ButTrauma (Renekton): lmao

[08:23] amp Toxiform (Janna) purchased Sight Ward

[08:24] [All] ButTrauma (Renekton): and i thought iwasa troll

[08:30] [All] RefleX (Zyra): qq

“Haven’t seen top in a while. Not sure if he’s in our jungle or what.”

[10:32] Neōfokyo (Shen) signals to be careful

[10:32] DeusRex (Maokai) signals to be careful

“None of my camps were cleared. I swear I’m going to walk into them doing Dragon. Or...not. The fuck? Where are they?”

[11:12] ButTrauma has drawn first blood!

[11:14] ButTrauma has slain amp Toxiform for a double kill!

[11:18] ButTrauma has slain DeusRex for a triple kill!

[11:18] ButTrauma is on a killing spree!

“Well, top’s almost dead.”

[11:20] amp Toxiform (Janna): wtf

[11:22] amp Toxiform (Janna): is renek doing down here

[11:52] NeoTokyo (Shen): We pinged.
 [12:23] DeusRex (Maokai): drag ~ 18:00
 [13:02] ButTrauma is on a rampage!
 [13:03] amp Toxiform (Janna): zzz
 [13:05] [All] ButTrauma (Renekton): lol
 [13:06] [All] ButTrauma (Renekton): no hawkshot?
 [13:10] [All] Royale Phyros (Ashe): i need dmg :(
 [13:32] Royale Phyros (Ashe): welp I'm sure this game's over
 [13:35] Royale Phyros (Ashe): sunfires all around
 [14:57] amp Toxiform (Janna): should just wait at blue
 [14:59] amp Toxiform (Janna): with sunfires
 [15:00] amp Toxiform (Janna): and jump them

Full Sunfire Cape teams, they would find, were ineffective against good Syndra players. But many laughs were had and the collective viewers of NeoTokyo's stream and DeusRex's stream approved of the laid back game.

"Invite me for another, dude," he told DeusRex. As they waited for the matchmaking system to find suitable players again, he opened up Thunderbird to check his emails, ones sent to his personal address, ones sent to the email for his gaming handle, and the school email he used to talk with old classmates who knew nothing about video games.

A typical list of emails cluttered his Unread folder: sales for computer parts, new books and eBooks added to a particular site's collection, announcements of his favorite streamers going live, and other such automated notifications.¹¹ He glanced over subject titles and senders before clicking Mark As Read.

One particular email stood out: "Confidential – Team Final Frontier Gaming" sent by a Simon Penn. Final Frontier Gaming was a website he joined some years ago and still frequented from time to time. He shared his knowledge of the game, his thoughts on the competitive scene,^A and it was where many of his viewers came from.

Confidential – Team Final Frontier Gaming
 Fri, Oct 7, 2016, 14:00 (7 hours ago)
Simon Penn <penn@ffgaming.tk>
 to me

NeoTokyo,

It is with great pleasure that I write this email to you. As you can no doubt tell by the subject, we are finally looking to form a team to compete in the upcoming North American Series and you are one of our priorities.

This is an initial proposition to ask if you are interested in playing for and representing Final Frontier Gaming. As one of our priority players I will share the list of other priority players we are looking to acquire:

11 that he had forgotten to opt out of for the hundredth time

Crescendo – Support – Captain
NeoTokyo – Top
DeusRex – Jungle
Marlwolf – Mid
Zodiac – Marksman

I believe I have made a pretty good job choosing roles, but I will be willing to talk to you guys about moving around if the need arises. On the occasion that Marlwolf is unwilling or unable to swap teams, we will instead opt for WildCat.

Because this is going to be a newly formed team and we will be going into this cold, we have set aside a budget to pay for a player's travel, as well as a salary for at least three months. As you know Riot guarantees a stable salary for teams that qualify into the LCS, so making it there will be tougher than simply being on FFG.

Feel free to reply with any questions you may have or talk to me on Skype (contact information available at FFG's contact page). Please respond with an official answer by the end of next week and we can discuss things in more depth.

Furthermore, please try to keep this under wraps for the time being until we can make an official announcement. Try not to show things off on stream (like the subject title for this email) and try not to talk about or hint towards this on social media. I cannot stress enough how important this is to us.

Thanks, and game on.

Sincerely,
Simon "Shellshock" Penn
Founder, Final Frontier Gaming
<http://ffgaming.tk>

"Fuckin' Tokyo! You fucker! Why didn't you accept the match?"

"Shit. Fuck! Did you...uh...d'you get an email from...Shellsh—Shelly?"

"Oh, from Penny? Yeah, I got it. Thought you already saw that shit. So that's why you didn't accept? Anyway, yeah, I'm down for that thing he said."

He scanned the email again, read it over one more time, two more times, three more times, highlighted the email address to make sure there was no sleazy kerning. He navigated to Final Frontier Gaming's contact page to see if they matched. He copied the From field and the email from the contact page, pasted both onto Notepad, and they matched. It was Shellshock.

He took off his headset, placed it on his desk. He reclined all the way back on his chair, leaned his head against his chair and let out a long sigh. His computer quietly hummed at him, had been ever since he turned it on but only now had he noticed.¹²

¹² These were the very fans and the very RAM and the very hard drives and the very motherboard he had saved up for and purchased and put together a few years ago. How far they've come.

Twitch chat filled with comments and faces:

GatJ8: he's gone full retard thanks obaam

Afhir: think he's ahveing an allergive reaction to rex

Oafy92: dam hes so srs right now : | : | :

"Sorry guys, just gimmie a few minutes," he told the headset on the desk.

Reply.

How soon would the team get together? Is there a gaming house, or are we just doing this online for the time being? Would I have to bring my own machine if there's a gaming house or will computers be provided for us? Are there any existing sponsorships or partnerships between FFG and other companies? When would we first be paid? Myriad questions, myriad typos, myriad twitchy fingers.^B

He read over his questions two times, three times, four times, looking for typos, looking to see if his grammar and spelling were correct, looking to see if there was anything else he wanted to ask. He hovered over Send ten, eleven, twelve seconds.

Send.¹³

He put his headset back on and held Shift, "Alright, let's go."

"Cool." DeusRex has invited you to a game.

Rap played into his ears: . . . *none of their kids serve in the infantry, the odds are stacked against us like a casino, think about it, most of the army is black and latino, and if you can't acknowledge the reality of my words, you just another stupid mothafucka out on the curb, try'n'a escape from the ghetto with your ignorant ways, but you can't read history at an illiterate stage, and you can't raise a family on minimum wage, why the fuck you think most of us are locked in a cage.* . . .

When teammates and opponents were found they accepted the match. And the next one, and the next, and the next, and they played into the wee hours of morning. They shared links of videos they found funny, articles the other may be interested in. They played *Scrolls*, *Binding of Isaac*, *Rouge Legacy*, *Spelunky*, and *Hotline Miami* between the lengthy queues—they played anything that would keep the mind awake and the fingers active. They celebrated their victories and learned something, anything, from their defeats, and time continued forever onward, 2:13, 3:43, 4:48.

"I don't know about you, dude, but I'm tired as fuck. Thinking of calling it a night."

"It ain't even five yet. Don't be a lil' bitch."

"Fuck that, man, I've got a lot of stuff to consider in the coming week."

"Yeah, I guess. Viewers gonna be pissed at you for not doing SubWars, though."

"Fuck 'em. No! Just kidding, I love you guys. Like my own flesh and blood. We'll just . . . do one tomorrow or later this week."

"Aight, you heard him guys. So just check the Twitters and the Facebooks at some point later this week."

"Oh I heard that yawn, don't try to hide it. And you said it wasn't even five."

13 He looked down at the slip of paper he had thrown away, picked it up and slid it into his wallet.

“Well I might as well get up early¹⁴ tomorrow, as wel—”

“Yeah okay, man, whatever. Anyway, if anyone’s tuned into my stream,¹⁵ thanks for watching. Sorry for not doing our weekly SubWars tonight but we’ll make it up to you. Maybe I’ll be on tomorrow, otherwise check later in the week for fun games and stuff. Bye,” he waved and yawned at his webcam.¹⁶

14 early meaning sometime in the afternoon

15 six thousand live viewers

16 as the wooden floor creaked outside his door

3

Beyond the Sword

(AW) [“Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.”](#) Bhagavad Gita

He would open the door to find pages taped on the outside. He would snatch them off before the parent could reach.

Why are you still awake? What are you thinking?! would ask the parent.

He would unfold the pages to find bills, water \$294.11, phones \$250, electricity \$239.17.

When are you going to be a responsible paren—person and pay your own god damn bills?

When are you going to put that degree of yours to use and be a CEO somewhere?

You don't even fucking understand the world anymore, there are no fucking jobs, dad.

Stop making excuses and apply yourself already.

Stop being an irresponsible human being and asking your son to pay your bills for you, mom.

You have no idea what the real world is like, son, you're too young and inexperienced to understand. Don't argue with us, we know best.

The world's changed so fast these past ten years that you have no idea what you're even talking about.

I know enough about being a family, and I know you wouldn't embarrass us by disobeying your parents. It's your duty to help a family member. Think of your younger brother; is this the kind of role model you want to be for him?

He's your responsibility; I didn't choose to have him. How about you think about yourself and your own image and yourself as a role model: you think having parents who can't pay their own bills and would rather pay for cable and a few beers will help him in the future?

Just do what we tell you and grow up already, you're twenty-two for God's sake. It doesn't matter if the world's changed, you're obviously too lazy to get a nice job at a nice office and work with important people who actually make a difference in the world, and actually make money doing it.

Oh, they change the world alright, and they fucking make money alright, while they starve the rest of us out of it. You guys just don't fucking get it. Sooner or later it's gonna bite you in the ass, and by then it'll be too late for you guys to do anything. We don't live in a same world anymore. We've moved on and you just don't want to understand: we live in a digital age.

4

DeusRex

“And on the pedestal these words appear: ‘My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!’ Nothing beside remains...” Percy Bysshe Shelley

A roaring crowd held up placards with insignias and messages written with markers. Well into the back of the room, hands waved ecstatically. Fists struck the air as voices chanted in unison “FFG! FFG! FFG!”

Rays of red and blue lights from above surfed around the crowd of people standing on their seats.

“FFG! FFG! FFG!”

Confetti fell from nowhere, camera crews followed reporters onto the stage and camera lights flashed from all directions.

“FFG! FFG! FFG!”

He ignored it all as he embraced the team. NeoTokyo moved closer holding his fist forward.

Bzzt, his pillow rumbled. Bzzt.

He tapped his phone and the alarm stopped. With burning eyes and mucus in his throat, he lifted himself up and strolled towards the bathroom, his hands acting as his eyes for the moment.¹ A cold breeze snuck in through the tiniest space between the walls and window.

“George?” asked a calm voice with a knock. Continuing to brush his teeth, he unlocked and opened the door.

“I’m going now to see Madelyn, are you coming?”

He spit the toothpaste out, looking at her through the mirror, “I’m gonna be goin’ later with Geoff’n Erica.”

“Okay, any idea what time?”

He pointed at his left wrist with his right hand.

“Uh,” she took out her phone, “12:50.”

He showed two fingers. Three, and seasawed his hand.

“Okay, I’ll let her know. Oh, and I left some eggs and sausages on a plate if you want any. I’m on my way now, though. Tell Geoffrey and Erica I said hi. I love you, George.”

“Love you, mom.” Breakfast had become cold, but it was still food. He ate with one hand, checked his phone with the other.

(12:52) Erica: puerta! D:

A knock. “Your mom opened the door for me,” she said as she hugging him and leaning in to kiss him on the cheek.

“Want some?” he asked holding the plate to her.

“Mmm, I think I’ll just wait to eat with Geoff,” she said inspecting the plate.

1 He saw the couch with his hands and avoided stubbing his toe.

“Were you watching us stream yesterday?”

“Mhm,” she quickly nodded twice.

“When ‘e asked about that email from Shel—well, lemme just show you.”

She read from his phone, her eyes slowly opening wide, silently she gasped.

“Ohmygosh!” she burst out with embracing arms.

“Waitwaitwait, nothin’s final yet, still not quite on a stable salary, or even in the official League. But I may have to disappear for a bit to dedicate my time to practice with the team and make sure we’re actually a quality team. I’m not even sure if I’ll be staying in New York for this since Shelly mentioned travel will be paid. I’m assuming there’s a gaming house. I also have to let Madelyn know, she’d’ve been the first person I told, but I’d really rather tell her in person.”

“So let’s go tell her!”

“Gotta call Tokyo, though, see if he’s up,”

The line rang three, four, five times. No answer.

“Let’s head over ta his place if he’s not picking up. Keep calling him while I get ready.”

As they left the apartment she hit the call button again.² She kept her phone to her ear as they walked down eight, nine, ten street tiles.³

“Oh. Tokyo, *ilevántate!* We’re coming over. . . No seas *bebé*, it’s like one o’clock. Get up. . . Geoff says hi.”

“I bet he did.”

They walked down the street, fingers locked together, discussing their week, this person and that video, this game and that episode. The streets were empty and quiet compared to the crowds and honking of the day prior.

At the curb of a major intersection a group of people sat on chairs, with a mountain of books piled on a table.⁴ Above them, on streetlights and tree branches, hung pairs of boots and sneakers that had always been there.

Nearby posters read “Prepare To Meet Thy God! Amos 4:12.” A man with a megaphone shouted such and such things about a “Jesu’ Crito” and a “Dios” and a “Rey.” There would be no point in asking her to translate.⁵

Atop a distant building a large billboard read “3 Million!” They walked past abandoned stores and derelict plots of land that had become a home for stray cats and plastic boxes and wooden boxes and smashed CRT monitors and bulky VCRs. This land

2 for the fifth or somethingth time.

3 street tiles that had black blotches of various pasted onto them, tiles that had come in contact with all sorts of bodily fluids, tiles that were aged and cracked

4 all titled *Santa Biblia*

5 Opposite the zealots, leaning against a store, a group of men discussed things loudly. One of them burst out “Half these niggas don’t even know what they fighting for!” as he tossed the previous day’s paper on the ground.

would not sell, it was far too filthy to clean and turn into profit. Other areas were boarded off with plywood to keep the junk and the strays and the destitute out.⁶

There were more window shoppers tapping at their pockets than there were actual shoppers within the doors.

They continued past broken, littered, and tarnished homes with letters sprayed on them.⁷ Cars outside the occupied homes were cars with numbers scribbled on them, cars recently cleaned and washed.

She called again, no answer. They sat on the steps outside, laughing, joking, talking. “Last I checked, ten minutes wasn’t twenty, Geoff.”

“Fuck you,” their fists met.

The girl hugged him and they quickly kissed each other on the right cheek.

“Aight, so where we goin’?”

“Don’t care, man, up to you.”

“I know, let’s just get whatever at the deli.”

“Aight.”

“So, dude, we gotta play our asses off if we want FFG in the series. Oh, does Erica know?”

“Yap, he showed me the email.”

“I think we can duo ‘n’ play some serious games for a while to see what we can do best before getting together with the rest of the team.”

“Puedo ser coach y give you guys pointers cuando hagan tonterías.”

“Might be worth a shot. Have you spoken with anyone else from the team since you got the email, George?”

“Nah, but I think I saw Zodiac on while we were in-game. He din’t message me or anything. Maybe he was AFK or didn’t wanna say anythin’ in case it showed up on stream.”

“Maybe we should talk with them, like set up a Skype call and set up some practice games. You already have everyone added, right?”

“Yeah, I’m sure we’ve both played enough games with and against ‘em to be on each other’s friends list. Ya thinkin’ this’ll be the actual team, or you think someone’ll decline?”

“Uh...I don’t know. To be honest, though, I’m not too sure what to think of Crescendo. No one’s seen him competing at any competitive LANs and all we know is he’s good at winning games with solo queue teams if they listen to his calls. I don’t think that’ll translate well into competitive play against practiced and coordinated teams with months or years of experience and structure.”

“I can kinda see that making an impact in competitive play. What d’you know about Zodiac or WildCat?”

6 Small business from the area advertised their services on the plywood: cheap divorce lawyers, bed bug removal, and cheap moving.

7 He could decipher one to read “Jesus loves you”

“Zodiac? Uh, well I know he played with a makeshift team at an MLG a while ago. He was playing with some other players we see in queue from time to time like Daze and... Shuriken, before she was picked up by Royale. And well, you know WildCat: king of solo queue with his god damn three accounts in Challenger. Kid’s insanely good. If he were to join the team, I’d be extremely surprised since I’d imagine existing teams would be fighting with every penny just to have him on their starting lineup. Anyway, then there’s this other dude who goes by the name DeusRex. He’s so shit, I don’t even think he belongs in Diamond, he’s like some high Gold, low Plat, if you ask me.”

“I’ve heard this NeoTokyo guy is pretty bad, too. That nigga ain’t anythin’ special... at all.”

They ordered their sandwiches and ate up further discussing whatever crossed their minds, with their newfound opportunity the focal point of conversations.

“Holy shit, though, can’t believe we actually made it to the top. And now this.”

“Ha, and to think you fuckin’ hated the game when I introduced you to it.”

“Well yeah, but it was like a completely different game back then. New patches and content and shit resulted in a game that plays way differently and has some more competitive depth to it.”

“It’s a’most like you owe me for showin’ you the game, now,”

“Mmm, well. Oh, I got it, I found FFG first, so Shellshock knows about you through me. I think we’re even.”

“By the way, d’you know what happened to... damn, what was her name?... that first grade teacher we had...”

“Oh yeah, hah! Fuckin’... god damn, what *was* her name. Why in the fuck can’t I remember?”

“You got us caught playin’ Pokemon and she took our Gameboys.”

“Dude, I had like no health on Croconaw, he was my last Pokemon and I somehow beat Whitney. And then she wouldn’t give me the badge. I’m pretty sure you would’ve reacted the same way.”

“You remember what she said after?” he asked withholding a snicker.

“Oh yeah. I fuckin’ remember. That sonovabitch had the god damn audacity to lecture us, the entire class, that video games were a waste of time and would get us nowhere. ‘One day you’ll be working in an office’ she said, ‘and you’ll have to fill out paperwork all day and you’ll have no time for toys and computers and your Pókemans and your playboys. One day you’ll thank me.’”

“*Ella* no dijo playboys. She didn’t, did she, George?”

“She actu’lly did.”

“*Ab*, so you remember she said that because a few years later you two found out what playboys *really* were, verdad?... *Hombres*.”

“Well, first of all, we remember her exact words because we then set out to prove ‘er wrong. . .so mission accomplished on that front. Second, you may not have heard of it, Erica, but we have this thing called *el internet*, now. Don’t need no magazines.”

“Oh god, why did I even say anything.”

“Yo, George, you still have the Playboy Advance SP search in your history?”

“Nah, I’m not that advanced yet, I can’t Google that until I find some good search results for Playboy Color.”

“Okay, voy a escuchar my music y ustedes pueden seguir caminando down the street talking about your playboys so everyone *else* can hear.”

“But dude, you haven’t heard about the magic of the PlayCube, yet.”

—

“Y ella? Mirala, que guapa. Y blancita como tu.”

“No, dude. Would *you* react positively if some random guy walked up to you randomly on the street or bus and complimented you or asked you out? Don’t fucking lie, you’d think he was a creep, wouldn’t you?”

“Pues, depende how he looks.”

“Something tells me you’re just saying that because you can’t bring yourself to admit it’s weird. Besides, you pretty much just said it’s all about looks. If you’ll talk to him because he looks cute or whatever, doesn’t that just mean the only reason he’s talking to you is because he thinks you’re cute or hot or whatever?”

“Mira, solo estas overcomplicating something that’s easy. You’ll probably never see her again y ni te va concer if you bump into each other on the street. Just go talk to her.”

“Where do you stand on this George?”

“I think I’m stickin’ with Geoff on this one. Look at it this way, if I had just randomly asked you out an’ you din’t know me, you woulda probably looked at me all weird. Yeah like that. But since we went to school together, there’s kinda already a reason for me to talk to you, like to ask what the homework was or whatever.”

“C’mon, Erica, don’t look so sad face. . .if I go talk to her, then will you be satisfied?”

“I think you should just go find out. Doesn’t look like she’s gonna say anything for a while. While you go over there I’ll poke her cheeks until I make ‘er smile. Look, see, he’s goin’ over ta her. You should be his official wingwoman for talkin’a strangers. Look at ‘er, he hasn’t said anything and already she’s turnin’ . . .ro-ho.”

“Roja. Rosada.”

“Oh, right. Yeah, that. See look, she’s all coy now and she’s makin’ ‘er body smaller. She must feel uncomfortable as fuck right now. The hell, why’d he point at you? Well, look at that, clearly a no. Happy now?”

“Well, ahi te va, Erica.”

“Probably ni trataste.”

“Well, if that’s how you think it went down. . .Maybe we can try again later, preferably with something on the line. Like a lunch or a few dollars.”

“Okay, enough bantering, you two. Let’s get inside.”

“How about next time you just go talk to some guy and see if he doesn’t react the same way? I’m telling you, hardly anyone expects to be bothered when they’re staring at their phone or just standing around. I’ll buy you lunch if you try it.”

“Fine, proxima vez we get the chance.”

“Good afternoon. How may I help you?”

“Hi, here to see King, Madelyn.”

“...305, left as you get off the elevator.”

“Thanks. Kay, I’m goin’ up the stairs.”

“Why? Si los elevators estan right here.”

“Well, if you wanna be trapped close quarters with people here, go right ahead.”

“Let me jog up the stairs with you, Rex.”

“Wait! Por lo menos hold the door for me!”

“Aight, left off th’elevators Uh...should be...this...way?”

“What if it turns out she trolled us and the room’s actually right?”

“There! *There’s* 305!” she sighed, relieved.

“Well, ladies first,” he swayed both arms toward the door.

“Aww, aren’t you just the *most* adorable, George?”

“Maddy!” she exclaimed rushing into the room.

“After you, Geoff.”

“¿Cómo estás?” she asked as their hug ended.

“Muy bien. Thanks so much for coming, Erica. Geoff! Haven’t seen you in a while, I was glad when I heard you would be coming.”

“Yeah I finally had a weekend off from work. M’glad to see you’re doing well, dude.”

“Heyo, Sis.”

“Hey, George. Hah! What the fuck? Flowers?”

“That’s not all. Cup your hands.”

“Aww, it’s so cute. I didn’t know they made Metroid plushies.”⁸

“They don’t. I got it custom made, jus’ for you, Sis.”

“Thanks, George. He shall be named...Squishy.”⁹

“Estos asientos are *really* comfortable! It’s like they want tu cuarto to be a lounge or something.”

“So, George, mom told me you and Geoff had something big come up?”

“Hah, god damn it, ma. Yeah, let me pull up the email.”

She flicked her thumb upward on the screen and the permanent smirk on her face turned into a wide grin.

“No, nono, this is horrible. This is like the worst thing possible... I won’t be able to watch your games from here. I highly doubt anyone could hook up a computer to the big monitor so I can see you in your glorious moments.”

8 as she inspected the parasite with delicate hands

9 as she instantly hugged it close to her face.

“Fuckin’ Madelyn! Such a troll. You learnin’ from Geoff?”¹⁰

“Haha! Relax, I saw an opportunity so I took it. I can’t believe you’re both going to be fighting for a spot in the LCS. I feel like I should ask you both for autographs and strictly start referring to you as NeoTokyo and DeusRex.”

“¿Sabes *qué*, Maddy? I think I should get autographs now too...while they’re rare. Then tal vez I can make some good dough online when the time is right.”

“Sign me up for that, Erica. Once you’re in the LCS you should fly us over to Riot to see you guys play in person.”

“Soon’s you get better. How long the doctors thinkin’ you’ll have to stay for chemo?”

“Well, they’re not exactly *saying* so I think they can’t even determine how long I’ll have to be here. They’re just trying to be cautious is all.”

“Then iremos when they play in Worlds.”

“How about we just worry about you gettin’ healthy for the time being?”

“That’s sweet of you, George, but I’m sure I’ll be fine. Right now you’ve a chance to do something good, something you enjoy doing...and you’ll have Geoff with you the whole way. Stop worrying about your little sis for a bit and focus on doing the best you can. Please? For me? Could you forget about my problems? Let me work on getting better, and I’ll let you focus on playing your best. Sound like a plan?”

“...well a’right, if you’re givin’ me permission to clear my mind, I’ll do just that. And this nigga right here, he’s gonna keep me distracted so I won’t go on tilt.”

“I’ll do my best. I’m probably better at that than I am on Rainbow Roa—god damn red shell!”

His phone rumbled. “Gimmie a minute, I’ll be right back.”

¹⁰ NeoTokyo’s phone played an alert tune^C

5 Machina

“The real problem is not whether machines think, but whether men do.” B.F Skinner

He would walk down long hallways, past other patients who were admitted for numerous reasons. Men and women in their dress shirts, in their white coats, with clipboards and folders in their hands took intentional strides at New York pace. They would look down at their phones, picking, and tapping, and sliding, and typing every second of every minute of every hour of every day.

Of course all financial and monetary regulations for health would have to pass through national politics. Yet those writing and passing legislation were chess players who had no clue their pawns were starving, no clue their knights had no horses, no clue his rooks were asleep on the job, and believed everyone lived happily ever after in their white palace like the king and queen. Of course they would think themselves king, the best piece—what experienced person wouldn't?

He would take the stairs up or down a few levels. He would enter a restroom, he would check under the stalls to see if he was alone. He would wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, until all was clear.

He would turn on the hand dryers, turn on a faucet and ask himself why.

Why.

Why? as warmth trickled down his face.

Why was she so strong?

Why could she handle it all? as he slammed his hands on the counter.

Why could she ignore it more than he could?

Why could she never break from her smile?

Why could she never admit to her pain? as his vision blurred.

Why would she not tell him how he could help?

Why is she okay with the way things are?

Why could she endure? as tears stacked on his nose.

Why could he not see the world through her eyes?

Why could she not see the world through his?

Why was she so much stronger than he was? as he punched an indentation into the tiled wall the shape of an upward-pointing arrow.

He would return to the room checking his phone, joining in on the conversation at hand.

You're bleeding from your left hand, she said this time.

Shit, must've been when the door closed on my hand.

And ever so slightly her smile would fade.

6 Pandango

“The man who moves a mountain begins by carrying away small stones.” Confucius

“So erythrocytes are the most abundant type of cells found in the blood. They typically last about one hundred twenty days, with most of the iron being recycled but some of it must be replaced. Normally erythrocytes are highly flexible cells that transport oxygen and carbon dioxide. Sickle cell anemia, however, causes RBCs to be” bzzt “much less flexible, and causes them to get caught. The bone marrow is res—”

Confidential – Team Final Frontier Gaming

Tue, Oct 11, 2016, 12:03 (0 minutes ago)

Simon Penn <penn@ffgaming.tk>

to me

Pandango,

Final Frontier Gaming is inviting you to be a member of our team to compete in the upcoming *League of Legends* North American series. We cannot give you the list of other people we have invited, but as of yet, two players have accepted our invitation. We are in need of a mid laner for the team, but of course roles can be swapped around if the need arises.

We have set aside a budget to pay for a player’s travel, as well as a salary for at least three months. As you know Riot guarantees a stable salary for teams that qualify into the LCS, so making it there will be tougher than simply being on FFG.

Feel free to reply with any questions you may have or talk to me on Skype (contact information available at FFG’s contact page). Please respond with an official answer by this Friday and we can discuss things in more depth.

Please try to keep this under wraps for the time being until we can make an official announcement. Try not to show things off on stream and try not to talk about or hint towards this on social media. I cannot stress enough how important this is to us.

Thanks, and game on.

Sincerely,

Simon “Shellshock” Penn

Founder, Final Frontier Gaming

<http://ffgaming.tk>

“Jorge!”

“... what?”

“What is it in the blood that allows it to transport oxygen?”

“Oh. Hemoglobin.”

“Yes. Hemoglobin is responsible for carrying—”

A once in a lifetime opportunity, a rare one, in the palm of my hands and I can respond in just a few seconds, and my future could change forever. In the palm of my hands.

Who could the other players be? Two of them accepted already, possibly new people, unlikely that already salaried and sponsored players would take a risk with a newly formed team. Maybe someone wasn't able to keep their mouth closed and some information was leaked...the internet detectives would know something by now if that were the case.

“Alright, so then I'll see you guys Friday. Email me if you have any questions.”

God damn. Still one more class before calling it a day, but only three days to decide. Fuck it, I'll just have to get home 'sfast as possible and see if there's any news. Who could be the other two players who haven't decided yet? Maybe they're already in an LCS team and are negotiating for better deals?

Fuck, am I even good enough to compete at top tier? Can I play at the same level as the greatest of North American mid laners? Dasher? MissInk? Zoroichi? Who'm I missing? Phynos. Marwolf. Do I have what it takes, or have I just gotten lucky up until now? That can't possibly be. I must be doing something right. Anything. I couldn't have gotten this far without having mitigated the mistakes I make while playing. Of course I can hang in top tier. If this works out, it'll be my job to mitigate mistakes. That I can do.

Who'll be on the team, though? Are they assholes who rage in solo queue? What if *they* just got lucky? That couldn't possibly be the case, could it? If I got this far by doing at least one thing right, they surely must have as well. And they can be anyone I play with on a daily basis.

What'll mom and dad think when I tell them about this? They'll probably want to see numbers or automatically think I'm getting scammed. Why are there still no eSports leagues in universities? I thought this was the place where we pioneer into the future, not stick to the same methods for decades. This'd all be far easier to explain and actualize if it weren't just a huge gambit raising red flags for everyone. Fuck.

Fuck!

Bzzt.

(12:22) Michelle: Yo where are you?

Shit...forgot again.

Call sender.

“Hey, Jorge, where are you?”

“Hey, Michelle, something came up during class. I'm going to have to skip next class and shit. Something important came up.”

“...Jorge, something always comes up with you. At this point I don't even know if I want to keep trying with you.”

“First of all, let me just say sorry. I know I haven’t kept my word these past two or so weeks, but I’ve been finding it difficult to adjust to university. For this thing that’s come up, I only have a few days to do some research on it, and maybe something big will come out of it. So if you’re willing to put off one more day of my stupidity, I’ll be all yours from here on.”

“You know what? To be perfectly honest, I want to accept that offer. But I don’t know if you’re just going to keep doing the same thing day after day, week after week. Maybe I just need to set my expectations low and this relationship can work, but I really, really don’t think that’s what I want to do. Can you at least tell me what it is that’s so important that we can’t go to lunch as scheduled? You don’t sound as ecstatic and kawaii as always. How serious is this?”

“...there’s...there’s this thing called eSports. It’s...more or less it’s competitive gaming, as...as a spectator sport. I was just invited to a team, and I have to let them know by Friday if I want in. I don’t know if it’s a reputable organization, though, so that’s what I’m going to go find out for like the next two or three days. If you want to know why I’m going so far as to skip class and our planned lunch, I can show you a few videos and articles about what this is and why it’s so important to me.”

“So you’re saying that some game is just going to—”

“It’s, it’s not *just* a game.”

“Fine, okay. But you’re saying this competitive gaming thing is more important than even going to your next class?”

“If you let me show you the videos of past events and tournaments I think you’d quickly see why I’m taking this so seriously.”

“...I’ll just...I’ll talk to you later, then, if you’re going to be busy doing stuff. I don’t know how long I’ll be willing to remain calm about this whole thing, though, so you’re off the hook...for now.”

“Alright, cool. I’ll call you later tonight if I get the chance. And I’ll let you know what happens with all this.”

“...yeah.”

She’s fucking pissed at me. Damn it, Shellshock. Agh! The only thing that could make this day any worse is a Teemo shroom.

I know what my parents are going to say, already. Why am I even bothering trying to convince them? If I go for this, would they kick me out of the house? What would I have to do to make this shit work? How would I get them on board without severing ties?

...So if you're lonely, You know I'm bere waiting for you, I'm just a crosshair; I'm just a shot away from you, And if you leave here, You leave me broken, shattered, a lie, I'm just a crosshair; I'm just a shot, then we can die...

Music bled into his mind while he worked his way off campus. Students rushed in every direction, some running,¹ some at the pace of snails,² others standing in groups talking and laughing and overall enjoying the best years of their lives.

Upon the grassy knolls stood the eldest trees on campus, towering above even some buildings. From time to time landscaping crews worked on the vantage point: they would pull the weeds and cut the thin, young vines eager to grow. They left the ancient, clunky roots growing out of the soil to absorb all the nutrients and all the sunlight, to provide further nourishment and wealth and health, and to preserve the prestige of the old guard.

He exited from the black gates of campus and walked to the bus stop. Vehicles flooded the streets, vehicles driven by people who had gone through the same educational system he was in,³ and they were people who would perpetually fill roles because it was what tradition had dictated. They had all been processed and developed and trained by the scholastic assembly line to complete tasks to certain expectations and then move on to the next task and the next and the next. They had all been rewarded with letters and numbers⁴ that would be forever attached to their résumés alongside their other lists of accomplishments, one after the other after the other, with no time to think any further and with no time to reflect or criticize—there, another task, do that! it must be done! it is as those before me have done! no time to improve on it! it must be done now! immediately! why isn't it done yet, do you not want more letters and numbers to add to your résumés?

And do not burden yourself with the worry of educational costs. If you follow in our footsteps we will ensure we set you up with internships⁵ and eventually you will begin to make profits, just like us. In the meantime, look at this grand oasis we have built to train your mind. The fauna and shrubbery are sure to keep your mind at peace, and look at all of these events we have for students, just like you—no, *especially* for you. I do not speak as a businessman—I speak as a friend, and an educator. Look at all of these people, they are just like you. Think of this, think of now; do not worry about the world outside the school or where we find the money for this. When the time is right you will earn a dollar, one by one. We are resolute in our structure, it has worked for us for centuries and there is no need to change it now. We have all of this down to a science—this is the safest way to make it through life. Listen to the politicians, they have it all figured out: the only way you could possibly fail is if you are too lazy to work. They, too, have gone through this system, and so it is to be trusted. You are in

1 probably to meet up with some friends for lunch, or for a class

2 who were probably done with classes for the rest of the day

3 the people who had followed in the footsteps of others

4 and the higher the number or the close to the beginning of the alphabet the letter was, the more you ought to be proud and happy for

5 that pay in exposure and require you to be available all the time, always have your phone charged and on when in an internship

the right hands, always—just do as we say. Do not take unnecessary risks, do not step where there are no more footsteps to follow, only those with years of experience can do that. Stay where there is sure footing, there is no need for you to attempt to carve your own footprints into the cement with a plastic knife. If you fail, you will be laughed at, no one can handle being laughed at, especially not a young person like yourself who has not experienced the troubles and difficulties of life. Always consider what others think of you, for they keep you grounded in reality. We urge you to stay where it is safe, we will provide you with a future.

—

- [37:52] Pompow (Nasus) has targeted ARC Marlowolf – (Lux)
 [38:13] Bls SaintSpark has slain ARC MechaHive for a double kill!
 [38:16] [All] ARC MechaHive (Volibear): :(
 [38:25] Pandango has slain Tahr for a double kill!
 [38:13] Pandango has ended Tahr's killing spree! (Bounty: 500G)
 [38:25] Pandango has slain JessThePinkMan for a triple kill!
 [38:25] Pandango is unstoppable!
 [38:25] Your team has scored an ace!
 [38:29] [All] JessThePinkMan (Lulu): real
 [38:29] [All] JessThePinkMan (Lulu): dat flash q
 [38:34] [All] Pandango (Karthus): lol
 [38:35] [All] Pandango (Karthus): wat r u talking about?
 [38:36] [All] Pandango (Karthus): i didnt' flash
 [38:37] [All] ARC Marlowolf (Lux): long range skittles doe
 [38:46] [All] ARC MechaHive (Volibear): damn panda ur pr
 [38:47] [All] ARC MechaHive (Volibear): pretty good at lieing
 [38:50] [All] ARC MechaHive (Volibear): I know the perfect job for oyu
 [38:53] [All] ARC MechaHive (Volibear): the governemtn
 [38:54] [All] Pompow (Nasus): xD
 [38:56] [All] ARC Marlowolf (Lux): he's just kidding
 [38:57] [All] ARC Marlowolf (Lux): there are no jobs
 [38:57] [All] Crescendo (Sona): :p
 [38:59] [All] JessThePinkMan (Lulu): rofl
 [38:59] Bls SaintSpark (Amumu): 4659 bar
 [38:59] Bls SaintSpark (Amumu) has slain Baron Nashor!
 [39:03] [All] Pandango (Karthus): lol wtf
 [39:06] Pompow (Nasus): oshit u landed the smite
 [39:10] Bls SaintSpark (Amumu): lol
 [39:10] Bls SaintSpark (Amumu): stfu
 [39:16] [All] Pandango (Karthus): will pentakill for monies
 [39:18] [All] Pandango (Karthus): pls
 [39:25] Crescendo (Sona) has targeted the Inner Turret

- [39:26] Pompow (Nasus) is on the way
[39:26] Bls SaintSpark (Amumu): too low im scared
[39:30] Crescendo (Sona): - _____ -
[39:42] Pompow (Nasus): drag soon
[39:46] Bls SaintSpark (Amumu): Cresh pls b
[39:47] Bls SaintSpark (Amumu): plssssssssssss
[39:50] Crescendo (Sona): Either you help me take tower.
[39:50] Crescendo (Sona): And we keep pushing.
[39:52] Crescendo (Sona): Or I go alone, die, and we lose towers.
[39:53] Bls SaintSpark (Amumu) is on the way
[39:55] Bls SaintSpark (Amumu): y u always take ur team hostage? qq
[39:57] Crescendo (Sona): Because win.
[40:00] UltimateBurrrito (Lucian): Saint stop crying in jungle and man up
[40:03] UltimateBurrrito (Lucian): ur crying so much I can see a river
[40:05] [All] Pandango (Karthus): saint won't stop crying in your jungle
[40:07] [All] Bls SaintSpark (Amumu): qq
[40:10] [All] ARC MechaHive (Volibear): i have a hug for him
[40:12] [All] ARC MechaHive (Volibear): come to bot inhib
[40:20] [All] ARC MechaHive (Volibear): I said bot not top
[40:27] Crescendo (Sona): B after.
[40:37] [All] ARC Marlowolf (Lux): pls responderino
[41:05] Crescendo (Sona) purchased Sight Ward
[41:10] Bls SaintSpark (Amumu) purchased Sight Ward
[41:23] Crescendo (Sona): TP/Karthus ult cd?
[41:30] Pompow (Nasus): 1min
[41:34] Crescendo (Sona): Pressure top while we take bot?
[41:35] Pompow (Nasus) is on the way
[41:40] UltimateBurrrito (Lucian): all mia
[41:47] Crescendo (Sona): Want a ward in top jungle?
[41:50] Pompow (Nasus): i'm good
[42:18] Pandango (Karthus) signals that enemies are missing
[42:24] Crescendo (Sona): They're probably all going up towards you.
[42:26] Crescendo (Sona): We'll take bot if they do.
[42:48] Crescendo (Sona) has targeted the Inhibitor
[42:48] Crescendo (Sona) has targeted the Inhibitor
[42:49] Crescendo (Sona) has targeted the Inhibitor
[42:57] Pompow (Nasus): lol they sent 3
[43:10] Pompow (Nasus): have FH
[43:11] Pompow (Nasus): tanky as fuck
[43:15] Pompow (Nasus): they gonna iwsh they hadn't let the dogs our
[45:53] Crescendo (Sona) signals to be careful

[45:59] Bls SaintSpark (Amumu): bar 1 min
[46:03] [All] JessThePinkMan (Lulu): why you guys no come to me?
[46:07] [All] JessThePinkMan (Lulu): I just want to give you cupcakes
[46:14] [All] JessThePinkMan (Lulu): also
[46:14] [All] JessThePinkMan (Lulu): saint
[46:14] [All] JessThePinkMan (Lulu): cresencdo
[46:16] [All] JessThePinkMan (Lulu): y u block minimap? > :C
[46:21] [All] Bls SaintSpark (Amumu): real
[46:26] [All] JessThePinkMan (Lulu): everyone else
[46:28] [All] JessThePinkMan (Lulu): y u no stream?
[46:32] [All] Pandango (Karthus): lol
[46:34] [All] Pandango (Karthus): I want you to tryhard, son
[46:35] Pompow (Nasus): 51:40 lux falsh
[46:36] [All] Pandango (Karthus): don't be so
[46:40] [All] Pandango (Karthus): ENTITLED
[46:43] [All] JessThePinkMan (Lulu): D:
[46:43] [All] JessThePinkMan (Lulu): k
[46:44] Crescendo (Sona) is on the way
[46:45] Bls SaintSpark (Amumu) is asking for assistance
[46:46] Pandango (Karthus) is on the way
[46:46] Pandango (Karthus) is on the way
[46:55] Crescendo (Sona) signals to be careful
[46:56] UltimateBurrito (Lucian) signals that enemies are missing
[46:57] Crescendo (Sona) signals to be careful
[46:59] Pandango (Karthus): we baiting or gettign?
[47:00] Pompow (Nasus): get
[47:03] Crescendo (Sona) has targeted ARC MechaHive – (Volibear)
[47:03] Crescendo (Sona) has targeted Tahr – (Aatrox)
[47:07] UltimateBurrito (Lucian) is asking for assistance
[47:13] ARC Marwolf has ended Pandango's killing spree! (Bounty: 437G)
[47:15] UltimateBurrito (Lucian) has slain Baron Nashor!
[47:15] [All] Pompow (Nasus): these junglers doe
[47:16] [All] Bls SaintSpark (Amumu): lol
[47:16] [All] Bls SaintSpark (Amumu): saint is that you?
[47:16] [All] xNietzsche (Jinx): woooloolool
[47:16] [All] Pandango (Karthus): pc
[47:16] Crescendo (Sona) has targeted ARC Marwolf – (Lux)
[47:17] UltimateBurrito (Lucian) has targeted xNietzsche – (Jinx)
[47:17] [All] JessThePinkMan (Lulu): fkn sky lazrz
[47:18] Pandango has slain Tahr for a double kill!
[47:18] [All] ARC MechaHive (Volibear): h4h4h4h4h oyur so funny

[47:18] Pandango has slain xNietzsche for a penta kill!
 [47:19] Your team has scored an ace!
 [47:20] UltimateBurrto (Lucian): lol gj
 [47:20] Crescendo (Sona) is on the way
 [47:20] Crescendo (Sona) is asking for assistance
 [47:24] [All] ARC MechaHive (Volibear): ggs
 [47:24] Enemy team agreed to surrender with 4 votes for and 0 against!
 [47:24] [All] ARC Marlowf (Lux): ggwp
 [47:25] [All] UltimateBurrto (Lucian): gg
 [47:25] Crescendo has started a surrender vote. Type /surrender or /nosurrender
 [47:25] [All] Crescendo (Sona): GG ^ u ^
 [47:26] [All] Pandango (Karthus): good agme duderinos :D
 [47:26] [All] JessThePinkMan (Lulu): geeg
 [47:27] Enemy team agreed to surrender with 5 votes for and 0 against!
 [47:28] [All] Bls SaintSpark (Amumu): gg wp
 Victory!

Alright, back to work. Let's see... Simon "Shellshock" Penn, played *Counter-Strike* for Collateral Gaming, from 2004 to 2007—aged seventeen to twenty at the time. That'd make him...two thousand *seven*, plus *nine* to sixteen, twenty-nine. After playing he coached for two years, then managed for another two. Damn. This guy knows what's up.

Founded Final Frontier Gaming after leaving Collateral on good terms. Hmm. FFG...guides, forums, contests, online tournaments. Neōfōkyo: most popular streamer, he plays every role pretty well whenever we're in the same game. Currently offline. Hmm.

Neōfōkyo...has been duoing with DeusRex for the last...every game. Tokyo: Shen, Renekton, Vlad, Shen, Aatrox, Yorick, Rumble, Rumble, Garen, Tee—Teemo. Such Teemo. My top laner—hello, Kyoto.

Rex: Bli—is that a...jungle Blitz? Elise, Zac, Hecarim, Alistar, Elise, Lee Sin, J4, Eve, Eve. My jungler—hello, Deus Ex Machina.

"Jorge, when did you get home?"

"Oh hey, ma. I got back about an hour ago. I came home early since I have to do some research on something important."

"You already have a big paper due?"

"It's not for school. Is...uh...is dad home?"

"He'll be around in a minute—he stepped out to pick up some things at the store."

"Well, since you're here I might as well explain it to you. There's this thing called eSports, it's people playing video games professionally, for money, for glory... fame, too, I guess. It's like sports, but for video games. Let me show you a video—so this was earlier this month, World Championship where only the two best teams from the world played. Neither was an American team partly because...well most Americans

don't know what eSports is or how big it is, so there are very few ways for people to get anywhere near the top and onto a world stage.”

“Wait, is that a stadium?”

“Yeah. Tens of thousands of people in attendance. With millions more watching online.”

“Why online? Can't they put this on TV?”

“Well, it's been tried about a decade ago, but honestly there are a lot of conflicts, and established organizations that already distributed competitive gaming content just did it so much better. TV tried to make it too much like traditional sports, but gaming can't be exhibited the same way. There are some fundamentally different philosophies between the restrictions and time slots of television and the freedom and flexibility of online streaming.”

“Are you trying to say you want to do something like this?”

“Sort of. Earlier today I got an email, and the founder of a gaming organization invited me to be a player. I may have to move, I'm not sure where yet but I'm guessing LA, New York, Chicago, Seattle, maybe.”

“Wait, are you serious about all of this?”

“Yeah, look, I can show you the email. I've been looking up information on the sender, and it's definitely the founder. He has a long history in competitive gaming, so he knows how business works.”

“Wow, well this is great! Will all of this happen after you graduate?”

“...that's the thing, ma. I've only got one chance. One opportunity, and that's right now.”

“Are you saying you're going to have to drop out of school?”

“That's one way of doing it. But I'm thinking I can submit a request for a temporary leave. The email says I'll be paid for three months, so until the end of January. If nothing happens, I'll just continue next semester.”

“This is definitely something we have to talk about with your father.”

“Yeah, I know.”

—

“No, absolutely not, this is silly.”

“Dad, I've only got this one chance. Even at nineteen I might be too old. I'm already late. If I were seventeen or eighteen I'd definitely have the natural reaction speed to play my best.”

“I forbid you from doing this. There are always going to be people better than you no matter what. If this is your only chance and you're already past your prime, it's definitely not going to work out.”

“You've told me countless times in the past that in life some opportunities are rare and that I should take them when I can. I can just do this for the three months and if it doesn't work out, I'll just continue with school normally and I won't pursue this anymore. Can we just do it that way?”

“Look, son, you’re not thinking straight. Listen to yourself: you want to drop school for three months to play video games. Video games aren’t going to get you anywhere in life. You’re not going to be doing anything productive, and it’ll probably lead you nowhere. This is extremely high-risk, and it’s a risk you don’t need to take. Just go through with school like everyone else. You can pursue video games when you’re done with school and you’ll have nothing but support from me.”

“C’mon, don’t you at least think you could believe in me just a little? Like, I’m sure you’ve taken risks in your life. Like all the fucking time.”

“Like all the *what* time?”

“Sorry. But I’m sure you’ve had to make hard choices in your life, decisions you probably didn’t want to make. And even then, if I fail at this, I can always just return to school easily. If I don’t try, I’ll never know. Isn’t that how you met mom? You decided to go for it. You told me yourself that even *you* weren’t sure if it would work out. You’ve always wanted me to give one hundred ten percent at everything, but now you’re preventing me from even doing one hundred. I can’t know if I’ll fail if I don’t try. What if you were born in a world where competitive video games were mainstream alongside football? You would have cheered on for your favorite team and I’d be sitting on the couch next to you cheering along. You would have raised me to practice football for an hour and then a video game for an hour. You would be urging me to take this chance—you’d probably be begging me to take it. And you’d be proud as *fuck* if you ever saw your son competing and winning at something he’s good at and something he enjoys doing. You’ve said it over and over again: you’ve followed your heart all your life and it hasn’t failed you. You’ve told me many times to follow mine, and right now, mine is here. In this, I want to be able to pioneer something for the future and actually make a difference. When you ask me what good came out of playing a lot of video games, right now the answer is, I *could* have *almost* been a professional player. I want to be able to say that all those hours led me to playing professionally, and maybe I still can. If I fail and if I make a mistake because of this, at least I’ll know. And there’s nothing worse than not knowing. This is *my* wager to lose, and yours to *win*. If I make a mistake, *I* will own up to it. I promise.”

“How about you give me a few minutes to think this over again? We’ll talk at dinner, son.”

“Alright.”

“I think you made very good points, Jorge. I’ll talk to him some more.”

“Thanks, ma.”

What if he says no? He seemed pretty adamant in sticking to his no. If he says no . . . then fuck it. It’s not his decision to make. He can’t live my life for me. This is my life. *I* get to choose. Wolves don’t lose sleep over the opinion of sheep.

Bzzt.

(16:45) Michelle: You know what, I think I need some time to rethink this. Let’s go our separate ways a bit. I’ll let you know how I feel in a week.

This isn't his risk to take—this isn't his education and his future and his life on the line. They're *mine*! Even if he'll hate me for it, I'll do it.

Better start studying.

YouTube.

LoL. coL vs Max 2016 NA LCS Summer Week 2 Day 2.

03:10

“—ecause this was a standard start with no aggressive wards placed, it was an optimal decision for Maxim to send two top rath—”

19:42

“—and at the end of the day Collateral just stood back and watched.”

“And not only did they just kind of give up Dragon to Maxim, but MissInk made a run for that top lane. So she's immediately pushing the side of the map furthest from Dragon to punish them. It was a five v five that Maxim were daring Collateral to take, and since Collateral is a really smart team, even though Collateral could have contested Dragon and won that fight, it was a risk, and they *weren't* willing to take it.”

“It does show a clear focus. They're more interested in towers than anything else right now. MissInk is taking a lot of tower hits, but she's facetanking it just to get her team their fifth tower of the game.”

“And with five turrets to zero in favor of Collateral, that is *exactly* where all the gold difference comes from right now. The CS numbers are starting to normalize across the board, but Collateral is still six *thousand* gold ahead and it's stayed at that value for a pretty long time.”

“Sorcerer's Shoes have been picked up by Zoroichi, he's really going to want that additional mobility now that the laning phase is over” bzzt “and do a bit more damage as he roams around the map and participates in teamfigh—”

(16:47) Mammy: I think you're in the green. Your father is proud to have a passionate man like yourself for a son. Let us know how we can support you in all of this. :)

God *fucking* yes!

7

A Future

“The wisest men follow their own direction.” Euripides

Reply.

I'll do it. My Skype info uses this same email. Let me know what I need to know.

Thanks,

Pandango

Send.

Log off.

Login.

Compose.

Requesting Temporary Leave from University,

Hello Dr. Norma,

Something has come up recently and I am wondering how I would go about requesting a temporary leave from my studies. I will only be—

Hello Dr. Norma,

I have been offered an interesting opportunity for employment, and I will have to take time off from school. I will be unable to continue my studies for the remainder of this semester. My temporary leave may take anywhere from three months to a year. I would greatly appreciate it if you would guide me through the steps I must take for a temporary absence.

Thanks,

Jorge Reyes

Send.

NeoFrollkyo would like to add you to his contacts.

GeorgeDeusKing would like to add you to his contacts.

Accept.

Accept.

GeorgeDeusKing has invited you to join his group.

Accept.

GeorgeDeusKing	Yo. You know why we added you?	17:04
NeoFrollkyo	PANDA!!!!!!!!!!!!!!	17:04
PANDAKAWAII	:DDDDDDDDDDDDDDDD	17:04
NeoFrollkyo	:D	17:04
	So we're planning on doing	17:04
	A team meeting sort of thing	17:04
	Over a Skype call	17:04
	Tomorrow or Thursday if you have time	17:05
PANDAKAWAII	Awesome. Let's do this shit.	17:05

8

WildCat

“Any society that would give up a little liberty to gain a little security will deserve neither and lose both.”
Benjamin Franklin

(20:34) DeusRex: yo you streaming?

(20:40) DeusRex: :/

DeusRex: y u gotta be afk on me tho?

(20:45) DeusRex: rea||||||||||||||||

(20:48) Cat the Turtle: yo

Cat the Turtle: Getting into Q tell me what's up

(20:50) Cat the Turtle: lol y u gotta be afk on me doe? Rea||||||||||||||||

Cat the Turtle: so troll

Match Found!

coL Typhergus: top pls :D

coL Ikarus: jangle

coL Ikarus: trade me j4 wildcat?

Cat the Turtle: Sure get me vayne

DoobyScoo: drex can I mid pls

DoobyScoo: I'll carry you :D

DoobyScoo: pls

DoobyScoo: :c

Thresh amp Militia	Fiora Afterglow	Frosted Ezreal amp Aeaza	Sakura Karma Zoroichi	AstroNautilus BushidoBlazeIt
Vayne	Glacial Malphite	Jarvan IV	Santa Gragas	Iron Solari Leona
Cat the Turtle	coL Typhergus	coL Ikarus	Bls Drex	DoobyScoo

[00:00] DeusRex: should have dodged :p

[00:00] DeusRex: ehh

[00:00] DeusRex: let me know when you're done with that game

[00:00] DeusRex: and don't start another

[00:00] DeusRex: don't even queue

[00:02] **Bls Drex (Gragas)** purchased **Warding Totem (Trinket)**

[00:03] **coL Typhergus (Malphite)** purchased **Warding Totem (Trinket)**

[00:03] **DoobyScoo (Leona)** purchased **Sweeping Lens (Trinket)**

[00:04] **DoobyScoo (Leona)** purchased **Relic Shield**

[00:06] [To] DeusRex: oooh why?

[00:08] **Cat the Turtle (Vayne)** purchased **Warding Totem (Trinket)**

[00:10] DeusRex: gotta show you something

[00:25] [To] DeusRex: no **** pics pls

[00:30] DeusRex: lol
 [00:35] coL Ikarus (Jarvan IV) purchased Sweeping Lens (Trinket)
 [00:36] coL Ikarus (Jarvan IV) is on the way
 [00:37] coL Ikarus (Jarvan IV) is asking for assistance
 [00:37] DoobyScoo (Leona) is on the way
 [00:57] DeusRex: NSA's coming out with new program
 [01:10] DeusRex: I found this thing
 [01:11] DeusRex: helps protect your data and privacy
 [01:13] coL Ikarus (Jarvan IV): 6 12 tr
 [01:14] DeusRex: its called freedom from government
 [01:15] DeusRex: or ffg for short
 [01:46] [To] DeusRex: o lol
 [01:50] DeusRex: send me your skype info when you're done
 [01:53] [To] DeusRex: K
 [02:12] Cat the Turtle (Vayne): yo leona
 [02:14] Cat the Turtle (Vayne): let's just go full ham lvl 3 and up
 [02:15] DoobyScoo (Leona): sure
 [02:28] Cat the Turtle (Vayne): carry the **** out of this lane

GeorgeDeusKing	move window to your other monitor	21:36
Jason the WildCat	I only have one monitor D:	21:36
GeorgeDeusKing	--	21:36
Jason the WildCat	um	21:36
	how long you thinking this is going to take?	21:36
GeorgeDeusKing	not sure tbh	21:37

“Um...kay, so guys I'm gonna stop streaming for a bit. Give me like ten or so minutes. Maybe more. Or...you know what, I'll start streaming again in an hour. Thanks for watching so far. Sorry for the sudden change, but I'll be back. I promise. BRB.” Stream Offline.

GeorgeDeusKing calling.

“—nyway, we just didn't mesh at all. She was like, super serious all the time and I was just dickin' around playing video games not even giving a damn about my classes.”

“I think I'm on the same boat right now, honestly. I mean, I've fucked up a bunch before I got Shellshock's email, and then skipping out on lunch was like the last straw for her.”

“A'right, a'right, we got WildCat. Let's get super serious now. As far as we're concerned, this is the full team. Panda, Tokyo and I have already accepted Shellshock's invitation. That means you two seem to be the only missin' pieces.”

“Ehh. Hey, so if this is the team, I just want to get something out of the way. From what I know about how you guys play in solo queue, Tokyo and Rex seem to already have good chemistry. Pandango, you really, really know how to manipulate and control

the flow of your opponents. Crescendo, if you're going to be our Support, I'm totally gonna respond to Shellshock as soon as we're done with this meeting. We always win lane that it's not even funny."

SW Crescendo It's like we can read each other's minds. :o 21:41

"No mic?"

SW Crescendo Yeah, something like that. 21:41

"Tokyo and I've been duo queuin' a lot recently and we're startin'a see some pretty serious changes in our playstyle. Maybe if you two put in some serious practice time together maybe you'll start seeing similar results?"

"Yo, Rex."

PANDAKAWAII <http://i.imgur.com/27vYyKU.png> 21:42

"It's not impossible. Dude, we can be like the best bot lane in North America, hands down. I'm calling it."

GeorgeDeusKing Lol racist ass nigga 21:42

PANDAKAWAII lol 21:42

<3 21:42

SW Crescendo Well, I mean, we haven't really run into any professional duo bot lane. But it could be worth a shot to try something out. I'm not sure about being captain, though. I haven't ever really played in any REAL competitive environment. 21:43

GeorgeDeusKing <http://i.imgur.com/iSlbgqv.jpg> 21:43

"Panda, that's for you and Tokyo. Also, there's still Thursday 'n' Friday to decide whetha or not you guys want in on the team. Shelly didn't organize this call so it's not like you *have* to say yes now."

PANDAKAWAII damn rex, so mean 21:45

y u no like faggots? :C 21:45

heartless bastard 21:45

SW Crescendo Lol, Shelly? 21:45

NeoTrollkyo Rex and I also call him Penny. He's a girl both times either way because trololo 21:46

"Rex and I have been thinking that we can also make a ranked fives team to see how we play together and to see what we can improve on. We could even do it right now if we really want to. Rex and I could probably carry us if you three weigh too much. I'm the one who'll be mainly carrying, though."

GeorgeDeusKing fagcts killed muh daddy, killed his lungs 21:46

And I have the best reason for my stance 21:46

Behold!: <http://i.imgur.com/PyogrKt.jpg> 21:47

PANDAKAWAI	All praise the Lawd! Facts burn in hell!	21:47
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“Ehh, I promised my viewers I’d stream again in an hour. Maybe we could do that tomorrow? So long as it’s before Friday night so we can let Shelly know we’re good to go, I’m assuming, right?”

NeoTrollkyo	http://i.imgur.com/ukJqYgN.png	21:48
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“You guys don’t even know. My link is the best. We could do it tomorrow if we can agree on a time. It may also be better to use smurfs so that people won’t figure something’s up if they see us in ranked fives. You all *do* have smurf accounts, right?”

Jason the WildCat	Am I a filthy casual if I play league?	21:49
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PANDAKAWAI	>, > ... What if I don’t have a smurf?	21:49
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SW Crescendo	I like this one :p http://i.imgur.com/FsgStnW.jpg	21:49
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NeoTrollkyo	http://i.imgur.com/lyhfre3.jpg	21:50
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GeorgeDeusKing	Trololo poor Geoff	21:51
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NeoTrollkyo	qq	21:51
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“Haha! What even are these links anymore?”

“I dunno, Panda. I don’t know. But seriously, we doing this smurf ranked team thing? I could probably lend you one of mine, but you may not have the runes or champions you like on it.”

“Sure, I guess. What are their summoner names?”

“One is TrinityJohto and the other is RaitoYagami.”

“Oh shit, those are you? You always shit on me whatever lane we face each other in.”

“Lol, well step up your game, Panda. We should one v one at the gaming house. Loser has to date Rex the next day. Winner dates his girlfriend.”

“In that case I’ll lose on purpose. Cuz mmm, that bod.”

“Wow. Well, I don’t mind havin’ my meals paid.”

“I never said I’d pay, though. Happy face.”

“Shit outta luck, George.”

SW Crescendo	Okay, so looks like we’re doing this smurf team, then? What time?	21:53
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“Okay. Actually, you know what? I’m down for this. I can see this going places. I’m sending in my email. Crescendo, it’s time someone takes you hostage. We’re doing this bot lane thing. It’s gonna work. Something tells me we’re going a long way with this duo lane.”

SW Crescendo	=w=’	21:55
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	I’d still have to reply to Shelly, though. So I’m not really hostage. \o/	21:55
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“Oh damn, WildCat. And I thought Supports made all the decisions bot lane. And I also thought cats were supposed to be all like...hella calm and chillax. So unkuawai. You could learn a thing or two from my panda skills.”

“I’m sending in my confirmation email, man. Whether or not we become the best bot lane is up to you now.”

Jason the WildCat >:3

21:56

“Top post on Reddit gonna be ‘Team Takes Crescendo Hostage.’ And solo queue will rejoice. But then he’s gonna be our captain anyway.”

“I’m typing it right now. Listen to my keystrokes. They seal your fate with each passing second. Oh shit, how do you spell ‘sign me up?’ It’s like...N, and then O, right?”

SW Crescendo

I think it’s spelled like this: I don’t want to play for FFG.
I’m a baddie and Crescendo would carry me every game.
Shelly, pls.

21:58

“Oh, okay. I think I got all that. That last part was P-L-S, right? Oh, but no, I actually have a serious question. Does anyone know if Shellshock can actually be trusted? Like, he won’t manage us until we win a tournament and then disappear like some of those other scum managers that people seem to run into, right?”

“He can be trusted. George and I met him a few years ago at an MLG when we played at a LAN.^D He took our team back then to lunch and stuff. He has a wife and a young daughter. I’m pretty sure he won’t be disappearing without someone noticing. But he’s an overall cool guy anyway. He knows how the eSports scene works, he’s played *Counter-Strike* professionally when he was younger and then did some managing and coaching before starting FFG from the ground up. If anyone knows how to protect players and organizations from corporate exploitation and fine print contracts, it’s Shelly. Trust me on that.”

“He’s a really chill, dude, let me tell you. I think he’d fit right into this convo easily. Like, he prob’ly wouldn’t find anythin’ we say offensive.”

“Which smurf you gonna want, Panda? I’ll make the smurf team with one and use the other. Just let me know which you prefer.”

SW Crescendo

What’s the team name going to be?

22:01

“Umm. I’ll see if I can get my old team name. If not, I’ll think of something. Gimmie them smurf names so I can add you to the roster.”

“You can add my TurtleSlayer one. Newly-30 smurf I’m working on.”

SW Crescendo

Metronome.

22:01

“Can you get ARoD to work?”

“I think I’ll take the Light Yagami one, Tokyo-kun.”

“Not quite. No variations of it seem to be working either. Oh, wait. I got it. Looks like we’re team MRoD. ‘Murica Runs on Debt, sendin’ out them invites. And you call me, Tokyo-*sama*, Panda-sama-kun-san.”

—
“Hey, ma. So I’ve decided to go ahead with the FFG thing.”

“Really? Wonderful! Have you told your father yet?”

“Nah, I was gonna ask you if you know where abouts in the places he may be.”

“He’s probably around somewhere. So it looks like you’re going to be following in the Yeung family footsteps.”

“Yup. This time around things might be a bit different, though. eSports has gotten big these past few years. Maybe I’ll be able to stick around the scene even after I’m too old to keep playing competitively. I really hope I can make a lasting impact with this chance I’ve got here. I’m pretty sure I’ve got a really good teammate to help me out with bot lane.”

“Have you played with him a lot in ranked?”

“From time to time. We’ve never duo queued, but it looks like the team is going to set up some practice games for tomorrow so we can see what we bring to the table as of now.”

“Sounds like you already know what you’re doing, then.”

“Well, I’ve learned from the best. I hereby fire-quit myself as the guy who handles the cash register and promote myself to pro gamer for FFG. I have a feeling this is going to work out really well.”

“What about the other people on your team? Or the owner, Penn, was it?”

“Yeah, the other guys seem really cool. They know the owner from a few years ago apparently. He has a family, little girl. Everything seems to be pretty legitimate. Two of the other guys on the team are featured streamers for FFG and they haven’t said anything bad about Shellshock.”

“If all of the business seems to be fine, then just keep in mind that you’re a player. Remember that it’s a *team* game. You’re going to always be there for your teammates, and you also have to trust that they’ll always be there for you. Always, always, *always* remember that the enemy team will be thinking the exact same thing you’re thinking. They’re going to be having the same internal issues you and your team are having. Try to find some advantage from that, or at least know you’re not the only ones with those team problems.”

“Damn, ma, you should coach again. I’m getting all jittery and eager to play right now.”

“No, my time for gaming is over. Maybe if things were just a little different I’d still be heavily involved in competitive games, but sometimes things just don’t work out how we want them to.”

“Then I’ll just have to do what you did, but better.”

“So long as you remember that everyone playing is just as human as you. They have the same desires and feelings and emotions as you do. The way you feel when you win, that’s how they feel when they win. The way you feel when you lose, that’s how they feel when they lose. Sportsmanship, Jason. That’s going to take you a long way. Firm handshakes, earnest look in the eye, honest smiles. And how could anyone resist that smile of yours?”

“It’s like Medusa, but people are filled with bliss.”

“How do you come up with all of these obscure references?”

“Internet.”

9

Young Dreams

“One doesn’t discover new lands without losing sight of the shore.” André Gide

His time had come. It was what he was born for. It was what he had dedicated the last few years of his life to. And it would all pay off now. All those sleepless nights, all those other missed opportunities, all those hours spent looking at frames, at statistics, at his predecessors. From the East Coast to the West Coast, from the West to the East, all the players he had aspired to be like, all the players he had admired, and all the players he had wished he could play with, he would be playing against—with just three months’ practice he would be the best.

From the American players to the European players, from the Chinese players to the Korean players, from the German players to the Japanese players, from the Australian players to the Mexican players, from the Swedish players to the Brazilian players—with just three months’ practice he would be up on the stage with the best.

In just a few days’ time he would leave home, leave behind everyone he’d ever known, every face he’d ever seen in person, every friend he’d ever made, every place he’d ever visited—because he was the best.

He thought it’d be easy to leave it all behind. He thought it’d be easy to just pack up and leave. He hadn’t thought this far ahead, he hadn’t thought his heart could weigh his body down, he hadn’t considered how hard it would be to let go. He hadn’t considered how hard it would be to grow up; he hadn’t considered that he may not be ready when his time would come. He thought it would just be easy to be the best.

But he had to endure. He had done it so far, and he could do it again, and again, and again. He had to endure, he had to adapt, he had to grow. He had to nourish his dream, he had to actualize it, he had to make it be, because no one else would do it for him. He had to strive for it, he had to work towards it, he had to find himself a muse, he had to find himself a reason—and it was that he had to be the best.

If he knew it would be this hard to move on, if he knew it would be this hard to grow, if he knew he would be internally torn at the last second, he may have done things differently. He may have stayed nearby, he may have changed his dreams. He may have admired the local heroes, he may have challenged a local issue, he may have been a different person, rather than to be the best.

But this was his dream, and even if he had known this all, he would do it again anyway. He would do it again and endure—he’d have to—to be the best.

10

Crescendo

“If music be the food of love, play on.” William Shakespeare

“Posture: good. Back: good. Hands and arms: good. Legs and feet: good. And you’re all set. Begin.”

The first finger pressed down on the first key, and the harmony of the piano reverberated and resonated across the room. A slow, steady hymn hummed from the heart of piano. An adagio of soft notes, one after the other, played smoothly and calmly, emerging from the fingers that danced on the black and white keys. Arced hands hovered over the keys, they hopped against gravity, glided toward other keys, and the arced hands landed back down with perfection and precision. The blank face turned into a smile—the pace hastened, cheerful notes bloomed from the instrument.

Her hands and arms began to bounce around while her head swayed slowly to the melody. She closed her eyes and played the piece in perfection—her body was one with the music, synchronized. She embodied the aria, commanding her face and her neck and shoulders and arms to dance the piece as it came from her mind to her hands to the keys.

A thunder rang from the piano.

Two.

Three.

Four..

...five roars shook the air, her head banging downward each time. Her eyebrows pulled inward and down, her brows of concentration transfixed on the power of the song. The blend of five notes played: the chord played in tangent, in harmony, in unison. The family of five continued on as the great opus began to settle. Her hands leapt into the air as she tightened her lips, the tip of her tongue escaping. Her sonata came to a gradual close.

Discipline. Posture, back, hands and arms, legs and feet default position. Hold for one, two, three seconds.

The pianist grinned and ecstatically bounced in her seat.

“And you named this piece... ‘Final Frontier.’ You...uh...you’ve never done that before, by the way. The way you moved to your own music. Your hands and body and face matched perfectly what you were feeling. I could feel the raw emotion and power in this piece, it’s quite tremendous. I feel like ‘Final Frontier’ was just itching to come out of you and it just burst out into this. It’s magnificent to say the least, not only did your music speak, but your body spoke with it, too...And I take it you’re going to choose to accept this eSports thing?”

The girl nodded with a smile frozen on her face.

“Then you’re going to have to teach me what I need to know so I can cheer for you when you’re winning, okay?”

The girl stuck her tongue out, rushed off the piano stool and embraced her mother. “You’ll still write and play music, right?”

She nodded.

“Good. Send me what you write so I can have a look at it, okay? And text me or email me or write if you want to talk about something. This is new for both of us, so open communication, right? Good. Okay, I have business to take care of, so I will probably be gone for the rest of the day. Let me know if anything comes up? Okay. Good practice session, by the way. I love you, Sonia.”¹

She walked back to the piano, closed the key lid and picked up the copy of the sheet music she had written. She placed her phone back in her pocket, picked up her tablet, and made her way towards her computer. The original pages of the sheets music were sprawled across desk, around the mouse and keyboard.²

She collected them into a pile, tapped it on the desk twice before setting it aside. She double clicked her journal and began typing:

Octooooooooober 14, 2016

So I played “Final Frontier” for mum today and she seemed to really enjoy it and approve of it. Working on it for five days straight seems to have paid off. I’m not changing the title from “Final Frontier” that’s there to stay now. :3

After having waited a week, and after having thought about Shelly’s proposition (Lol, I still find it funny to call him Shelly (or Penny)), I’m going to say yes. In fact, I’ll respond after writing this entry. :D

I still don’t know how well I could do as a captain of a team. I’m not sure why Shellshock thinks it could work out well. I almost feel as if any failure at all will completely be only my responsibility. :C

Oops, forgot to turn on music. :p HER LIFE WAS SAVED BY ROCK N ROLL! :D

But I’m really having conflicting thoughts here. I think the only reason I can lead a team well over Solo Queue is because the main method of communication there are pings and text. Sure, Kitty and I can sort of “telepathically” communicate for anything we’re doing in lane, but then I’d have trouble communicating with the rest of the team. At least I think so. ^ ^ ;

In a lot of interviews with current and past players, they seem to say there’s a bunch of communication issues from time to time. I really don’t know how I’d be able to improve in that area with my team. D:

If Shelly thinks there’s some way around this, then I’d trust his call on it. With his experience and guidance we should be able to work things out, though. Toky and Rexy seem to trust him enough with anything related to ESports, so maybe I’m just not thinking about what other options and resources I’ll have available once the

1 The girl made a heart with her hands and held it up to her chest before waving bye.

2 notes, question marks, and revisions were scribbled on across the pages with pencil marks smeared in all directions

team gets together in that gaming house Penny told us about in his second email. I hope things really work out well.

Ooh, also I've started reading *The Art of War* seeing as how I'm going to be all captainy and shit. Maybe I'll get a cool captain's hat or something. I'm getting quite a lot of good ideas and ways to formulate strategies from reading Sun-Tzu's stuff. And I'm also learning a bit of Chinese tradition and history in the process. One of the things I found interesting from the early notations was the concept of punishing the commander if his soldiers fuct up. Normally, at least how I think of it, punishment should happen to the person or persons who are acting out of line. But the philosophy of punishing the commander or the teacher or the parent for the faults and flaws and misbehavior of those they are leading or teaching or raising just makes so much more sense. I'm not sure I want to punish myself though. Hopefully no one else on the team has read *Art of War*. ˘_˘

I'm not sure what I want to be for Halloween yet. D: Maybe I'll just cosplay another champion this year.

Oh shit, I have to let my friends know I may have to move in order to play professionally. Gotta do that after I email Shelly.

AND A REUUUUL HERO, REAL HUMAN BEING! :D

I'm thinking I need a new anime to start watching. I've recently finished *Sword Art Online* and I really enjoyed it. There were some parts that were pretty meh, but overall it was really funny and really good. Maybe I can start looking around for just some new manga series. Or I could also look for some more online comics like that Nuzlocke one. That was a really, really, REALLY funny read. Those faces are just the most hilarious things ever.

OH! Maybe for Halloween I could go as a Pokemon. Maybe like Gardevoir. Or Blaziken would be pretty cool to make. Or maybe I could be the ice cream one. LOL, that'd look so dumb. Maybe something like Bellossom would be nice to craft, too. But then there's also like Zelda or Samus or Chun Li. I wish I could cosplay like Jessica Nigri. I WANNA BE THE JESSICA NIGRI!

Oh and on the topic of Zelda and Samus, I recently found out I suck at *Smash Brothers*. :c I don't know how they play *Melee* like that, it's just fucking insane. I can't believe there's still a lot of people who love *Smash* around. If only Nintendo liked the attention it was getting. Maybe FGC and ESports would have been better for *Melee* in its golden age. Also, Abigail recently sent me a link to *The Smash Brothers* documentary that was made a few years ago. I'm only a few episodes in, but it's really, really good so far. I'm liking the flow of the story and how it unfolds. I should probably finish watching it before heading out to the gaming house. Maybe I'll learn something more about competitive gaming that I hadn't thought of before.

I feel like playing some *Minecraft* again soon. I haven't played in a while and kind of want to just build something new.

SOME DAY THOSE TEARS ARE GONNA SPILL. SO BUILD THAT WALL AND BUILD IT STRONG CUZ WE'LL BE THERE BEFORE TOO LONG!

Bastion was such a good game! I cried at the end. T_T Twice. T_T Even though I knew what was going to happen for the other ending, I still cried. Supergiant such a good developer. And fucking *Transistor*. :X Too many feels. T_T

I wish I had a voice like Ashley Barrett's. So pretty and sexy as fuck. Just listening to her sing makes me want to cry out of an overdose of beauty. ;~; I would marry her just so I could hear her talk and sing all the time. :3 And Darren Korb. That voice and music too good. I'd also marry Wife! And Jessica Nigri! And Notch! I should make them all my waifu! THERE AREN'T ENOUGH PEOPLE IN THE WORLD TO FALL IN LOVE WITH AND MARRY! <3333333333333333

Oh shit! OH SHIT! I just realized I could talk to Shuriken and Tempest and xNietzsche and ask them what communication is like on a team and how it's fixed. We could conspire to join up and make an all-female team. ~u~

I wonder what my teammates are like IRL. Everyone knows REXY and Toky are tight bros. I wonder what they're like off stream and out of the game. What about Panda? He sounds like a pretty cool dude, too. I wonder if he has any pet pandas. That'd be so cool. :o If I ever had a pet, it'd probably be like a Poro. :3 :P :PPPPPPPPPPPPPPPP Ugg. Such an overdose of cuteness and kawaii. :3 TuT Or maybe I'd get a Togepi as a pet! Or a Charmander! :D Eeeeeeee, or a Pichu. I should main Pichu in *Melee*.

Maybe I could be Misty for Halloween. Or Cynthia. Or Lyndis. But it'd be difficult as fuck to make my hair like hers. D:

Kitty always seems like a cool kid on stream. He's so young, too. 18 according to his FAQ on Twitch. Among one of the youngest players to compete professionally in the LCS. And he has like a million accounts in Challenger. How in the world does anyone do that? HOW!?!?!?!?!?

We were pretty successful with the smurf team thing that we did. Everyone knows so much about the game, timers, and concepts, and strategies. Maybe I won't have to work as hard as I originally thought to keep the team on the same page. But then again, we haven't really played against any professional teams. I wonder what kind of scrim partners we're going to have. If Shelly knows the ESports scene, I'm sure he's got a list of teams that'll be willing to play with a newly formed one. We'll see.

And LOL, Toky has a smurf named after Light. I wonder if he's only read the manga or watched the anime. Or maybe he's done both. We should talk about the stuff we've watched. If I had to guess who he was by his name, I would have thought he was Japanese. But he doesn't sound like it, nor does he look like it from what I've seen of his stream. He's soooooooooooooo super weecaboo. And then everyone knows REXY has like a crush on *Elfen Lied*. There's so much to discuss. Not enough time to do it, though. D: And then there's like a million more things I could talk about with them and Panda and Kitty. ! What about Shelly?! What about his wife?! And they apparently have a daughter. I wonder how old she is. I could totally train her to be my Pikachu. :3 She'd follow me around everywhere with Pikachu ears and red cheeks. xD Now I that image will just stay stuck in my head forever.

WELCOME TO OUR WORLD, WHERE YOU ALWAYS GET THE GIRL, YOU MAY LOSE A FIGHT OR TWO BUT YOU'LL WIN IF YOU GET THROUGH! FACE UP AND CHALLENGE ALL YOU EVER KNEW SINCE YOU COULD CRAWL, ALWAYS LOOKING SOMEWHERE ELSE WHEN IT'S ALL INSIDE YOURSELF! I WANNA PLAY UNTIL I DIE, DON'T WANNA LOSE MY REASONS WHYYYYYY! I RACE TOWARDS THE SKY, IN A

WORLD THAT NEVER ENDS!

I should get to work on some stuff. D: Until next time, Word Eater!

Sonia “Crescendo” Wintory

“And I-I like what Espada said there about Royale’s style of play: ‘They accelerate the game.’ And that’s what a lot of other teams don’t do, if they’re in the lead, they *bold* that lead but don’t accelerate anything.”

“And a lot of the best teams that we’ve seen in League of Legends history have been those teams that know how to play fast and just dominate with the smallest of advantages.”

“Alright, everyone, now that we’ve heard from the teams, let’s have a look at today’s starting lineups. On the Blue side: it’s Royale! Shuriken in the Top Lane, Dendra in the Jungle, Phyros at Mid, Covert playing Marksman, and Izbiri at Support.”

“And on the Red side it’s the underdogs in this one: Team Ampersand. We’ve got Toxiform in the Top Lane, Tempest in the Jungle, Espada, happy as always, in the Mid Lane, Aeaza on Marksman, and Militia on Support.”

“And our featured match up for this Semifinal Series is the *melee* in the Mid Lane: Royale’s Phyros versus Ampersand’s Espada.”

“Yeah now this one’s gonna to be interesting to watch. Espada is generally a very explosive player who can find small advantages in lane and just run rampant the rest of the game if the enemy team doesn’t have an answer for him.”

“Right.”

“Phyros, on the other hand is a very calculated player. He knows how much he can handle and how much he can deal. So he can arguably just play safe and farm early game without putting himself in harm’s way until he knows he’s got a trap for Espada.”

“Alright, Masua, we’ll see which champions they’ll use this match, but *first* let’s see who *you* think will win. I think I know who the fans voted for. And according to LoLESports dot com, eighty-two percent of you think Royale will be the team to join Collateral in the World Championship.”

“And that is an expected number, you know, Royale has been quite strong throughout the season, and they usually win against Ampersand. But even the fans here are giving Ampersand a little bit of credit. Royale has only gone through this once before, and maybe they’re still susceptible to the jitters every now and then playing in front of a crowd. But Ampersand is an organization that has stood the test of time for a while now, and they’ve also had to play on these stages before to qualify for prior World Championships. I’m not sure which of the two is more confident here.”

“And we see now that we’ve entered the Pick and Ban phase that Ezreal was banned away from Aeaza, Sona from Militia, and Zac from Dendra. Royale are *really* focusing a lot of bans on that Bottom Lane and for a good reason. Aeaza is extremely good at surviving with little to no peel, and if Royale were to risk having her play Ezreal, things could be rather complicated in mid and late game.”

“To further punish them, they also banned Sona from Militia because Royale likes to play the farm game early and they *don't* want to get poked down. They're a bit pacifist in that regard, like Covert and Izbiri are saying: 'Hi, we see you, please don't hit us, and we won't hit you.' Make no mistake, however, they *can* be extremely aggressive if they see an opening. At the same time, powerful ganking champions like Volibear or Maokai could easily slip into Ampersand's Jungle. Maybe Royale's plan to go for the Ashe-Zyra combo might backfire on them...the other bans are Zed from Phyros, Kassadin from Espada, and Evelynn from Dendra as well. It looks like Ampersand has banned away more champions from Royale's Jungle, and it's really a very smart decision. We've seen in the LCS that a lot of the power plays from Royale start off from very well-coordinated ganks by Dendra. By banning out Zac and Evelynn, they're really taking care of possibility of a surprise initiation either from fog of war or from a path that wasn't secured with True Vision since Evelynn is an invisible unit until she's *just too close*, which is too late at this level of play. We'll also be seeing Kassadin and Zed taken away from the Mid Lane completely. These are both champions that, with just a little bit of a lead and a few seconds of having reaching level six, can decide the pace of the rest of the game. It looks like both teams are in this for the long haul with very few assassins left to pick.”

“So it looks like Royale is comfortable with a first pick Elise. This is a good pick because it doesn't give Ampersand any real information on whether she'll be played by Dendra in the Jungle or by Shuriken in the Top Lane.”

“It looks like the ambiguous pick isn't going to faze Ampersand, they're locking in the Shen and Lee Sin instantly. And you know what, Remington? Royale's also going to just instantly lock in that Ashe-Zyra combo. *I* saw it coming and *Ampersand* saw it coming. Lee Sin and Shen are some pretty good champions to have once everyone on the map reaches level six. A well timed Stand United from Shen can easily turn around a skirmish or teamfight that an Ashe-Zyra lane starts. And for the rest of the game Shen will just splitpush whenever there's nothing going on anywhere else on the map.”

“Yeah, these teams can read each other quite well. But since neither team hesitated to lock in those picks, maybe they actually have something else planned that might make the other team reconsider their team comp.”

“So now Ampersand's just said: 'Aha! Hold on a minute.' They're taking a bit longer to pick this time...and it looks like they're going to hover over Fiddlesticks for a while. That may not be such a bad pick, a well-timed Shen ult with a taunt and a Fiddle ult is a very dangerous combination which they could easily do if they can negate vision from Royale. And Support Fiddle can throw out those crows to harass Ashe-Zyra with fairly decent damage. And then of course the fear is a very strong initiation with a Lee Sin Jungle to back you up. So it looks like they're going for Fiddle-Cait. Caitlyn's long range is a pretty good answer for Ashe-Zyra as well. Ampersand have autoattack range, Piltover Peacemaker, and Dark Wind to counter Royale's passive playstyle early game. But if there's a kill or two for either team, that lane might very well be over.

These picks, however, do look like they're purely reactions to the Ashe-Zyra—other than the poke, Ampersand have a sort of dissonant Bot Lane. Fiddle can be something more of an initiator or a peeler, hardly both. Meanwhile, Caitlyn is a champion who sits in the back of the team chipping away at her enemy's health bars. But that's exactly the playstyle Aeaza is good at, so we'll see whether or not this lane meshes well."

"The last picks for Royale are going to be Fizz...and...Rumble. So it looks like Rumble is going to be heading to the Top Lane with Elise in the Jungle."

"So this opens up the chance for really strong ganks Bottom once everyone's level six. Either Jungle or Bot Lane can start off with crowd control, and there will be at least two more slows or snares or stuns. This Bottom Lane is going to be a really scary lane for this entire game. And if Dendra sees an opening in Mid Lane, he and Phynos can just burst down whoever Ampersand picks in response. The Rumble pick is more of a standard pick for Royale here. Shuriken has played Rumble extremely well all season, and the team seems to be thinking: 'Why would he change that?' Which is a really good mentality to have when the stakes are this high. So the AoE damage and teamfight of Royale is as strong as ever with the Enchanted Crystal Arrow, the Stranglethorns, and The Equalizer. I don't know how Ampersand plans to respond to this."

"Militia here, toying with the crowd, is hovering over Heimerdinger."

"No, he's not toying. Ampersand is *totally* going to send Fiddle Mid and use Heimer as Support, it seems like the kind of thing Ampersand would do just to mess with Royale a bit."

"And they're going for the Diana pick."

"Ooh, now Diana is a pretty good matchup against Fizz. This is going to be amazing since it's our featured matchup and both of these champions can easily burst down anyone. These aren't your typical assassin picks, but again most of the popular ones are off the board and these seem to be acceptable replacements. Diana is a very all-in type of champion which synergizes quite well with Lee Sin, Shen, and Fiddlesticks. So if Ampersand ever gets the drop on Royale they're *going* to lose objectives. What's good about Diana rather than, say Ahri, is that she's a bit of a better duelist and she's got that all-in, surprise attack, 'Oh look your health bar is gone' kind of play style. But while this is a good pick for Espada, I don't think Ampersand have a decent enough composition for teamfights. If they're going to want to win this one, they *have* to pick off one person in Royale's Jungle or they're just going to be racing against time. It's uncharacteristic of Royale to mess up on teamfights, so Ampersand have to play with...*absolute* precision."

The VoD continued playing while she reached for the notebook she had purchased earlier that day. Red, the color complimentary to her cyan hair. With a black marker she wrote the title on the cover: Dal Niente.

She flipped open to the first page and began writing: Final Frontier's Road to Victory. Ampersand's weaknesses...

11

Game of Inches

“Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win.” Sun-Tzu

She took off the green arm warmers to let her arms breathe. The lone scar running down her left arm beckoned. It served as memory of her younger and more vulnerable years—the years when her instruments were only tools to play the music of others, and when video games were only buttons to press to pass the time. She’d used music and games as a shield from the kids who’d made fun of her. Kids could be so cruel, even if solely for the sake of being cruel. Adults, she’d found, were no different.

If her mother hadn’t been there, she’d’ve never grown. She’d’ve never spoken through her own music. She’d’ve never spoken through her playstyle, through her tactics. She’d’ve never made the friends she had, she’d’ve never learned from her mistakes. She wasn’t even her biological mother, but had earned the title Mom. If only there were more people like her in the world, who embodied the virtues of love, truth, and honesty.

If anyone in the government were to say the sky was blue, the grass green, all one would have to do is peer toward the window—of course the sky would be gray, the grass brown. But all our screens seem to bring far more comfort. And those who’d said hard work was the only thing someone had to do to get out of poverty did not understand the world where even all the hard work in the world is insufficient. From her window she could only see the rooftops and the tiny cars and buses of New York. From up here, she could not see the faces of those who toiled nonstop.

Of course Wall Street would also say “mistakes were made,” evade responsibility, and play the blame game. Just like solo queue, only with real repercussions that actually hurt people. Of course the working people were those most affected by the mistakes of few. Bankers were not the ones losing homes, bankers were not the ones losing jobs, bankers were not the ones unable to afford gifts for their family, for their children. The working people had endured it all.

Life is but a game of inches. Mistakes were made is an unacceptable excuse for a leader, for a captain, for a team—for anyone. Because when did mediocrity and conformity become admirable?

A self-made promise: no excuses, only hard work, dedication, reflection. No impulsive choices, no miscommunication. My teammates have probably made the riskiest decision of their lives, and they’re probably no older than twenty, twenty-two maybe. This is going to work. It has to work. *I have to make it work*, she thought as he put her arm warmers back on.

Part Two

*... I stand above the world
in my glass enclave
And I cannot be hurt
by the war and the barrowing waves*

*From High above the world
I see the ones depraved
They know to stay away
from our walls and the master slaves*

*I live life without remorse
Out of sight is out of mind
I have no regard for their kind
In spite of everything I have
I owe no debt to those who don't
I played the game and I won...*

– *Rise of a Digital Nation*, “99” (Audio Warning)

What’s been lacking, Rakoff finds, is the political will and government resources to bring individuals before the bar of justice. Although millions of Americans are still suffering the financial consequences of the crisis, Rakoff suggests that the failure of the justice system may do even more lasting damage to the fabric of American society. . .

– Michael Hiltzik

I have stood knee deep in mud and bone and filled my lungs with mustard gas. I have seen two brothers fall. I have lain with holy wars and copulated with the autumnal fallout. I have dug trenches for the refugees, I have murdered dissidents where the ground never thaws and starved the masses into faith. A child’s shadow burnt into the brickwork. A house of skulls in the jungle. The innocent, the innocent, Mandus, trod and bled and gassed and starved and beaten and murdered and enslaved. This is your coming century! . . .

– *Amnesia: A Machine for Pigs* (Audio Warning)

The party that leans upon the workers but serves the bourgeoisie, in the period of the greatest sharpening of the class struggle, cannot but sense the smells wafted from the waiting grave.

– Leon Trotsky

Farming the World

12

Manifest Destiny

FFG > News > Competitive > LoL > Team

Final Frontier Gaming League of Legends Squad

by Simon "Shellshock" Penn

on October 17, 2016

Hello friends and fans of Final Frontier!

Today I am extremely pleased to announce that we have acquired five League of Legends players to form a competitive League of Legends team. With an additional two teams allowed to compete in the upcoming League Championship season, FFG aims to claim one of those two spots for the 2017 Spring Split. The road to the LCS will most definitely be a difficult and brutal one, but I am absolutely certain that our roster can put up a fight against the top Challenger Teams, Wildcard teams, and the defending LCS teams.

Our roster currently consists of the following players:

Coach/Manager: Simon "Shellshock" Penn

Top: Geoffrey "NeoTokyo" Wagner

Jungle: George "DeusRex" King

Mid: Jorge "Pandango" Reyes

ADC/Marksman: Jason "WildCat" Yeung

Support: Sonia "Crescendo" Wintory

We currently do not have any subs, but may look to openly find subs in the near future. If you are interested in becoming a sub for FFG, keep an eye out for a post in the near future.

Since the Spring Promotion Tournament is just around the corner we intend to spend the remainder of the year practicing and honing our abilities as a team before taking on the Challenger Teams, LCS Teams, and other Wildcard Teams.

Things to look forward to in the coming weeks:

- Our players will be streaming under the FFG team on Twitch
- FFG official sponsors to be announced

I would like to thank everyone who has followed and contributed to FFG as an organization up to this point, and furthermore, I would like to welcome friends and fans to follow and support our players as we make our way into the LCS.

Best,
Shellshock^x

13

Soul Shackle

Morning blue light sluggishly crept through the window and onto the blank walls of the room as he flipped through the green bills again. He set the stack of bills down on the desk that used to carry his computer, monitors, peripherals, books, and served as his bed on some occasions. He pulled up the sheet of paper he had set aside and began writing with one of the many pens that always filled one of his pockets:

“Yo, so I’m leaving since a job opportunity’s opened up. I’m leaving \$300 for you guys to get your shit straight. Don’t expect me to pay for anything else anymore. I won’t be around, and you probably won’t be able to contact me. As a matter of fact, please don’t contact me until you’ve figured your stuff out.”

He read it over, scratched it out, and started again:

“Yo, so I’m leaving for a job you probably wouldn’t understand. I’m leaving half of all my money because I know you’re going to need it. Please don’t contact me until you’ve figured your shit out.”

He scratched it out:

“Yo, I’m leaving. I’m not coming back. Don’t ever contact me.”¹

On his way out he peered back once more at his blue tinted room, with its bare walls and bare furniture, where the last twelve years of his life were spent. Carefully, he tiptoed his way down the stairs, aiming for the nails to avoid the creaking wood.

His bags and suitcases, filled with all the things he ever owned, ever cared about, ever worked for, waited for him at the foot of the staircase. He clogged his ears with music, found some way to carry and pull all his things, and stepped out the door onto the numbing, dormant six-in-the-morning streets.

... I will live forever, I refuse to fade away into the nether, I don't wait for heaven, I will leave my mark right here on earth instead. I will be forever, I refuse to fade away into the nether, I don't wait for heaven, I will live my life right here on earth instead...

As he walked past idle trucks that growled at him and shops that polluted his air with the scent of coffee, he kept readjusting his bags whenever one arm became too sore or tired. At a red light he tapped at his pockets to skip a song, but he hit his carton of cigarettes. The carton was weightless in his hands and he could count more than five sticks sitting next to a balled up sheet of paper,

An exhale came out as a wheeze while he clenched his fist, crushed the carton and tossed it into the empty trashcan at the corner. Upon hearing the thump at the bottom of the trash, itches sprouted up on his arms and legs, but no amount of scratching would make them go away.²

1 He reviewed the page of chicken scratch, crumbled it up, and stuck it into an empty spot in his cigarette carton.

2 As he walked past the train station

As the rest of the city awoke and golden rays of sun shone over distant buildings, he arrived at a small park where leaves were only just turning red and orange and yellow. The colorful trees swayed in a single direction while leaves danced in the air, clinging to their stem, and soft rustling resonated all around.³

At the center of the park rested an old fountain that still functioned and spewed a continuous cascade onto the small body of water. Bronze and silver and gold⁴ coins and lockets and amulets littered the base of the fountain and waved at him with the ripples of the drips of water that had spilled out of the pool.⁵

He plucked a quarter out of his pocket and flung it into the water.

“I’m so fucking stupid,” he scoffed.

On the way back towards the train station, streets and roads were more active—children grasped onto the hands of their parents, buses hummed in ever direction, and clumps of teenagers clotted sidewalks, talking and yelling without a care in the world.

Once underground he navigated the narrow corridors, dodged the inconsiderate,⁶ and finally made it to the platform.

“Whatup.”

“Yo.”

“So I was playin’ *Street Fighter* with fuckin’ Panda.”

“Mhm.”

“He’s gone some fuckin’ hacks, man.”

“If I were to speculate that you just suck, I doubt I’d be wrong.”

“One v one.”

“I don’t even play *Street Fighter*.”

“Don’t pussy out on me. One v one.”

“*Samurai Gunn*.”

“Oh yeah. When’s the nex—”

The screech and rumble of the incoming train echoed throughout the long chamber, putting an immediate end to all conversations in the station. They dragged their baggage on board and dropped them amid the crowded car.

“Why you tappin’ your feet? Gotta take a leak or somethin’? Rash on your arms, too?”

“No, I threw my smokes out. I’m gonna start raging for retarded reasons. Carry me, please.”

“As if you don’t already rage for retarded reasons. Be real.”

“I guess. But yeah, ‘tis the start of a new era.”

³ An aged sign in the park read “Fuente de Sueños”

⁴ Copper and zinc and nickel

⁵ Upon further inspection he noticed that the trail of water on the cobblestone led to kid sitting on a bench who was counting a few coins in his hands.^E

⁶ whose eyes would forever be fixated on their phones

“Good, cuz I don’ want our room smellin’ like Smokey the Bear either.”

“That was partly the reason I ditched the smokes last second. I also can’t imagine trying to play professionally and getting cravings in the middle of a game or in the middle of a best-of set. Poor habit for sure.”

“Tch. Okay, Light Yagami. I get it. Plannin’ ahead. An’ why in the fuck you got so many bags n’shit? Did you pack everything you fuckin’ own?”

“Umm,” NeoTokyo’s sight darted from bag to bag while he stretched yawned, “yeah, pretty much. Don’t plan on comin’ back. Start of a new era, George. Start of a new era.”

“Y’know, you coulda just made multiple trips, dumbass.”

“Fuck that,” he responded as he looked around the train car “too much work.”

“Yeah, but now I’m gonna have to carry some of your shit and it’s gonna hurt my back and shit. Think of the pain.”

“What’s the matter? Don’t lift?”

“Tss. Just sayin’, Geoff.”

“Fuck,” Tokyo groaned holding a hand to his stomach, “was too busy packing that I forgot to eat.”

“Well you’re in luck,” DeusRex announced while digging his hands into one of his bags, “I have some snacks if you want ‘em. Won’t fill you up, but hey.”

“Oshit, really? Praise Helix,” Tokyo rejoiced weakly. “You’re my god damn Bird Jesus.”

“By the way, you plannin’ on upgrading your computer?” Rex asked handing over a fruit snack package.⁸

“Initially that was the route I was planning on taking. But now I’m just thinking I’ll build a new one from scratch. I was thinking of just getting maybe some better RAM, but honestly if I were to do that, it’d be better to go all the way, because why not? What about you? Upgrading?”

“Tch, thought about it, but I just left my computer at home. I a’ready sent Shelly the parts I want. I hopin’ they get here soon so I can set it up.”

They continued to talk of the parts and tech they were interested in as the train screeched and jolted down its predetermined path. Life pressed on normally with passengers boarding and leaving the train going about their daily lives, working and

7 Looking around the car, he read the advertisements plastered all over “Our focus is education, our mission is careers.” Pixel perfect models with perfect eyes and perfect teeth smiled at him as they hugged their perfectly new books against their perfectly new clothes in the foreground of a lush and perfectly green campus under a perfectly blue sky. To better advertize the university, the posters included just-as-perfect black and latino models to lure in easy victims from whom academic corporations could easily profit from for the rest of their lives so long as no alternatives routes to employment are as mass-advertized or as culturally ingrained as education, which is sure to never run out of customers.

8 He noted one of the Tokyo’s bags was the one he always used to carry his computer to and from previous LAN events.

toiling nine-to-five. An existence boiled down to checking emails every second of every minute of every hour of every day.

And they worked away, without a moment's rest, with eyes locked onto their screens and hands ready to answer phones. They analyzed the numbers and the graphs to anticipate the best times to buy low and sell high.

And they organized meetings to discuss the success of the company, or the troubles of the company, or the future of the company. PowerPoints presentations and Excel documents projected tables and graphs that told a clear story of past, present, future. And the slides and cells of the documents were the life and blood of the company.

They carried their planners with them, a notebook or a phone, and they stuck to the schedule. The agenda was to be followed, one must never stray from the plan, from the schedule, otherwise valuable time would be lost, and it was company time. Company time must never be spent on personal affairs, it must not be spent on trivial things that will not ultimately bring in more profit for the company.

And profit was always the number one priority, more profit, higher profit, better profit than the previous quarter, than the previous year, than our predecessors. We must get more than they did. We must please our shareholders.

Profit, more, whatever the cost.

And they all had fancy titles and fancy business cards that they could pass along so that their peers and competitors and clients would know of their goods and services and existence. And the way the business ran was the most efficient and the most practiced, and all the big companies did it because that was the standard meta of work.

But some people did not have time to analyze or reevaluate the meta, because they just did what they were told. And they did not attempt to improve it, because it was the way things have always been done. It was like that when they showed up, and it's what makes money.

Some feared the computers and the numbers and the stocks and the graphs and the plans and the titles and the meta and the money because they did not understand it or did not know who was in charge of changing them.

Some worshiped the computers, and the stocks, the agenda, the roles, the meta, the money, because they provided shelter from thought and feeling, and they were buffers separating them from the real-world effects of their decisions.

Some were angry at the computers and the figures and the chain of command because they had siphoned their life and drained their time and energy and passion. Yet they had to keep going because they could easily be replaced by young scholars, desperate for income and eager to prove themselves. And God knows the geysers of young scholars were pumping out too, too much.

Some thought little of the machines and the graphs, and the planners, and positions and the meta because they only cared about the end result of getting paid, no matter what they had to do.

And there was always insufficient time to analyze it, or be creative about it, or toy with it because they were exhausted after working those long hours. With only a few hours left in the day before the next business day, they had to juggle dinner and budgets and hobbies.

Most of the food was saved for later because the ever looming loans always lingered in the back of their minds and stole their appetite. A single meal was to be stretched three meals because there was not enough money to pay for the necessities and to repay their education from years ago.

And they had to be cautious, always, because any unplanned medical problems would create further fiscal dents from which they could only recover in fifty years' time. And any presence online was to be done with absolute care, because the companies monitored them at all times wary for any crumb of unprofessional behavior with which they could threaten termination.⁹

The labor had been refined and crafted and perfected. They were proud to be a part of the machine without being the machine. They were identical, uniform cogs,¹⁰ oiled with fear and driven by desperation. For those who refused to be a cog in the machine, the company simply dangled pay before the eyes of the labor, forcing them to produce and to function as intended.¹¹

And so the razor-sharp jaws of the corporation held its firm grasp around the neck of the dependent workers, with souls shackled to the will of the company. The monster, the reaper, the owner, the well-fed company, always held a scythe at the ready. It swung practice swings and flexed whenever it could.

And when things went wrong there was no one to blame. *The company* made mistakes, no *one* person was responsible for the failure, everyone was only a worker; they were not the company itself. The company was its *own* person, its own being, its own sentient self. It's made of men, and acts like men, but it's not a man.

And the company was too big to fail, and too big for trial.

The companies had grown and evolved over the decades, becoming exempt from trial, excused from fault, and immune to criticism.

And it has been so.

And it is so.

And it will be so.

9 And they had to explicitly let the world know that what they said did not express the thoughts of their employers. What they typed was of their own volition and their own opinion and their own voice, and they always had to specify, as if to convince themselves that they truly had a voice.

10 Etched into the cogs were their manufacturers, their alma mater, who guaranteed their supply would bring satisfaction: all the requisite steps were taken to mold and create a functioning product.

11 Branded onto the stock were their providers, their alma mater, who raised and pacified them from young, who trained and tamed them to bring satisfaction to any company.

14

The Box

“Think I should’a gotten something to eat on the way here,” Tokyo groaned, sitting on the steps of the apartment with a sunken head.

“We’ll just drop off our stuff and then look around for what’s good.”

“But...I’m...so hungry,” Tokyo whined monotonously.

“Oh, you big baby.”

The door behind them loudly opened, and Rex’s gaze turned to meet the eyes of an old man. He wore an ironed light-blue dress shirt, buttoned up except for the very top, and untucked from his well fitted jeans. His short, brown hair was neatly kept and favored leaning toward one side. In spite of his age, the old man stood tall and straight without the assistance of a cane.

“*Damn, nigga!*” Rex exclaimed. He leaned in with squinting eyes to further inspect the man. “Think I c’n see the gray hairs comin’ in.”

The old man suppressed a laugh and instead smiled.

“Hey, George. What’s up?” he asked, bumping his fist against Rex’s.

“Those gray hairs are what’s up, Shelly.” The excitement in his face evaporated as he came to a realization. “Tch, damn...I forgot my gift at home. I had a cane for you, but I’m sure you already have a couple.” A permanent smirk sat on the joker’s face. He wore his gray hoodie unzipped, and underneath wore a plain, white shirt. Beneath his hood hid his short, curly hair. A small tuft of hair clung to his chin, and that was all he allowed to grow. He was carrying a heavy bag on his shoulders and had a large suitcase by his feet.

“Ha! Even if I did have canes I’d probably use them to discipline you. You’d be in serious need of a paddlin’, George. Gotta respect your elders. Hey, what’s wrong with Geoff?” he asked with brows of worry.

“Oh he’s jus’ bein’ a man-child. Said he was *apparently* up all night packin’ and forgot’a eat. He looks so orz.”

“...he looks so *what?*”

“Orz. Y’know, like, when in anime the dude falls down on all fours an’ gets like those purple, squiggly lines of stress above his head. Or sometimes he jus’ gets like a spotlight on ‘im.”

“Ah, I see. Hey Geoff,” Shellshock said loudly, “If you’re in the mood to bring your things inside we’ve got some food upstairs.”

“Fuck that,” Tokyo mumbled to the ground, “bring the food here. I’ll wait.”

“Great! Let’s go. C’mon, c’mon, c’mon. Gimme these,” he said beckoning at some suitcases.

“Guys...dudes...” with closed eyes Tokyo sluggishly pulled his luggage inside. “I’m not gonna make it. Go on...carrying my things without me.”

“Oh *yeab*,” Rex lit up. “He threw out his smokes, so he’ll be hella cranky.”

“*Really?* I’m proud of you, Geoff.” said Shellshock, turning to Tokyo. “If you wanna buy nicotine patches or whatever let me know and I’ll see if I can help you out.” He pressed the elevator button and the doors immediately opened.

“Frankly...I’m not even sure I’ll be able to quit. Hasn’t even been a day and I already feel like I need to quit quitting.”

“You haven’t even tried yet, Geoff. Besides, sounds like you’ve reached a record. You haven’t smoked in...what, five, ten hours?”

“About ten, yeah. But I mean, like, I’m also at a record for longest time alive...and that just means I’m that much closer to death.” An exhausted Tokyo leaned against a corner in the elevator, his eyes and shoulders seduced by gravity. He blankly stared at the floor with dark, distant eyes. Shellshock knew those eyes, they were eyes that mused some intricate thought to which there was no easy solution, eyes that said his hunger and withdrawals were merely a facade for some deeply troubling facts. His black and green Razer jacket followed his steep shoulders downward, his messy, black hair flattened against the wall.

“So Geoff, how about we get some food in you? You can take a nap afterward if you’re still tired,” Shellshock suggested while twirling and fiddling keys in his hands.

“...yeah...sure,” he replied to the wall.

Rex inhaled the air and sighed in satisfaction as the doors opened. “Oh damn, this elevator doesn’t smell like piss.”

“Why would it?” Shellshock asked, brows burrowed inward.

“Do the *stairs* smell like piss?”

“No. As far as I’m concerned, no,” he responded taking a left off the elevator.

“I should be the first to do it, then. Gotta mark my territory, Shelly.”

“Sure thing, George, knock yourself out. Anyway, we’re off this way. These two apartments here will be us.” He pushed into the door on the left side¹ and held it open.

“So since you two will be sharing a room you’ll get the big room in this apartment. This one’s also where we’ll have all the computers set up.” Tokyo and Rex entered and saw a fabric poster hanging high on the furthest wall. On a pure black background sat the Final Frontier Gaming logo: a thick white circle encompassing two white Fs, the black cloth filling in the negative space of the letters.

“Holy hell, when’d you get *that* thing?” Rex asked walking closer to it.

“We had that custom made. Looks pretty awesome, but I may be just a tad bit biased. This is the room you’ll be practicing in, so I figured I’d hang the banner here.” On either side of the banner a window brought sunlight into the room. Hugging the wall were five identical tables. A neat collection of power strips and extension cords and ethernet cables snaked between the legs of the tables.

“Damn, son. Place looks good.”

1 the apartment number read 63

“This apartment’s lacking furniture...other than the desks and bed frames that is. Anyway your room’s down this way.” They followed him down the corridor left of the entrance, passing a few other rooms on the way. Two mattresses leaned against the wall, two boxes of bed frames in need of assembly sat at their feet.²

“Y’know, I’ve never actually seen the city from this high up.”

“It’s a pretty decent view. I haven’t quite gotten to piecing the beds, been dealing with emails and other things. I’m sure you guys can make the bed frames, right?”

“Impossible, Simon,” Tokyo mumbled. “George is illiterate and I tried putting the square peg in the round hole when I was in kindergarten. We’d never be able to construct these things, much less build computers.”

“Why *I* gotta be the illiterate one?”

“Mmm, seems more believable.”

“Racist.”

“Guess you’ll be sleeping with your mattresses on the ground, then. But yeah, whatever, leave your things here and let’s go eat.”

“We the first ones here?”

“Yeah. Crescendo’s in New York, she just has to move her things here. Pandango will be flying in...tom—” his eyes looked up and to the right as he dug into his brain to recall. “Pandango should be coming soon, two or three days at the latest. Wildcat thinks early next week since he’s waiting for his passport to be mailed.”

“You’re not...gonna lock the apartment?” Rex asked pointing back toward it.

“Oh it’s fine. There’s only four apartments per floor,” Shellshock answered as he leaned to open the door labeled 64. “There’ll probably always be someone in each apartment anyway, no need to worry about locking the doors.”

At the center of an entertainment center rested a large television screen. The shelves on either side of the screen housed various devices. A purple cube, two white, slim rectangular devices, numerous black, sleek machines. Wires and cables ran from the machines to the screen and to the power strips on the ground. A ring of sofas was laid out to face the monitor, and a wide, dark-brown coffee table sat at the center.

“Hey, Simon...” Tokyo whispered, “...is this real life?”

“Dude. No—fuckin’—way.”

“Oh that. Didn’t think you guys would be intere—”

“Fuckin’ Shelly! You plannin’ ta steal Toke’s master troll reputation?”

“Shh, shh,” he gestured to keep a low voice, then peeked cautiously toward one of the rooms. “Daughter’s asleep. I know it’s gonna be hard, but please try not swearing if there’s a chance she’s around.”

“Oh shit, sorry. But dude, you got every console anyone could ever want.”

² Rex walked over to one of the windows and peered out into the busy streets below as everyone went about their daily routine, hailing taxis, crossing red lights, holding phones to their ears. Quick strides swept across the sparkling pavement, across perfectly cemented street tiles without cracks, across perfectly clean streets.

“But does he have any good games, George? I mean, I can see the Steam Machine, so at least we know he doesn’t revel in peasantry.”

“Before you ask, yes, I do have *Smash*.”

“Meh,” Tokyo and Rex dismissed in unison.

“Played plenty of *Smash* on Geoff’s 3DS. But—”

“It just ain’t no *Melee*, Simon. Decent game in its own right, but it’s no masterpiece. Speak no more of this, Shell the Shock,” a melodramatic Tokyo implored “lest you wish to further remind me of my Nintendo-induced broken heart.”

“Oh, that reminds me!” Shellshock sparked up “Did you study drama at all?”

“Nah. I just had to take a couple of courses on Shakespeare, Chaucer, rhetoric, the usual, boring, English Literature stuff. I just happened to pick up some drama.”

“Mhm,” he nodded before heading towards the kitchen, “that explains a lot, actually. Does he go overboard with it sometimes, George?”

“All the time, *Shell the Shock*,” Rex emphasized. “You ever watch him streamin’ when he’s playin’ on a smurf?”

He shook his head, pulling out various ingredients from the refrigerator and placing them beside the sink.

“He hella trolls ragers in chat usin’ words they probably never heard of, and tries teachin’ ‘em philosophy ‘n’ history. It’s so fuckin’ dumb,” Rex chuckled.

Tokyo responded incoherently while chewing on some lettuce.

“Then you might as well tell ‘em Socrates wrote *The Regular Gatsby*. I’m sure they’d never suspect a thing.”

Shellshock failed to suppress a smirk after their banter. “So. How do you guys like your sandwiches?”

—

A swordsman clad in black quickly hopped around the map. He dashed left and right, and left and right again. He swung his sword, parried, and dodged around to avoid the fists and elbows and knees of his opponent. A muscular fighter in a red helmet raced and flew around the swordsman’s blade, they traded blows relentlessly.

“See, Penny, way, way, *way* better. Marth’s animations are just the best. They’re so elegant in *Melee*, even when you’re wave dashing, dash dancing, and holy fuck do I love his Nair animation. Pixar’s got nothing on HAL Laboratory.”

“Aright, a’ready. Sheesh. You ‘n’ Marth’s animations need ta get a room.”

“I’m just sayin’, dude. *Melee*’s top notch. Anyway, thanks for the food, Simon.”

“Same, man.” Rex handed his plate over. “You gonna be the team chef as well or somethin’?”

“*Me?* Chef? *No!* I’m terrible,” Shellshock claimed as he carried three empty plates away. “I can only make a handful of meals. Relying on me for variety or a healthy diet is a mistake.” The dishes clanged as he placed them into the sink. He returned to the living room toying with his phone. He flicked and tapped and read with a pensive face for a moment while the two sparred in the background.

“Alright, so it looks like I’ve gotta get back to emails and phone calls and other business. If you guys need anything else just let me know. I’ll be in this room over here.”

“Ooh, you ‘ave an office?”

“Yeah. Share it with Lily. She mainly handles the website, its design, artwork, and social media, as well.”

“Didn’t you start the website and the forums and stuff?”

“I did. But I hardly have time to keep working on that with all the management and partnerships I have to stay on top of.”

“Gotcha. Makes sense. By the way,” Tokyo inquired, “what’s in the package? Parts? Gifts? A puppy?” A brown box was set next to the coffee table. It was nearly the same height as the table and had normal postal markings.

“*Parts*, yes. Don’t open it. I’m saving that for later.”

“Sounds like something Santa would want to hear about, don’t you think George? I should write a letter to inform the North Pole what a meanie Simon is.”

“He’ll really do it, Shelly.”

“Go for it. But seriously, don’t open it. I’ll let you guys to relax, just don’t break anything. And Geoff, get some rest,” he suggested before fading into the office.

“Pfft. How can I be tired when I’m playing *Smash?*”

The game resumed and the fighters continued the duel. Three platforms hovered on the stage, in the background a fountain gushed out water underneath a stellar night sky.

Their fingers danced with precision as the controllers clicked and clacked and tapped in their hands. The characters danced and lunged and rolled around, occasionally a colored sphere would pop up around them. They continued to communicate through the game, Tokyo argued his set of moves was best. Rex deflected and countered, his contrapuntal play punished Tokyo. But there was a retort: a split second mistake left Rex vulnerable, Tokyo slashed forward one, two, three times, then spiked Rex downward. An artificial crowd cheered and gasped in response to it all.

“Tch. Damn, son, lemme move.”

Tokyo snorted a laugh.

The discourse continued, the fighters kept their distance from his opponent’s sphere of influence. They lured each other into making a misplay, they slowly inched into range to attempt a jab, they slowly chipped away at one another.

“There’s just *too* much to do today,” Shellshock exhaled leaving the office.

“What happened?”

“Crescendo just arrived,” he left the apartment, the door slowly closing behind him.

“Woah, wait, need any help for luggage?” Rex asked loudly.

“I got it!” his response echoed in.

15

Sigil of Silence

As the elevator descended his eyes remained fixated on the bright screen. They slid across the lines and lines and lines of text and text and text. The lengthy phrases, propositions, and deals with their many clauses, exhausting jargon, and stipulations taxed his mental fortitude, forcing him to reread the lines over and over again to decode them.

“For this partnership to endure,” the emails read, “the following conditions must be met,” “within the boundaries of these guidelines,” “you and your affiliates are required to,” “within the timespan of,” “for no less than,” and so on ran the premises and terms of the fine print. He hoped to finish reading, sliding the page upward, but the elevator chimed, its doors opened, and he was once more interrupted.

Bright blue eyes met his when he opened the door. With a smile she turned to face him, holding out her right hand. Shellshock slowly held out his hand in response, uncertain if he should first focus on her bright blue hair or her yellow-tinted glasses.

After the firm handshake, a wide-eyed Shellshock glowed, “Gunnar! Of course!” he tapped two fingers against his forehead in a moment of stupor. He pulled out a small, black notebook from his pocket, flipped to a page with a red bookmark, and scribbled down a note.

He returned to meet her eyes saying “Just another possible sponsor,” as if he were responding to a question. “I have to say, though, the blue hair’s kind of a surprise.”¹

While she smirked, the back of her hand brushed some daggers of cerulean hair from her line of sight. She wore a perfectly fitted, waist-length, gray jacket unbuttoned, its lapels facing skyward against the cool breeze.²

“Anyway, let me help you with these,” he pocketed his phone and notebook, lifted a suitcase over the door’s threshold and led her toward the elevator. He tapped the button, the elevator dinged to life and the doors slid open. The small wheels of the suitcases rolled loudly and echoed against the marble tiles and as they crossed the gap onto the lift. Inside the elevator he tapped another button, the doors slid close and a shallow resonance of the humming, whirring machinery made its way to their ears as they ascended.

“George and—” Shellshock shook his head to recalibrate names, “Rex and Tokyo arrived a few hours ago. You guys didn’t all plan on arriving the same day did you?”

She shook her head.

“Oh. Well then I guess there’s no need to worry about team communication seeing as you three already have some sort of chemistry going,” he joked. “Have you already eaten, by the way?”

1 The tone of his voice fluctuated between casual, playful and professional, focused.

2 Around her neck hung a pair of headphones with wires leading into one of her pockets.

She quickly nodded and showed him a thumbs up.

“Alright, awesome. I didn’t manage to put anyone’s bed frames together, so let me know when you want to get that set up so I can help you out.” Again she nodded and the doors slid open.

They walked down the corridor to the apartment as their footsteps tapped against the floor. “That’s where all the computers will be,” he pointed to apartment 63, “and where everyone else’s rooms are. Your room’s here,” he said turning the door knob to the door labeled 64.

An ensemble of strings, coupled with a harmonic vocalization flowed from the opened door. On a giant screen ahead of them two figures dueled beneath a churning windmill, while the clashing and grunting of battle vibrated from the speakers..

The windmill and its surrounding terrain then descended into a cloud of smoke. In its place, two platforms rose and a green arena appeared, all the while the two continued trading blows.

“Yo, Shelly,” Rex called out keeping his eyes on the game, “you should make a *Smash* team. It’s too good to pass up.”

As they approached the couch Shellshock asked “You think so? I’ll be sure to move it to the top of my to-do list. Anyway, Crescendo’s here.”

“Yo,” Rex said, his attention still to the television. He turned his head and “Yo!” he yelped when he faced them. “Are...are we...like...in an anime?” he asked with squinting eyes darting between Shellshock’s and Crescendo’s, his head turned slightly sideways.³

Crescendo tilted her head slightly and playfully pouted.

“Oh hi,” Tokyo’s monotonous voice vibrated as he sloppily waved toward her. “I call black hair if we’re doing this anime thing.”⁴

She smiled and returned his wave.

“I dunno if you’re aware, but your hair’s a’ready black.”

“*Ob?* In that case: another job well done. Or do you want me to not have black hair? What are you, some kinda racist?”⁵

Shellshock took the arguing as their opportune moment to escape. He beckoned Crescendo to follow, taking her past a cluttered room, and he led her to an empty room. At the corner there was a small desk, on top lay the pieces of bed frames. A mattress leaned against the far wall beside a window.

“So with Gunnar on the list, I’ll be even busier today trying to see if I can get things moving with them. Umm,” his eyes looked upward to consult his memory, “I think that’s it. Oh! I’ll be in that first room we walked past. And...” he looked up again, “I *think* that’s it. I’m sorry if I’m rushed.”

She mouthed “it’s okay,” with an understanding expression.

³ the intonation of his voice emerging from behind his throat.

⁴ The timbre of his deep, rough voice was one that shook from the lungs out.

⁵ Their voices rang clearly and cleanly, distinct and vivid unlike the digitally distorted versions she had heard over their streams and voice calls.

“If you need anything just let me know. Text me if you can’t find me, or tweet me, email me, whatever you can think of.”

She nodded and in an instant he walked off pulling his phone from his pocket. She breathed in deeply and let out a silent sigh to settle into a new home. An empty closet called to be filled, but far more interesting were her teammates who fought like they were married.

“Then is bald a color?” she overheard Tokyo asking when she was in hearing range.

“Tch. Nigga, bald ain’t a damn color.”

“Dude, games with character customization have bald as a color option. You’ve never made a game, where’s *your* authority?”

“Okay, fine. But can you make bald by mixing paints?”

“I don’t care about your finger painting experiments.”

“How ‘bout the light color spectrum? Can’t find *bald* there either.”

“No, but we know there’s stuff we can’t see. Therefore, infrared equals bald. Q.E.D.”

Crescendo sat on one of the many couches and focused on the screen as Rex and Tokyo continued.

“Oh, what up Cappy?” Rex ask upon spotting her.⁶ “There’s more controllers in the cabinet if you wanna play,” he said pointing to the compartments below the television.

“So let’s do this, Geoff: I’ll get white hair, you *get* black hair, and Cresh stays blue. Then I call you black, you call me white, we call Cresh blue, and all the racists will become enlightened and racism will disappear.”

Tokyo chuckled at the suggestion, “Sounds like a great plan. Get Obama on the phone. Oh wait, he can’t do anything, he’s on his way out.”

She watched as their fingers constantly adjusted to the situation on the screen, their hands gripping the controller, clawing, twitching, and decisive.

Every now and then Rex grimaced in response to the screen, other times he smiled, and yet other times he leaned back and sigh displeased. He talked smack and name called, his tone constantly shifting, sometimes cheerful, other times groaning. He flowed with the pace of the game, tides whose favor was constantly shifting.

Every now and then Tokyo blinked, and his eyes always moved, always active, always figuring. His response to anything on the screen was to blink, every time he blinked he learned something new and stored it in his brain for later use, and rarely did he respond to Rex’s remarks but with a concrete face.

She awoke the tablet she laid next to the seat flicked at the screen a few times and began typing with the attached keyboard. She turned her gaze toward the two with a pensive expression, holding a finger to her lips. Then she turned to the television and again typed into the tablet. Her lightning fast fingers and the subsequent rapid clacking of the keyboard vibrated in tangent with the controllers.

When she was done she pushed the tablet off to a side and retrieved a controller from the cabinet Rex specified. In the same compartment laid relics of the past, a

6 She quelled the urge to react with a coy smile to the banal name of endearment

Nintendo 64, a Sega Genesis, a collection of game cartridges and controllers that were once dominant and in control. Thought they elicited pleasant memories of halcyon days long gone, they were now old, irrelevant, and incapable of fulfilling the needs of their successors.

The match in progress was canceled so that she could instantly join in. The played game after game with jokes and jests, with misplays and accidental kills and accidental deaths. Rex continued reacting as he had before, Tokyo continued blinking. She played as the yellow, tiny, mouse with pink cheeks and black-outlined ears.

Their styles, she surmised, would be similar: Tokyo would know the game well, play every character well, and would only take risks when the chances were in his favor. Rex would get into her head, into Tokyo's head, and would go on the offensive whenever they walked into his trap; but if they got into *his* head...

"Okay, I think I may 'ave lied when I said I wasn't tired. That's my last game," Tokyo put the controller down on the coffee table and stretched his arms high above his head with a yawn.

"And you said *Smash* wouldn't make you tired," Rex jeered. "Where you from anyway, Blue?" he turned to Crescendo. "Shelly said you were a'ready in the city, so...I assume you live nearby?"

She confirmed with a nod.

"Y'know, y'don't have to be shy around us. We might be tall and scary 'n' shit but we're just dumb kids. But Geoff's more dumb."

She grinned at his joke, hesitating a moment before reaching for her tablet. Before typing she swept hair away from her eyes and adjust her glasses.

"Fuck, now I'm hungry again," Tokyo moaned, holding a hand to his stomach.

"Geoff, you're fat."

"Okay."

She flipped the screen toward them, the large text read ":p It's not that I'm shy," she scrolled the page down, "I'm mute."

They sat silently, Rex's face froze puzzled, Tokyo's face was blank as always, still holding his stomach. She bowed her head slightly and brushed some hair away from her eyes.

"Really? You mean, like, by choi—"

She began shaking her head furiously before Tokyo could finish asking.

"Hm. That's...kind of cool, actually," he continued in his deep, monotone voice.

"And Shelly knows about this?"

She lay her tablet on the coffee table so they could read as she typed again with lighting fast fingers, "we exchanged a lot of emails about this when he first sent out the team invitation. I told him and he said it was fine. I let him know I would proably be a shitty captian but he said we would work something out together."

She returned to her seat wary for any response. Tokyo, standing, held a hand to his chin, eyes looking upward. He was making calculations, musing in his mental library, finding a way to make things work, to develop malnourished ideas.

Rex, sitting, held the side of his finger to his lips. Facing Tokyo, he sat silently and waited for his response.

“It’s definitely not something that’s been done before,” his deep voice said, “but that doesn’t mean it won’t work. Furthermore, if Simon thinks this could work I’m certain he’s got something in mind.” He paused, then smiled. “This...this could easily grow to be another team’s Kryptonite. Oh, dude...*dude*, this shit’s gonna be hella fun.”

Crescendo and Rex eased up.

“And just like that I’m not even tired anymore,” Tokyo said quickly and upbeat. “And just something I noticed: you’re off to a good start as a captain. You took notes on us while we were playing, you probably noticed things we don’t anymore since it’s just muscle memory for us. Do more of that, and do that for Panda and Wildcat when they’re here, and everything should fall into place over time. But anyway, I’m sure Simon’s gonna talk to us as a team when we’re all here to see how this thing’s going down.”

“You *really* think Shelly’s got a plan, Geoff?”

“Yes. Twenty bucks.”

“You’re on.”

Crescendo typed into her tablet again, this time aiming it towards Rex, “It’s not blue btw, it’s cyan.”

“Psh. *Blue, cyan*. Same thing.”

“Hardly. In full color spectrum, paint pigmentation, etymology, they’re different.”

“Ugh, just...” he scoffed, “just say it, Geoff.”

“Why I haven’t the faintest idea what you blabber about.”

“Yup. You’re fucking bald, Geoff.”

16

Zap!

[32:10] NeoTokyo has slain Ikshi for a triple kill!
[32:10] Your team has scored an ace!
[32:10] Xte4 (Jax) has targeted the Inhibitor
[32:11] Xte4 (Jax): can we take inhib?
[32:12] Crescendo (Braum) has targeted the Nexus Turret
[32:13] Xte4 (Jax): o
[32:14] Xte4 (Jax): didnt see lol
[32:17] Crescendo (Braum): :p
[32:20] [All] Ikshi (Brand): kitty y u playign on tokyo's account?
[32:22] [All] NeoTokyo (Lucian): lol
[32:23] [All] NeoTokyo (Lucian): Is that him?
[32:24] [All] FFG WildCat (Caitlyn): wtf
[32:24] [All] FFG WildCat (Caitlyn): im still in canada lol
[32:28] [All] amp Espada (Kha'Zix): nice try tokoy
[32:30] [All] amp Espada (Kha'Zix): we know that ur on kittys account
[32:35] [All] FFG WildCat (Caitlyn): shit
[32:36] [All] FFG WildCat (Caitlyn): there onto us
[32:36] [All] FFG WildCat (Caitlyn): kappa
[32:39] [All] FFG WildCat (Caitlyn): also gg
[32:40] [All] amp Espada (Kha'Zix): gg
[32:42] [All] NeoTokyo (Lucian): gg tokyo
[32:42] [All] NeoTokyo (Lucian): was fun :3
[32:44] [All] FFG WildCat (Caitlyn): gg kitty
[32:45] [All] Crescendo (Braum): G_G
Victory!

“I haven't played Lucian in forever.”

(11:29) Crescendo: We only won because I carried you, Kitty.

“For sure. Can I go back top lane now?”

Yup. Just one game was all I wanted.

Where's Rex?

The front door opened loudly followed by a growling rumble that scrapped against the wooden floor.

“Yo, yo, To-kee-yo!”

They turned simultaneously and saw the fresh face of a kid with red cheeks. While rolling up the sleeves of his purple hoodie he held out his lower lip and blew air upwards. Shellshock closed the door and took some of the luggage to an empty room.

“Oh hi, Panda,” Tokyo waved as usual, taking off his headset. “You’ll never guess who that is in the blue over there.”

“Aw damn, is that the yung Crescendo? At first I thought it was, like, Miku Hatsune,” he said holding his glasses closer to his eyes.

She held up a peace sign, smirking at his response.

“Where’s the dudebro Rex?”

“Idunno. Was about to call him.”

“Holy shit,” he exclaimed, “that logo looks fucking awesome up there,” his eyes marveling at the large banner upon the wall. “Hella dope.”

“Hmm. Hella dope.” Tokyo repeated.

“Oh, yo, did my parts come in? I need you to build my computer, Tokerino.”

“Um...I think they did. Ask Simon.”

“Coolio. Where uh...where Shelly?” he asked looking around aimlessly. Tokyo pointed to where the old man went before putting his headset back on and returning to his phone.

“T-y, t-y,” Panda responded heading down hall. He pulled his luggage and walked past an empty room. At the end of the hall were two doors, Shellshock stood in the room to the right, and to the left was a room with cardboard boxes.¹

“Harold and Kumar decided they’d set up the beds, so you’re in luck.”

“Wait, the fuck? Rex is Indian?” Panda set his burden against a wall.

“Well no, but Geoff isn’t Asian, either.”

“Mhm,” Panda realized, “yeah, yeah, I get it. Smart-man-Shelly coming up with them nicknames. Is it just me or is it, like, really hot?” he asked, again blowing air out of his mouth.²

“No, your body’s just getting used to the warmth again. I asked you if you wanted to borrow my jacket. You’d better not get sick, I’m paying you to play League, not Let’s-eat-all-of-Shellshock’s-chicken-soup.”

“Shelly, please. I wasn’t even cold.”

“If you say so. But if you *do* start coming down with something you let me know immediately.”

“Cool beans. Oh yeah, and did my parts show up?”

“I think everything except your RAM. It might show up later today or tomorrow.”

“Aww, dude. Fucking sorrows.”

1 There were large, brown cardboard boxes, some with mailing stickers still stuck on them. There were blue boxes and green boxes and black boxes with computer peripherals, tall boxes, short boxes, tiny boxes, and brown cubes of all sizes. Some were empty and flattened and laid upon the floor, others were off to a corner, still sealed or opened with their contents still inside.

2 his cheeks returning to their light-brown complexion.

"I've got some old computers lying around if you need one for the day."

"Nah it's cool. I got my own craptop. Played some old games on the plane."

"A craptop is at least better than nothing. And before I get back to my endless emails," he started toward the door, "let me show you where you'll be sitting."

"Oh, and your stuff's in this room," he paused between both doors, "just look for the packages under your name."

A fusillade of keystrokes filled the room as Crescendo's lightning fast fingers tapped against her keys. On the far side Tokyo scrolled down the page on one of his monitors, his chin resting in his palm and elbow balanced on his armrest.

"So I'm pretty much having you guys seated according to the lineup. Tokyo's on the far left," he pointed, "then Rex, then you," he pointed to the empty desk at the center, "then WildCat, and lastly Crescendo. There's an ethernet cable under the desk, and you should have all the outlets you need. And that about covers it. You have any questions?"

"Mmm. Nah, everything looks p-good."

"Alright. If you need anything let me know. I'll be in the other apartment in...I guess the equivalent of your room. If you don't find me there, call me, text me, email, whatever you can think of."

"Got 'em, coach."

He retrieved his backpack from his room and brought it out to his desk which lay beneath the Final Frontier banner.

"Yo, Panda," Tokyo yawned lifting the headset off his right ear and turning around to face him, "Crescendo wants to duo with you. You have a computer you can play on or you wanna use mine? Cuz even if you have all your parts it'll take forever to do updates."

"Egh. I might have to use yours," he chuckled, pulling out his old computer from his bag. It was covered in colorful stickers and written on with black markers. "Wanna trade?"

"No, I've got some extra laptops in my room."

"Ooh, okay. Is this the PC you put together?" he pulled out a wired mouse.

"Yeah, in high school. It's pretty old now."

"Your parts aren't in yet, Harold?" he pulled out a black and white plushie from his bag and placed it to the left of his laptop's screen.

"I didn't really know if I wanted to build a new PC until a few days ago, so I'll probably have to use this old thing for about a week. Is the panda's name Harold?"

"Nah it's your name. Didn't Shelly tell you?"

"No."

"Oh. Welp. Oops," Panda laughed softly.

"Wait, what? Why's my name Harold?"

"Spoilers. I can't say. Ask Shelly."

“I don’t think I wanna know, now,” he yawned again. “Anyway, don’t change my settings, pleaserino, Pandarino,” Tokyo stood up and hung the headset on the chair’s armrest, “I always dread having to reconfigure them.”

“Yo, man, how *tall* are you?” Panda got up placing his bag on the chair, walked towards the titan and raised his hand above his head to measure the difference.

“I don’t know, like six-something.”

“I could probably put the panda on my head and still not be tall enough.”

“Maybe. By the way d’you guys want anything to eat? George was at 7-11 and didn’t invite me because I was apparently asleep. The bastard.”

“Ooh yeah. You know those gummy fruit things? One of those would be boss.”

“Alright. Blue? Want anything?”

She shook her head and continued on with her rapid typing.

“Alright, so expect your gummies in a bit.”

“T-y, t-y. So, yo, the hair *is* inspired by Miku Hatsune, right? Or is it, like, a blue version of super saiyan?”

(11:58) Crescendo: If it DID come from Miku would it make a difference? :p

“Eh, maybe.”³

Mmmmmmmmmmm.

I’ll keep it a secret for now then.

“Real. Am I going mid or we going bot?”

Duo bot.

(11:59) Crescendo: I want everyone to see how I’ll be peeling for Kitty

and how I initiate/retreat/whatever else

So you can see how I manage my skills, mana

CC, activatables and everything else

Maybe you can use my timings with yours

“I can dig that. Also, why you don’t talkerino? I see you have a mic,” he turned around to confirm. “Yeah, I *seen’t* it.”

lol

I don’t talkerino because I’m mute.

No talkerino foreverino.

Is that how you do it?

“Wait, seriously? You trolling me?”

(12:00) Crescendo: Noperino.

3 Over Teamspeak his voice was accompanied by the barely audible low chirping, hissing, and static sounds picked up by the mic, and drowned by the cables, and distorted by the internet.

Zed	Braum	Rumble	Acolyte Lee Sin	Mafia Jinx
Ikshi	Crescendo	Howpro	FFG WildCat	Pandango

Bad Santa Veigar amp Espada	Vandal Jax Xte4	Snow Day Ziggs Meznir	Arctic Ops Varus coL Ikarus	Karthus Zingy
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[00:05] FFG WildCat (Lee Sin) purchased Warding Totem (Trinket)!

[00:05] Ikshi (Zed) purchased Warding Totem (Trinket)!

[00:10] Crescendo (Braum) purchased Warding Totem (Trinket)!

“Oh jeez, what is this music Tokerino listens to? What in the world is Rage Against the Machine? He needs some Nujabes in his life.” Panda clicked and scrolled around before continuing, “Oh. He *does* have Nujabes in his life. He really needs more Metaphorical Musics.”

[00:20] FFG WildCat (Lee Sin) is asking for assistance

[00:22] FFG WildCat (Lee Sin): pandaaaaaaaaaaaa

[00:25] FFG WildCat (Lee Sin): come

[00:25] FFG WildCat (Lee Sin): we invade zingy

[00:27] Pandango (Jinx): omw

“Oh shit, almost forgot my panda,” he lay the headset on the table, rolled the chair toward his desk and retrieved the plushie. He gently placed it to the left of the monitor before putting the headset back on.

[00:36] FFG WildCat (Lee Sin): leggo

[00:42] Meznir has drawn first blood!

[00:44] Howpro (Rumble): fck

“Oh shit, it’s the moment of truth.”

[00:50] Pandango has slain Meznir for a double kill!

[00:51] Pandango has slain coL Ikarus for a triple kill!

[00:51] Pandango is on a killing spree!

[00:53] [All] amp Espada (Veigar): gg

[00:55] [All] Pandango (Jinx): did you

[00:56] [All] coL Ikarus (Varus): yes

[00:56] [All] coL Ikarus (Varus): lol

[00:57] [All] Pandango (Jinx): flash into my w?

[00:57] [All] Pandango (Jinx): lol

[00:59] [All] Pandango (Jinx): want to do that again in 5 mins?

[01:02] [All] Pandango (Jinx): consider it a date :3

[01:08] [All] coL Ikarus (Varus): ff

[01:12] [All] coL Ikarus (Varus): no mas pour favpr

17

Static Field

“C’mon, man, I know you’re trolling me,” Panda squinted, looking for some inkling of truth in her eyes.

Nope, she mouthed, quickly shaking her head before typing into her tablet: no trollerino.

“So you went through all of school without ever talking?”

She nodded.

“Dude, that’s so bullshit,” Panda clicked his tongue. “You never had to do any presentations or stuff like that?”

Crescendo typed into her tablet: Teachers just made me write papers instead. I hated doing them. :(I would have loved to do presentations if I could.

“Hmm. How’d the teachers know you couldn’t talk? Doctor’s note or something?”

Kinda. Physical exams revealed I had no vibration from larynx. Therefore I no talkerino.

“Mmm,” Panda nodded. “You ever wonder what it’d be like to talk?”¹

She inhaled deeply, her eyes looking downward, and slowly sighed out through her nose before typing: All the time, Panda.

“So Penny’s downstairs with WildCat,” Tokyo announced, removing his headset and launching himself up from his chair, “and he apparently forgot his keys,” his tone dipping. “What a dummy.”

He tapped at his pockets as he walked toward the door. Turning the doorknob he faced back, “And I’m in queue. If it pops, someone try to get me Renekton.”

“Got ‘em, coach” Panda gave him a thumbs up and spun his chair to watch Tokyo’s monitor at the other end of the room.

Walking down the hallway toward the elevator, his gaze remained on his phone. He scrolled down the page to picked up where he was reading on his computer: rumors that a player was retiring, rumors that another North American team would import a foreigner, rumors that a beloved player has been benched from his team, and he read a continuous, ever-growing list of rumored roster changes as teams learned to adapt to their ever-changing ecosystem.²

Tokyo entered the elevator after the doors opened. He tapped the button for the ground floor as he continued reading the rumors and the tweets and the discussion.^F

1 Across the room Tokyo’s phone rang. He answered with short, quick replies.

2 And those who failed to adapt, who clung to antiquated philosophies, who followed the ideas of their predecessors without challenge or critique, who were satisfied with the structures and systems in place, faded away. Died out. And rightfully so. And deservedly so.

Once at the apartment vestibule he opened the entrance door. Instantly, Shellshock held a bag towards Tokyo.³

He sighed in his throat, his eyelids slightly lowered “You...you didn’t forget your keys *did* you?”

“I did. But since you’re here,” Shellshock inched the bag close to Tokyo.

“I hate you, dude.”

A long-jawed kid in a black sweater stood beside Shellshock, his eyes bouncing back and forth with the interaction. If he were to stand on his toes he would almost be as tall as Shellshock, and he would almost be tall enough to reach Tokyo’s shoulders.

“Hey, Tokyo,” the kid chirped, his hands tightly gripping the handle of his luggage.

“Oh, hi,” Tokyo droned his usual introduction, “don’t trust this guy,” he gestured to the old man with the bag, “he’s a scumbag. Worst boss ever.”

Shellshock snickered, “A bad boss lets you play games at work?”

“No. The kind that adds new things to my job description without telling me in advance,” Tokyo mumbled. “Also I’m in queue, le’s go,” as he began walking back toward the elevator.

“So finally,” Shellshock paused to adjust his grip on some bags, “the team’s all here. Guess that means we’ll start scrim soon. Once we set up your PC, that is,” he turned to address WildCat. “And now that everyone’s here,” they boarded the elevator, “it’s time you see what was in that box.”

“The puppies are probably dead by now. You didn’t put air holes for them.”

“These puppies don’t require air to live.”

On the way up Tokyo noticed WildCat kept stretching his fingers, the skin on his hand tightly hugging and copying the shape of his bones. His fingers would twitch and toy with the air, he would pull them and make them crack, and he would make them jolt like spider legs reaching for some prey.

He would clench his fists and squeeze his fingers tightly, and then he would relax his fist and spray and shake the stiffness away.

“So—we’re floor six,” said Shellshock stepping off, “and we’re six-three and six-four,” as he started off in the direction of the apartments.

They walked the brightly lit hallways, painted a clean, milky white, and again Shellshock explained what was housed in each apartment, stopping outside door 63.

Tokyo turned the doorknob and in a heartbeat Panda’s voice rang loudly, “Kitty!”

When he opened the door they saw Panda and Crescendo sitting in their chairs, wiggling their fingers, arms extended way above their heads with silly grins stuck on their faces.

“Ehh, hi,” WildCat whispered.

Rex turned his head just enough to lay eyes on the latest arrival, “Aww yeah, the legendary WildCat in the house.” He then quickly turned his focus back to his game.

3 The streetlights across the road lit up in unison, followed by the streetlights outside the building, and finally the lights attached to the outside of the apartment.

“Wook at the wittle kitty,” Panda cooed as he dashed across the room.

“Heh, hiya,” he said again softly.

“Oh shit, we have the same glasses?!” Panda exclaimed, pecking his face far forward to take a closer look.⁴

Their lenses were wide and high enough to mask their eyes, and the frames were thin, black, rectangular with curved corners.

“Umm...maybe...these glasses are OP?” WildCat asked, his shoulders shrugging. Tokyo and Shellshock began moving the newcomer’s belongings into the vacant room.

“Then we gotta duo, Kitty. Gotta mess up some kids.” Panda petted WildCat’s head but quickly retracted and yelped, “Okay! Damn, Pikachu, calm down.”

He giggled with a wide grin “Dude, that’s so troll. This sweater’s been giving me static shocks since I got off the plane, too.”

Panda again reached for WildCat’s hair, ready to pull his arm back as if the shock would lunge out and bite like some feral beast. Just before touching his hair Panda heard a crackle, and again retreated his hand.

“Ow,” he giggled. “Yo guys,” Panda yelled, “bring the Pokédex. I think I found me a new breed.”

A smiling Crescendo joined Panda in attempting to dodge the electric bites, and they found his sweater also gave off shocks. WildCat tried to block their hands, and in doing so he felt the shocks in his own hands.

“Stop, guys! Stop!” he hissed and whined. In a brief moment of peace he rushed to take off his sweater,⁵ and he flung it onto the kitchen counter.

“No! Dude!” Panda groaned. “Now Professor Oak’s never gonna believe me,” his lower lip hung out and drooped downward.

Crescendo’s furtive hands sneakily reached for the electric hair again, she quickly jabbed at it only to receive a tiny volt. In defeat her shoulders sunk and she mimicked Panda’s face.

“Wha happened?” Tokyo’s voice vibrated as he returned.

“Kitty was Pikachu for a while. He took off his magic sweater, though,” Panda pointed at the sprawled clothing on the counter.

“Isn’t Pikachu a mouse?” Tokyo asked, reaching for WildCat’s hair. His hand landed without incident, and he rustled the hair before turning to look Panda in the eyes.

“Well duh,” Panda scoffed. “But we’re not gonna call him Electabuzz. It ain’t cute.” He walked over to the counter and touched the fabric, again pouting in defeat.

“Yo!” Tokyo directed to a hidden Shellshock, “Wherefore art thou not bringing the box?”

“Box? What box?” Panda raised his eyebrows and held his lips out.

“If you show Jason his room I’ll go get it,” Shellshock said poking his head out from the door.

⁴ WildCat leaned back to leave space between his face and Panda’s.

⁵ the static ripping off sounding like quiet velcro to Crescendo

“Ooh, I got it,” Panda volunteered and he bolted into the room, WildCat following after in a normal pace.

“Awesome, now go get th—” Tokyo noticed the big, red “Play” button at the top of his game’s client. “Panda, what the fuck, man? Did you miss my queue?”

“Oops! Sorry, Tokerino!” he yelled from WildCat’s room.

“Welp. He’s messed with my mouse sensitivity and now he didn’t accept my match. Remind me never to trust Pandarino agai—” his eyes fell on the panda plushie. He peeked warily in the direction of WildCat’s room, then quickly grabbed the panda from the desk⁶ and disappeared into his own room.

“So you’re gonna sit right over here,” Panda pointed to the empty desk between his and Crescendo’s.

“Tch, one bad play,” Rex told his monitor, taking his hands off his mouse and keyboard, “all it takes is one mistake and then everyone’s too afraid to fight them. Aww well,” he took off his headset and stood up, “that’s just the nature of solo queue.”

“Hey, Rex,” WildCat said, placing his laptop on his desk. He picked up the set of keys, and Panda instantly answered, “Yeah, those are yours.”

“Sup, Kitty,” Rex held out his fist as always, WildCat quick to respond. “I gotta see you play, lil dude. I don’t—” he paused and dropped his sloppiness to mimic Tokyo, “I haven’t a clue how you have managed to claim three slots in Challenger.”

“You could just watch VoDs of my stream,” WildCat chuckled.

“I could,” Rex responded, “but I can’t see how your hands work on the mouse and keyboard.”

“Ehm. Well that new account I was working on a few weeks ago is Diamond II right now. I...guess maybe I could play a game?” he asked them while he hooked up some cables to his computer.

“Do it, do it,” Panda chanted. He dropped onto his chair, still next to Crescendo’s desk, rolled it right next to him and reclined all the way back. Crescendo grabbed her tablet and rolled her chair between theirs, her feet on the chair with knees level to hold her tablet in place while she typed.

“F’only we had some popcorn.”

“Then let’s buy some next time,” Tokyo suggested emerging from his room. “What’s going on?” he asked noticing the team huddled around WildCat’s desk.

“Gonna watch Kittychu play. Get your chair, Tokerino,” Panda beckoned.

Shellshock reentered the apartment with one arm hugging the parcel, “Alright, Christmas came early. And twice since you all needed computers.”

One hand dug into the box as he approached the crowd, “I’m sure you’re all wondering why I’ve gathered you here today.” He pulled out an orange book and placed it flat on WildCat’s desk.

“*The Art of Learning*,” he announced.

“Course material?” Tokyo asked.

6 it always sat to the left of Panda’s monitors

“Yup.” He dug into the box again and pulled out a red book and placed it on top of the other, “*Playing to Win*.”

“I can’t read, ‘member?” Rex asked.

“Have Geoff read it to you.”

“*Really?*” WildCat asked, bemused.

“Poor George,” Tokyo lamented, “he managed to graduate high school but still couldn’t read. Luckily they accepted him for that esports scholarship.”

“*Ob!*” WildCat chuckled. “You’re so troll, Tokyo.”

“And lastly, but *most* importantly,” Shellshock emphasized, “by that I mean I want all of you to read this one first,” he pulled out a thin, white volume, “*The Art of War*.”

A snap echoed through the room. They turned to Crescendo, who was carefully inspecting her tablet’s screen and combing it over with the tip of her nails. She looked up smiling weakly, her forehead glowing bright red, the rest of her face following. She showed them a thumbs up and quickly looked down to attend to the tablet’s care.

“So make sure you cover *Art of War* first and foremost,” he repeated, again digging into the box to distribute copies.⁷ “And now that you’re all here: we’ll start scrim next week, either Tuesday or Wednesday. Two matches against Collateral. Best start practicing,” he advised before he took the empty box to the box room.

“Quick, Kitty, get in game so we can do the ‘learnings.’”

They sat and waited a while until a game was found.

“By the way, George,” Tokyo said, “there were recently some esports articles on New York Times and Fox Sports.”

“Tch, you been reading comments again?”

“Dude, they’re so good. Seriously, I’ll link you and you’ll have a blast.”

“Aight, I’ll take a look after Kitty plays.”^X

The five cluttered around the young legend to watch him play. And each of them paid attention to something different. Some watched his hands, how his dormant fingers hovered over the keys and then suddenly sparked to life, prancing and performing on the mouse and keyboard.

Some observed his eyes, trying to track and understand what he valued most and how he used vision and the team’s information to move around the map. Somehow, someway, he was always able to keep maximum distance from his foes, max distance down to the pixel. The savant was untouchable, on another level, as if he were surrounded by an electrifying aura.

He made it all look easy, down to the way he farmed. As if he and the game were one. If ever he missed some gold it was because he had dodged a skillshot or because he had helped his support kill a freshly placed ward. He understood and controlled the rhythm of the game, smoothly moving left, right, left, right, striking at precisely the right moment. And some were convinced he could play perfectly if blindfolded.

7 When Tokyo received his books he opened to a random page and breathed in the new book smell.

He made it look easy, and now it was his job: a job that hadn't existed a decade ago. A newly created job that existed only because few were willing to take the risks.

He made it look easy, and professionals were paid to make it look easy.

18

Focused Resolve

“*Gab!*” Panda’s loud, shrill shriek pierced through the apartment walls, “*help* me, Rex! *Help!*”

- [31:30] [All] Gadot (Vel’Koz): LMAP
 [31:32] [All] 5prax (Miss Fortune): olololololol
 [31:33] [All] Tails92 (Thresh): XD waht the fuck
 [31:34] EgoPot (Syndra): woooooooooooooow
 [31:36] [All] Gadot (Vel’Koz): wtf was that panda?

Rex chuckled while responding, “Why’d you even Flash in?”
 “I din’t think there’d be *four* in there!”

- [31:53] [All] Pandango (Zed): who put four pelpe there? go bot you fucks
 [31:56] [All] Pandango (Zed): baron control isn’t imrpotant
 [31:59] coL Typhergus (Malphite) signals that enemies are missing
 [32:00] coL Typhergus (Malphite) signals that enemies are missing
 [32:03] [All] DeusRex (Elise): Dis guy
 [32:05] [All] DeusRex (Elise): Tactical genius. You huys should listen to him
 [32:08] [All] Gadot (Vel’Koz): we have cheat codes
 [32:11] [All] Gadot (Vel’Koz): 100% vision on panda
 [32:15] [All] Pandango (Zed): omg
 [32:25] [All] Pandango (Zed): 9x repot for hax pls

“Game almost done, guys?” Shellshock asked, watching over their shoulders.

“Tch...maybe another ten or so minutes?” Rex guessed. “When’d you even get here?”

“Just now. Jason’s up so we can get this meeting done once you’re out of game.”

“Sure thing, bosserino,” Panda replied, his eyes and attention still on the game. The mouse clicks and clacking of mechanical keyboards continued while the game went on.

Tokyo scrolled through various pages on his computer, pages filled with news articles, forum discussions, Wikipedia entries, and academic essays.¹ A handful of books were stacked on his desk, including the books he had received the day before. He sat and read in silence as music played through his headset. His left elbow stood on his chair’s armrest and he pressed his thumb against his teeth while in deep thought.

Having just brushed his teeth, WildCat made his way to the small kitchen and poured himself some milk and cereal. He brought it over to his desk and turned his attention to Panda’s screen as his laptop slowly turned on. Panda’s loud shrieks of

1 He had numerous tabs opened on his browser. Some were opened some days ago, others were opened weeks ago, but he intended to read through all of them. Eventually.

excitement and terror pierced through even the loud internal crunching of cereal. When his computer came to life he opened up a browser and navigated to a stats website. However, rather than viewing the stats of North American players on North American servers, he switched to the stats for Korean servers and Korean players. He found the highest ranked player who was currently in a game and he spectated the match.

Elsewhere on the globe some player much like himself was also sitting behind a computer. And this player clicked and tapped on his mouse and keyboard and played the very same game. But his stats were far superior, his technique more advanced, and he was a player respected and praised all around the world. Even as the highest ranked player in North America he still had much to learn, much to do, and much to improve.

And he knew that.

And he accepted that.

In spite of his accomplishments up to this point, there was still much more he had to do in order to be the best. And he knew he could never grow complacent or rest satisfied with the way things were, not if he wanted to be the best.

“Welp, GG,” Panda announced.

Rex exhaled a chuckle, “That fuckin’ Flash at Baron, man, I don’t even.”

“Bah!,” Panda brayed, “Woulda worked if there weren’t three guys there.”

“Shoulda just warded,” Rex stood up, stretching his limbs in all directions “could’ve won that one so easily,” his voice a higher pitch as he stretched and sighed of relief. “Anyway, meeting time,” he picked up his phone from the desk and slid it into his pockets before making his way to the door.

“Oh yeah,” wide-eyed Panda jumped from his seat, “almost forgot.” On his way out he yelled out to the rest of the team, “Le’s go, duderinos!”

Crescendo sat on a sofa silently reading one of the books Shellshock had assigned. She held the book in her left hand and she kept her right hand near her tablet ready to jot down ideas and notes.^G

One by one the rest of the team entered the apartment and they took a seat on the comfortable, cloud-soft sofas. While waiting they played with their phones, sliding their fingers up and down and tapping at their screens.

Shellshock entered the room glancing at his watch, then took one peek at the team and declared, “Alright, guys, phones away. So first off,” he began, “I just wanna reiterate some ground rules. So far this hasn’t been a problem and I don’t want it to *become* a problem either: take care of your own dishes.” He opened his laptop, quickly peering at the screen, and tapped at the touch pad before looking back at the players. “It sucks when five peoples’ worth of dirty dishes pile up and someone has to do all of them. Let’s avoid passively hating each other over simple chores.”

“Along those lines,” he continued, “please keep your desks clean and don’t leave garbage lying around. I’ve seen my fair share of gaming houses and some are just

absolutely atrocious. So in short, clean up after yourself. Let's try to value our civilization."²

Shellshock tiptoed closer to the television mounted upon the wall and pressed a button at the bottom. "Now, I think it goes without saying, time's *not* on our side. We've got *very* limited time and I'd like us to make as much use of it as possible. So I kind of want us to skip through the awkward phase of you guys being too shy to give constructive criticism to each other. That said, I don't want you guys be dicks to one another but please, please, *please* talk things out as much as possible." He paused a bit to look everyone in the eye with a solemn, solid face. His voice was deeper than usual, and he spoke far slower than when he was joking around.³

He continued, "A good team articulates their thoughts well and works through their problems to fix them." He paused again before continuing in his stern, slow voice, "If we *don't* talk these things out we're not gonna get any better and we're just gonna be wasting our time."⁴

"So let's try to value our time as well. Also talk to me about *any* problems you have. Communication is key both in the game and out of the game. If you don't want to bring something up but still want to work on it, *talk to me*. I know you guys are going to get frustrated, I know you guys are going to get nervous and the pressure might get to you...I've been there before. Don't just let these problems go unattended because chances are they're not gonna go away on their own. I'll be here if you need me for anything, alright?"⁵

They attended to his every word, and every now and then their eyes gravitated downward as they thought further on his words.

"So," his voice lightened up, "moving on." He pressed a combination of buttons on the laptop and the television displayed his screen. "Here's a clip from Collateral against Ampersand this past split," he played the video, "tell me what you see."

Two groups of five characters danced in the river. They twitched and shifted, moving left, right, left, right, clumped together, slowly inching their way forwards or backwards. The blue marksman inched forward and fired projectiles at the mass of characters with red health bars, and the red marksman inched forward and fired in turn at the characters with blue health bars.

2 Panda kept putting his hands deep in his pockets, pulling them out and rubbing his fingers together, dropping tiny pieces of garbage onto the floor.

3 WildCat fidgeted with his fingers, stretched them out in all directions and cracked his knuckles which broke the silence in the room.

4 Crescendo flung her head to one side to keep hair from her eyes. When it failed she gently moved the blades of hair to one side with her hand.

5 Rex nodded in agreement to everything Shellshock said, the rhythm and pace of his nods increasing the more he agreed.

The red characters slowly, slowly, slowly pushed their way forward, and the five moved forward in unison. The blue characters slowly, slowly, slowly pulled back, and the five moved backward in unison.

Shellshock paused the video and asked, "So...what d'you see?"

Without any thought into the matter Tokyo instantly replied, "Collateral pressured Amp away from Baron just by using their higher range as an advantage and as a threat. Sun Tzu would say Collateral fought without actually engaging in a fight. Typical zoning and indirect combat."

WildCat was quick to jump in, "It also kinda looks like everyone's too afraid to fight in this scenario. Like, in this clip alone there are, like...maybe six instances where either team could've initiated. But no one pulled the trigger."

Shellshock nodded. "Now, let's look at another clip," he tapped a few buttons and a different video began playing on the large screen, "This is Samsung versus KTF. Tell me what you see here."

Two groups of five characters danced in the river. They twitched and shifted, moving left, right, left, right, clumped together, slowly inching their way forwards or backwards. The blue marksman inched forward and fired projectiles at the mass of characters with red health bars, and the red marksman inched forward, instantly the blue team attacked in unison and deleted that player from the map. The four remaining teammates fell one by one, and a few moments later their base crumbled.

"Ab!" Panda exclaimed at no one in particular, "In this play they just went right in."

Shellshock's eyes marked Panda, and waited a while, as if expecting further explanation. When Panda didn't offer one, he pushed further, "...yes, but *why*?" He paused again before continuing, "These two clips are practically the *exact same* scenario," he motioned at the screen with the back of his hand, "yet they play out *completely* differently. What *is* that difference?" He replayed the video.

Crescendo quickly typed into her tablet and showed it to the person sitting nearest. Rex read aloud, "They were confident and moved as one the second they saw the ADC just a tiny bit out of position." She pulled her tablet back into her hands and Rex continued with the idea, "I don't know what happened, but from what I can see, either a call was made or everyone just followed up on the initial catch really well."

Crescendo's rapid fingers again typed something, and this time she typed a bit longer before handing her tablet to Rex, "I could probably compare it to an orchestra. Different instruments provide a unique sound, in this case each role and each player brings something different to the table. I would think the shot-caller of the team would act like a conductor who keeps track of tempo and beat. When the conductor signals a movement the music flows together in perfect harmony."

"Harmony is actually a perfect word here," Shellshock nodded. "After a while music becomes so intuitive to our ears because we learn what notes blend well together. Teamplay is pretty much the same thing, you guys just need to play together so much that you'll orient yourselves to one another's play-style. Once we hit that point where

you five move and fight seamlessly, all that'll be left is a deeper understanding of tactical and strategic play. So there's *a lot* of grinding ahead of us, but again, our time is *very* limited."

WildCat mused some further idea, "I think we can also, like, see each team positioning themselves...systematically...or something. Like, if we look at any professional team when they're grouped there's, like, an invisible line they, like...avoid...or...I don't know if avoid is the best word, but it's almost like if they always try to keep some, like, precise distance from the other team." Shellshock played the video again trying to see what WildCat saw.

"If anything," Tokyo's slow voice vibrated in the air, "we can just relate that to formations. We tend to forget this shit when we play Solo Queue, but generally we can see similarities to actual combat strategies. If we think back at, say, the Revolutionary War, Civil War, and other warfare from that time period, generals..." Tokyo pondered a second for the perfect word, "...generals *squeezed* out as much...*efficiency*...as they could. The reason for linear formations, the reason for squares of infantry was to make up for the inaccuracy of muskets."

"So back to League," Tokyo's hands jumped back from history, "a good team makes very efficient use of distance and range. What Kitty said about 'systematic' positioning just comes from practicing together, knowing how we'll move as a team, and making very efficient use of our 'formations,' depending on what champions we're playing."

"Yeah, like that," WildCat excitedly agreed with a wide smile on his face.

"The problem with that, however," Tokyo continued, "is a good flank could allow their assassins to take our damage out of the fight. And I guess this just goes back to what Simon was saying; we need to play with each other enough so that we'll be as coordinated as we possibly can, which will in turn allow us to easily and quickly adapt to problematic situations like that."

"So then we gotta do lots'a Duoing, right?" Panda figured.

"Yeah, *a lot* of Duoing," Shellshock emphasized. "I want all of you to Duo with everyone else at least five games per week, so even one game per day is fine. And if we can find the time I'd also like you guys to play in online stuff like Go4LoL since it'll be more suitable grounds for practicing against other dedicated teams. But of course that's..." he waved the idea away, "that's secondary to getting you guys on the same page. Once our micro-strategy reaches this...state of nirvana, where you're all thinking and acting as one, the next step's gotta be polishing macro-strategy. So again, there's a lot to work on."

He pulled out his phone, tapped at the screen a few times and slid his finger upward. "Last couple of things," he resumed, "I'll try to do as much coaching as I can without being too intrusive to you guys. I'll be around during scrims for some real-time team coaching. Umm...I'm usually also swamped with emails and paperwork a lot of times, so I won't be able to coach twenty-four-seven, but I'll definitely try to stick to some kind of schedule so you're not just practicing on your own. And...and since I'm

just a mid-Diamond scrub I'm sure you guys won't need any individual or mechanical or lane coaching, but if you do just let me know."

"And the last thing was...uh..." his eyes gravitated upward to recall, "...Oh! Last thing was discussing a shotcaller. This is a role that's probably best bundled in with the team captain, but unfortunately Crescendo won't be able to do shotcalling for us. I'm thinking that after some scrimms we'll probably have a better taste for who'd be suitable for the role, so Crescendo, we'll talk more about this in the future, alright?"

With a little smile on her face she threw him a quick thumbs up.

"Wait, why can't Crescendo do the shotcalling?" a baffled WildCat asked.

"Blue's muterino" Panda quickly quipped, "and can't talkerino,"

"Wait...really?" WildCat asked leaning forward to see her response.

She held air in her mouth and puffed up her cheeks, coyly nodding to confirm.

"*Ob*," WildCat exhorted, "that actually, like, explains your stream and everything."

In jest she held out her tongue at him.

"*And*," Shellshock sang as he peeked down at his watch, "last, last thing. Gym's downstairs in the basement. I don't just want you guys sitting in front of the computer all day. *At least* an hour a day go run on the treadmill or play some basketball or soccer or something. I need your bodies fit so your minds are fit, alright?"

"Tch, then you gotta play with us, Shelly," Rex suggested. "Can't expect us to play evenly with five."

"Yeah, sure. Just let me know in advance and I'll crush you kids one v five," Shellshock replied with a cocksure smile.

"*Ob!*" Panda hollered with raised hands, "Shelly comin' out with hella trash talk. You gonna take that shit, Rex?"

"Aight, Shelly, I see how it is. You goin' down, old man," Rex replied leaning far back into the sofa.⁶

"We'll see, George," Shellshock snickered. "But back to serious mode, any questions or anything you guys wanna talk about before we head back to practicing?"

They shook their heads and sat in silence, and Shellshock softly proceeded, "Alright then, head on back and get to work."

"Sure thing, bossierino!" Panda exclaimed. He leapt from his seat and eagerly yelled out, "Yo, Rex, le's duo. Been wanting to test out some different rune and mastery set ups."

They all began for the door before Shellshock groaned, "Ugh, last, *last* thing. I wanna treat you guys to dinner tonight. It's the least I could do before I start pushing you really hard."

"Ooh, okay," an amused Panda cooed, "Gonna eat *all* the foods!"

"Be ready at around..." Shellshock looked at his watch, "eight or so."

"Alright, be ready at nine, got it, Shelly!" Panda yelled as the door closed.^X

6 Amid the exchange WildCat giggled, and Crescendo giggled silently.

19

Entitlement Generation

From within the offices of the highest skyscrapers the well dressed, well paid, well fed could overlook the city, still dormant and frozen in the blue light of early morning. In the comfort of their offices they reflected on the good memories and on the good things that came to them as a result of their hard work. They were given promotions and higher pay and private offices, no longer having to live the inferior cubicle life, and they were deserving because they had followed instructions.

But not only did they follow instructions, they were far better at doing so than their coworkers. The office walls were dressed in myriad awards and medals to demonstrate the fact. These were the men and women who deserved to be successful because they had worked for it. They worked for it all on their own, without anyone's assistance, without anyone's help. They were successful only through hard work and dedication, not because they accepted handouts from others.

During downtime they gathered around the coffee machine or the water cooler and discussed their lives as professionally as possible. They spoke of their past, of their younger days spent cramming material for an exam, of the smell of coffee and alcohol that their peers emitted during finals.

They spoke of the present, of how they aimed to work, work, work in order to climb up the company ranks, to make their family proud, to begin saving up little by little, because they were finally in the real world.

They spoke of the future, their eyes gazed toward their boss with admiration and they clung to the idea that one day that would be them. All it took was hard work and they would reach the top.

And they spoke of dreams, now that they were done with school they could do whatever they wanted. They could follow their dreams, dreams of working a nine to five at a desk in a cubicle. The American Dream. Because it was what everyone was supposed to do.

The sun rose golden and shone above the east coast, the radiant dawn cast out long rays of blazing zenith blades, and the behemoth buildings cast long shadows out onto the streets, like fingers eager to grasp and take anything and everything in reach. An endless river of cars flowed up and down the streets like rushing, rolling, splashing streams of currents too strong and dominant to resist.

An equally endless river of employees emerged out from beneath the ground. They traversed the close-quarter mazes from memory. And every day they walked the grime infested tunnels and the crowded halls underground, entering the city like rats and roaches.

And they *were* rats and roaches. They were born of a broken age. They were born in the entitlement generation. They were much too lazy themselves to work but they were so, so, *so* willing to leech off of those who *had* put in the work.

These parasites had found a way to make it their life goal to have everything for free. They wanted free schools and free medical care, free books, free homes, free entertainment, free everything. And if they knew how to do it, they would pirate it all because that way it would be free.

The moochers were much too obsessed and dependent on the technology their enabling parents had purchased. The young these days believed everything should be free, they believed they could live a life without ever making sacrifices, without ever working a fair day in their life. All they ever wanted were handouts and a free pass to an easy life.

Things were different in earlier years. We were successful today because we worked day in and day out, we worked that job we didn't want to work, we passed our classes without complaint because we knew deep down in our heart that a degree would be worth it. The degree would land us a well paying job and would provide us a better future and a better grip while climbing the company ladder.

Those who were too lazy to work did not deserve any compensation, because hard work is *always* rewarded. Those who claimed they worked hard and have not been rewarded have simply not worked hard enough.

The young today, they have it easy. And yet they complained about jobs and tuition nonstop. These young brats have always felt so entitled to everything, and yet they always, always, *always* wanted more. They were helpless, worthless, useless, and they were undeserving of any help, undeserving of any sympathy.

If *we* were able to make it through college while working a job and if we were able to eventually succeed as we have today, the young should have no problems. But all they ever did was complain. These slobs were so unwilling to work, but they were so willing to cry. *We* succeeded without any help from anyone. *You* have no right to complain.

And the youth today are the cancer causing everyone's problems.

20

Golden Age

In the swirling maelstrom of honking horns and rapid paced sidewalks, the well dressed, well combed, well behaved pedestrians made their way to work. They wore their suits and ties and slacks and blouses and were made to look professional, because that was the only way to get to the top. It was proven, it had worked in the past, and it was the final step to becoming a functioning person.

They walked the streets, shaded by the giant buildings of their employers, and they wandered into a forbidden world exclusive only to those who were intelligent. And they were no doubt intelligent, they were deemed intelligent by that degree they had earned. Their professors ensured they were ready for the real world. All that remained was that they should pay their dues.

They wandered the streets masqueraded in expensive clothing, driving expensive cars, always trying to impress their bosses and their colleagues. And they lived always in the shadow of the colossus. They went to school and they did what they were told to do, they did what everyone else would do. They did what they were supposed to do.

But they did not do what they wanted to do.

It was a golden age of entitlement.

It was a golden age of corporate entitlement. They felt entitled to cheap labor, free labor if they could get away with it. Everywhere you looked you could see it, cheap, free, abundant labor. It was simple business: explore, expand, exploit, exterminate.

Explore what will sell, mine their data, sell their data, sell products designed around their search results, around their search bubbles. Explore every resource possible.

Expand to more territories, go overseas if necessary, breach their phones and computers and find anything and everything we can use to monetize from them. Create better advertisements, let them know we have what they need: just buy some of these and everything will be alright.

Exploit them from birth, encourage them to become loyal customers to earn points, to earn exclusive offers. Look to maximize revenue while always aiming for the minimum possible pay. Harvest every cent they own.

Exterminate the competition and tell the world our products are best, they will be unable to tell for sure. Should we need to squash any internal dissent simply contact Human Resources, there are plenty of potential employees: they are a resource, an endless supply, hire someone, anyone, it makes no difference who.

The gushing, overflowing pool of unemployed is a dream come true: if one applicant refused to work cheaply, immediately a willing candidate will appear. All it took was for one person to cave and everyone else would lose leverage and they would have to settle for low pay.

It was an age of corporate entitlement to free art, free music, free articles, free photography, because companies were allowing artists to work on their passion. And these artists enjoyed doing this work, and that would be pay enough. It was a labor of love and the companies were oh so generous that they paid in exposure and business cards. But they were also paid in experience, highly desired experience. And it is required everywhere.

And yet when the economy took a hit, they did not know how to respond because the school had not taught that. To mask their fear they took it out on the young: told them to suck it up, to stop complaining. The degrees had taught them how to follow instructions, and fill out the paperwork. The degrees had not taught them how to adapt. And now they did not know what they were supposed to do.

They were taught to memorize and to pick one of four possible answers. All they cared for was earning a good grade rather than learning and loving to learn. Their knowledge was not stored in their minds, but written on their index cards, because grades were praised and that was the sole expression of one's intelligence.

Out of grief, not greed, jobs were shipped overseas to save money. But jobs were not destroyed, they were simply...relocated. Employees were let go due to budget cuts and a single person remained to do the job of two, three, four people, but would still be paid for the job of one.

How conveniently they forgot who had helped them on the road to success. Every day they would drive to work on the roads built by workers and paid for by the working people all across the country. They had built a successful company and they were not afraid because they were protected by a police force and a fire department that had been paid for by the working people across the country. Ever since they were young there were people who wanted to teach and encourage them, and their contemporaries sought the said and yet were paid ill. How easily they had forgotten they were bailed out of bankruptcy because of the people's money.

And yet they claimed no one helped them be successful and that they did not take handouts and that only the young were entitled.

And the corporations were the cancer that caused the problem in the first place.

The young were pummeled into the ground with advice and with words of wisdom, they were told to get a degree, to get a job, as if minimum pay had inflated with time, as if the only solution for dealing with tuition costs were to go into debt, as if diminishing returns were a non-factor. The world was built by old money and old philosophy and old frameworks that were rusting and decaying and crumbling under its own weight in the face of rapidly changing times.

But the young lacked the resources, lacked the experience, lacked the opportunity, lacked the representation, lacked the voice, lacked the power to do anything about it.

21

Ebb and Flow

From time to time, when business was no pressing matter, Shellshock would walk over to the apartment and spectate as the team practiced. When he would open the door, a shower of clicking and typing would reach his ears. The team would make the sound of rain, every input a separate drop of water tapping against his eardrum.

Though he would mostly see their backs he would still attend to their conversations. They always talked and joked and laughed together. They spoke of tactics and numbers and statistics. They traded advice, hints, tips, and pointers. Each of them wanted the other four to improve, and they did what they could to ensure they would be better players the following day.

Other than Tokyo and Rex the team had never met face to face, and yet they already spoke warmly to one another as if they had been friends for years. They grew up to the same books, and television, the same games, and music, and now here they shared the same goal.

He would stand behind them and watch them play, taking notes, jotting down each player's strength and each player's weaknesses. He would be there for them if they needed him, he would be willing to buy food for them or pick it up so that they would only ever think about and focus on the game.

When watching their streams he would see their eyes darting back and forth, he could see their reactions, he could see how they responded to everything. From their streams he could see their bright, glowing faces and he knew they were putting their all into the game and into the team. They were a mirror image of his younger and more competitive days. And in each of them he found remnants and pieces of himself.

And he understood full well that the curse of success was believing that what had worked the year prior, or five, or ten years ago would work in a newer age, and would bring success to a newer generation.

Only few people could ever nurture and raise and guide them as he was doing. And only few people could ever understand their motives and their work and their determination. And only few people could ever help them reach their potential as a team. And only he had provided them with the fertile playground they so desperately needed to achieve paramount success in a field that made mockery of all that had come before.

If Crescendo didn't type out her smilies, they would instead appear on her nimble face that seemed able to express every possible reaction possible with a keyboard. She would type out calls, type timers, and use all the pings whenever they were necessary. When viewers asked questions she would pull up Notepad, quickly type in her response, leave it on the screen a few seconds, and then drag it away. Her wandering fingers would constantly play with her hair; she would sweep at the blue daggers and

brush them to one side with the back of her hand. Whenever disappointed in her own play she would sink her head so that her hair covered her eyes.

At the top of her screen a sliding marquee of white text displayed the music she was listening to: “Piano Concerto No. 20 in D Minor, K. 466: II. Romance” - Mozart. And she listened to everything under the sun, music in every genre, music in every language. If the beat invoked the need she would bob her head; different parts of her face, neck, and shoulders played different instruments and she would embody the music. Only when in a tense situation did she sit still and focus fully on the game while the tip of her tongue found refuge on her upper lip.

When WildCat streamed he would often duo with Crescendo. They would change their practice methods from day to day. Some days they would play champions with excellent synergy, other days they would play champions that were counter productive on the same team. Some days they played aggressively, other days they played defensively. Some days they would attempt to stay in lane as long as possible before they were killed, other days they threatened their opponents so strongly and so recklessly as if wanting to end the game the very next minute. His mouse movement was perfect. Every game. All the time. He somehow played the game perfectly.

He encouraged the rest of his team, and his duo partner, to intentionally play poorly, to intentionally place themselves into bad situations, into trying circumstances. This way they knew what to do and how to react to unforeseen problems. Having placed themselves in unfavorable positions hundreds of times in the past would better serve them in a real match with far higher stakes. He continuously apologized for not setting up a section on his stream to display music but he always told his viewers when they asked: “To the Top by Scattle, from the *Hotline Miami* soundtrack.”

Panda would constantly switch windows between the game and his stream’s chat. He was, by a wide margin, the loudest member of the team when reacting to the game. When he chased for an easy kill, or fled from near death, he cried out and yelped, his screams spilling into his teammates’ mics and broadcasted on their streams. In-game he always fought down to his final hit point even if it meant risking the game. His mouse was also the fastest of anyone else’s. In spite of the rapid movement he was as precise and accurate at WildCat.

Above his minimap he set a region from his other monitor to display the music he was listening to: “In the Waiting Line” - Zero 7. He would hum to the music “...Do you believe in what you see? Motionless wheel, nothing is real...” then he would attend to a difficult situation in the game and resume humming “...Nine to five, living lies, everyday, stealing time...”

Rex would rarely stream, but when he did he would thoroughly explain his movement. He had very specific reasons: he knew where the enemy was going, he knew why they were going there. He knew timers for all objectives, as if he had them warded all the time. He spoke of hypotheticals whenever he could, if the enemy mid

laner reached level six before his mid laner, the game was likely lost. If top lane kept up the pressure the rest of the team would be able to win the game 4v4.

Between games he would read manga, always up to date with the most recent translated releases before sending the link to the rest of the team. His music, like Panda's and Tokyo's, was displayed above the minimap: "Pokemon GSC Route 27" - Junichi Masuda. They all listened to game music, but the viewers were convinced that Rex's selection of game music was best.

It had become a common joke that no one would be able to tell if Tokyo's player cam were replaced with a picture. His face hardly ever reacted to the game, he hardly ever repositioned himself in his chair, and hardly ever told his viewers why he did what he did. Unless duo queued with someone else it was unlikely he would ever say a word. His face was frozen steel but every now and then a pixel would twitch and his chat would explode and begin forming conspiracy theories involving kappas.

Above his minimap the text read "Know Your Enemy" - Rage Against the Machine. In silence and with nothing other than blinks he played and listened "...Compromise, conformity, assimilation, submission, ignorance, hypocrisy, brutality, the elite, all of which are American dreams..."

And they practiced, practiced, practiced, from sunrise to sunset, working to hone their skills, to improve as individuals, to improve as a unit, to improve as a team.

22

Collateral Damage

Tokyo's phone rang for the second time.

"Can you steal?"

"Gonna try."

"Panda you got Flash?"

"Twenty seconds."

"Baron's at three thousand."

"Ready?"

"Go, go, go."

[42:14] **coL Ikarus (Kha'Zix) has slain Baron Nashor!**

"Fuck!"

"M'going on Sinik."

"*Fuckin'*!...ugh...I positioned like shit."

[42:18] Crescendo (Lulu) signals to be careful

[42:20] **Sinik has slain DeusRex for a double kill!**

"That went well."

[42:25] **Sinik has slain NeoTokyo for a triple kill!**

"F'you die, that's game."

"D'you've Flash?"

"Nope."

[42:32] **coL Ikarus has slain WildCat for a double kill!**

[42:32] **Enemy team has scored an ace!**

[42:37] **[All] Miss Ink (Lux): gg**

[42:38] **[All] Crescendo (Lulu): gg**

[42:40] **[All] WildCat (Vayne): :(**

Defeat.

The tense team sighed and eased in unison, their shoulders sinking back to their natural position as the red Defeat screen popped up.

"Don't beat yourselves up, guys," Shellshock said in a calm tone. He stood behind the players, his eyes peering down at his phone. "Remember, Collateral have been playing together for about two years. Just keep your heads up and learn from the loss. We can afford to lose these practice games, but we still have to learn from them."

He looked up from his phone met only by silence and the backs of the players. Tokyo and Rex sat with frozen, pensive grimaces as their monitors displayed the post-game lobby. WildCat's cursor dashed from number to number on the post-game stats as he cross-referenced items, damage dealt, and all the other possible data he could collect.

His gaze dropped back to his phone and he announced "Hoplite says they're still down for a third game if you guys want."

Tokyo's phone rang once again. He exhaled loudly, and stood up, "Let me just answer this before the next game." As he walked out the door he pulled the phone up to his ear and "What?" he asked sternly, quietly closing the door behind himself.

"Shelly, my butt's already sore," Panda whined, "I don't wanna get wrecked anymore." He began reaching out toward the left of his monitors, then suspended his hand in the air, a puzzled look on his face, "Wh...where'd my panda go?" He spun his chair, quickly shifting his gaze around the room. Then he jumped off his chair and on all fours began searching beneath his desk. The cables underneath were too entangled and he shuffled his hands around, careful not to disconnect them.

To no avail, he sat back in his chair scratching his head. "Hmm," he mused, hiding his upper lip in his mouth.

Crescendo spun her chair around and waved her hand in Panda's direction. When he finally looked over she pointed to his screen.

(17:39) Crescendo: You didn't hear this from me :p
I saw Tokyo taking it into his room

WildCat snickered, leaning in on his armrest to read, "Ha! That's so troll. Maybe you can take something from his desk," he quickly suggested, "and then, like, trade it for the panda."

"Hey, s'actually a good idea, Kitty." Panda leaped out of his chair, walked over to Tokyo's desk and began scanning for valuables.

There was a loud bang against a wall accompanied by Tokyo roaring "*That's the point!*" Instantly Panda jumped in his place, his shoulders jolting up.

All heads turned toward the door and all eyes turned toward Shellshock. Rex walked to the door and was ready to turn the doorknob before Tokyo's voice again thundered through the walls.

"I did *everything* you said, everything every *teacher* said, and shit's *still* fucked up!"

Rex's fingers slowly retreated from the doorknob and into his palms.

"Your wisdom doesn't mean *shit* if you're *fucking wrong!*"

Rex sighed quietly and slowly walked back to his station.

"Wanna know what your wisdom and advice is worth?" Tokyo's voice continued leaking through the walls, "*Thousands* of fucking dollars in debt with *no* fucking job!"

Rex sank into his chair grabbing his copy of *The Art of War*, and skimmed through the pages re-reading the text he had highlighted.

"Honestly? *You really* think *I* care what *you* think is a good idea anymore?"

They sat in silence, fidgeting with whatever they found nearest to their hands.

"You need to stop *glorifying* education as if there's nothing wrong with it!"

In a low voice Shellshock spoke to the rest of the team, "Maybe we'll just end the scrim for today."

"You don't *get* to be disappointed. It's time I become disappointed in *you!*"

They sat in silence, eyes staring at the floor.

“Just watch me!” Tokyo growled.

He reentered the apartment letting the door swing close on its own, in his hands he finished removing the battery from his phone.

The team sat in their seats, Shellshock sat on the kitchen counter, and they were quiet. Their eyes followed Tokyo as he sat down and loudly dropped the phone on his desk, and they all sat still. He put his headset back on and the team’s faces were expressionless and they said nothing.

Tokyo let out a long, hard breath of air, and his voice returned to the normal monotony, “Let’s play.”

“Geoff, let’s just postpone the scrim,” Shellshock said in a low, calm voice. “How about we just relax for the rest of the day?”

With eyes still locked to his monitor Tokyo took a long sip of water from his bottle. “I’m being paid to practice. Let’s practice,” his back still turned to the team. Everyone else continued sitting in silence.

Shellshock scratched the back of his head, “How about we talk about it in private?”

Tokyo scrolled through his Twitter feed, every now and then clicking the favorite button. He exhaled loudly, and hesitantly responded, “Later...after this game.” He placed the back end of a pen into his mouth and began softly gnawing on it.

“You sure?” Shellshock asked.

“Yes,” Tokyo replied instantly. “Now let’s play.”

The rest of the team sat still and sat silent. Some of them kept their eyes on Shellshock, some stared at their monitors, but all of them sat silent. After a while Shellshock hesitantly pulled his eyes away from Tokyo, turned and half-nodded at the rest of the team.

Members of both teams joined the new lobby and Shellshock cleared the air, “Alright guys, new game. Forget that last game. It doesn’t matter anymore and what’s done is done. Now let’s start thinking through this next game.”

coL Theosis: ready when u are guys

Tokyo pressed ‘Start Game’ and the champion list on his screen lit up for the first ban.

“I wanna hear talking,” Shellshock said. “If you’re silent or not typing during pick/ban phase, you’re not part of the team. Mention any useful information: bans, comps, picks, strats, talk it all through.”

“We’re blue side?” Panda asked.

“Mhm. What are we banning first?” Tokyo asked.

The team sat in silence as the ban timer ran down four, five, six seconds.

Crescendo: Let’s try poke comp this game.

“Um...I could play Xerath...Lux...does Karthus count as poke?” Panda asked.

Crescendo: :p

“It could if you play a particular style,” Tokyo said, “but seriously, what’s our first ban?”

“We could take out Lee,” Rex suggested, “or Braum. That’d be a nice ban too.”

“Good. Keep talking,” Shellshock’s voice rang, “keep throwing out names. Keep each other informed. What did your teammates miss? Be there to fill in the gap.”

The ban timer continued downward.

“Ten seconds on first ban,” Panda blurted.

“Ban Gnar. Gnar, Gnar, Gnar,” Rex said.

With few seconds left on the timer Tokyo banned Gnar.

“Okay. That ban came out of nowhere,” Shellshock said, “but do you all understand the logic behind that ban?”

“Gap-closing engage with good CC?” Panda asked with a slight quiver to his voice.

“Yes, good,” Shellshock praised, “but I want more talking for this next ban. Once Collateral bans, think through their logic and reasoning. Why would they ban what they just banned? What do they have in mind?”

“Do we want to pick Janna early? Or first?” Tokyo asked, “Or do we want to give them the chance to pick it away from us?”

Rex through out a hypothetical “What if they ban Janna or Nami?”

“They’ll only ban both if they deduce we’re going poke based solely on the Gnar ban,” Tokyo argued.

Crescendo: So what are our next bans?

Crescendo: And what are our picks for this poke comp?

“What are we doing for disengage?” Panda asked.

Crescendo: We can do Janna, Nami, Braum

She scrolled up and down the champion list and suggested

Crescendo: For poke we can pick Jayce, Xerath, Ziggs

Crescendo: Lux, Cait, Ez, Corki

Crescendo: Varus, Nid

“We can ban Sion, Mumu, Sejuani, Maokai” Rex said. “Or if we want to ban assassins we could ban Akali, Diana, LeBlanc.”

“Good. One of you is listing picks. The other is listing bans. What else needs to be discussed in pick and ban phase?” Shellshock asked.

Collateral banned and Tokyo’s champion list lit up.

“They banned Lee,” Tokyo said and then threw out ideas “Pantheon, Malphite. Ahri, Irelia, if they’re going for a pick comp.”

“What about synergy in our comp?” WildCat asked.

“If we ban another AoE CC with engage they might figure out we’re going poke,” Rex thought.

Crescendo: If we have good vision

Crescendo: We don't have to worry about banning short ranged AoE CC.

“So Panth's a good ban,” Rex said.

Crescendo: Yeah.

Crescendo: Everyone good with the Panth ban?

“Agreed,” Tokyo said.

“Sounds good,” WildCat added.

“This okay,” Panda cheered.

Tokyo banned Pantheon and asked “What are we doing level one?”

Crescendo: Might need vision on buffs

Crescendo: And depending on what they pick

Crescendo: Might also have to ward lanes

Crescendo: To watch for lane swaps

“What's our last ban gonna be?” Tokyo asked.

“I'm thinking Leona, Braum, Sion,” Rex replied.

Collateral banned Thresh and Tokyo's champion list regained color.

“Braum and Yasuo can block our poke,” WildCat said.

Crescendo: They have long cds

Crescendo: We can use that window to spam poke

“Kalista could add long range initiation. Could be a good last ban,” Rex suggested.

Crescendo: Kalista could bring long range engage with a Galio or something

Crescendo: Sej, Kalista, Rammus

Crescendo: Braum, Yasuo, Vi

“Mark me down for Sejuani or Kalista,” Tokyo droned.

“I'd rather a Kalista ban,” Rex said.

Crescendo: Panda? Kitty? Kalista ban?

“Yeah, Kalista,” WildCat said.

“Yup. Sounds good,” said Panda.

Tokyo banned Kalista.

A heartbeat later Collateral banned Janna and Tokyo's champion list came to life.

“Aight. They know we're going poke,” Rex said. “Anything we want to pick away? Or is there something we really want?”

Crescendo: Their longest range engages could be Leo, Braum, Sion, Sej,

Crescendo: Zac, Rek'Sai, Malph

“Sion's pretty easy to avoid,” Rex said.

“Leona’s ult has a pretty fast animation after cast-time,” Tokyo said.

“I could poke and have an escape with Cait and Corki. And I guess if we go late game Trist,” WildCat added.

Crescendo: I can play Leo or Nami.

Crescendo: Use ult only as counter-engage

Crescendo: Unless we catch them out of position.

“We could go hella old-school Corki-Leona bot lane!” WildCat exclaimed.

Crescendo: So if we pick Leo it takes away engage from them

Crescendo: And adds counter-engage/peel for us.

Crescendo: Everyone good with Leona?

“Yeh. Lock it in, Tokerino,” Panda said.

“Sounds good to me,” Rex said.

Tokyo locked in Leona and his list grayed out. “What are our next picks?”

Crescendo: Could be Corki if they don’t pick it.

“What’s going in our jungle? Not much poke or disengage there,” Panda figured.

“Lee ult could serve as disengage,” Rex claimed.

“Rek’Sai could act as some poke, and she could maybe disengage,” Tokyo added.

Collateral locked in Lulu and Orianna, and instantly Rex and Panda’s champion list lit up.

“Could be Top or Support Lulu,” WildCat considered.

“Shit, if they pick a good gap closer they can engage really good,” Panda groaned.

“Definitely need escape on Kitty, then,” Rex said. “Corki might be our best pick.

Unless we get Ez.”

“Ez is just a shitty Corki,” WildCat said, “Corki does more damage with his poke.”

Crescendo: So Rek’Sai and Corki this round?

The team agreed and the picks were locked in.

“Do we still need poke from Top?” Tokyo asked.

“Yeah. But let’s see what they pick, though,” Rex said.

Collateral simultaneously locked in Olaf and Shyvana, and instantly WildCat and Crescendo’s champion list lit up.

“Oh fuck,” Panda said. “GG.”

“Gonna need something to get to their back line, I think,” Rex said.

Crescendo: Ireliia could work.

“You think you can handle their frontline on your own, George?” Tokyo asked.

“Um. If we don’t get caught outta position we should be fine.”

“I’m thinking Renekton here. I’ll just zone their back line and soak the damage,” Tokyo proposed. “If Panda gets some CC with his poke that might give you guys some time to stop Shyvana.”

“Xerath has a decent stun,” Panda suggested. “I could also try Vel’Koz, but I haven’t played him much.”

“Aight. So sounds like Xerath and Renekton for last picks?” Rex recollected.

Crescendo: Sounds good.

“Mhm,” Tokyo hummed.

“Yeah. Do it,” WildCat said.

They locked in their picks and thought out their scenarios.

“So they *could* lane swap here if they really wanna,” Rex speculated.

“Doesn’t really matter what ADC they pick either,” WildCat said.

“I’ll be fine ever if they do,” Tokyo ensured the team.

“Yeah, just make sure Blue doesn’t get behind. I’mma stick around Mid and Bot. If you need any help just let me know, Geoff.”

“Mhm.”

Collateral locked in Graves and the players traded champions. The timer counted down as the players double checked their Summoner Spells, Runes, and Masteries.

“This pick and ban was better,” Shellshock finally said. “If we keep getting better each time we’ll be in a good spot. Now let’s play the game out.”

The loading screen popped up and everyone quickly loaded in.

Bloodfury Renekton NeoTokyo	Rek’Sai DeusRex	Xerath Pandango	Urfrider Corki WildCat	Pool Party Leona Crescendo
Ice Drake Shyvana coL Typhergus	Brolaf coL Ikarus	Bladecraft Orianna Miss Ink	Mafia Graves Sinik	Lulu coL Theosis

“Don’t waste time in the loading screen, guys. What’s the plan?”

“Even if they lane swap it doesn’t matter, so we need vision on river to see if they’re gonna invade,” Rex uttered.

“So we stick together?” Panda asked.

They spawned in on the Blue side, quickly purchased their items, and waited for the spawn walls to drop.

[00:01] Pandango (Xerath) purchased **Warding Totem (Trinket)**

[00:01] WildCat (Corki) purchased **Warding Totem (Trinket)**

[00:02] NeoTokyo (Renekton) purchased **Warding Totem (Trinket)**

[00:03] Crescendo (Leona) purchased **Relic Shield**

[00:04] Crescendo (Leona) purchased **Warding Totem (Trinket)**

[00:05] DeusRex (Rek’Sai) purchased **Warding Totem (Trinket)**

Pings appeared around top-side river, a reminder of ward placements. Once there Tokyo and Rex dropped vision, careful not to be spotted, and even more wary not to be get caught.

Panda, WildCat, and Crescendo walked tightly together around bottom-side river dropping the defensive wards they had planned for situations like this. As they moved they threw skillshots where they suspected Collateral might be, distrusting the darkness of the fog of war.

When they secured their desired vision they moved the map and waited in silence as the clock ticked onward.

[00:18] [All] Miss Ink (Orianna): anyone play the new ahri yet?

[00:25] [All] Pandango (Xerath): not yet

[00:26] [All] Pandango (Xerath): she any good?

[00:32] [All] Crescendo (Leona): Support Ahri incoming.

[00:34] [All] Pandango (Xerath): ayy lmao

[00:39] [All] Miss Ink (Orianna): she's too stronk

[00:43] [All] Miss Ink (Orianna): rito's gonna nerf her again lol

[00:48] [All] Pandango (Xerath): :C

The clock ticked onward as jungle camps spawned, but no invade came, and no ward revealed Collateral's whereabouts.

"Tch. I'm startin on top-side jungle," Rex said.

Panda clicked toward Mid and then toward top-side jungle while WildCat and Crescendo made their way to Bot lane. They sat and waited in the brush closer to their turret, uncertain where Collateral hid.

[00:59] Crescendo (Leona) signals that enemies are missing

A question mark appeared above the brush across the river.

"Ehh, look at my mana, lol," WildCat said.

[01:03] Crescendo (Leona): O

[01:03] Crescendo (Leona): lol

[01:04] Crescendo (Leona): Nvm then.

When minions met in lane Collateral's Bot and Mid emerged from the darkness, and the clicking and clacking of mice and keyboards filled the air.

"Ikarus started top-side jungle. Probably started Red," Rex announced.

"How can you tell?" Panda asked.

"Top's still MIA, Bot showed in lane."

"Miss Ink's in lane though," Panda said as he dropped some damage onto his opponent.

Rex finished clearing a camp and moved on to the next, "Yeah, cuz Miss Ink never leashes."

"Oh really? I never noticed that, actually."

"You might want to start noticing the tiny details, Panda," Tokyo suggested, "They might help you win."

"Collateral's done that in every LCS game they've played," Rex cited.

"Why would I do that when I can just shit on them in lane? Look, she's already half health," he giggled after landing more poke.

As a cluster they walked back toward their jungle and safely recalled as Collateral passed over Panda's ward.

"Good! Good shit," Shellshock praised. "Great fucking job! Keep it up."

[04:46] DeusRex (Rek'Sai) purchased Vision Ward

[04:48] Crescendo (Leona) purchased Sweeping Lens (Trinket)

[04:48] Crescendo (Leona) purchased Sightstone

[04:49] Crescendo (Leona) purchased Vision Ward

[04:52] NeoTokyo (Renekton) purchased Vision Ward

[04:54] Pandango (Xerath) purchased Vision Ward

"How'd you know to TP?" Rex asked as the team left base full-health with newly acquired items.

"Ward near Dragon spotted him before it died. His icon just showed up near the river brush so I knew he Flashed over the wall."

"Damn, Tokerino, you must watch the minimap like a hawk."

"Mhm. Gotta keep an eye on the big picture."

The team returned to their respective lanes and the game moved onward, the game timer continually counting on and on.

A while went along without a word and Shellshock intervened, "Guys, I don't hear talking. This isn't Solo Queue. George, if no one's talking I need you to ask who needs help. I need you asking where wards are, who has Flash, who doesn't. I need you asking cooldown timers. Keep talking, guys. If George isn't talking I need someone else taking initiative."

"I can help Top or Mid soon," Rex said. "Let me know Flashes and stuff."

Tokyo pinged the brush behind Collateral's Blue camp, "Ikarus just passed by. Might have to go Mid, George."

"You have trinket up, Panda?" Rex asked.

"Nah, still on cooldown."

"TP two minutes," Tokyo informed the team.

Patiently they waited, they were half-silent, muttering few words here and there. They were tense and they waited, ready to react at a moment's notice. But the moment never came.

"He might've backed," Rex thought. "Either way, stay alert at Mid and tell me if Miss Ink starts playing aggressively."

"Sure thing, dudebro," Panda confirmed.

"Are all our trinket wards on the field?" Tokyo asked.

"Not mine, but we're warded," WildCat told the team.

"George wanna Pink that brush near Red?"

"Uh, sure. I'll be up there in a bit. His Red might be up soon, too."

"Panda try to hug the top-side of Mid in case they find us," Tokyo commanded.

"Got it, Tokerino."

“They fucked up that Bot lane fight,” Tokyo mused. “Game would’ve been harder if they didn’t.” He let out a loud breath as if he had inhaled a great big clump of air, then leaned his head back against his chair and closed his eyes. He remained still and silent as he absorbed both the music and the sounds around him.

“Excellent teamwork this game, guys,” Shellshock applauded. “The first victory of many more to come. Really awesome work.”

“Tch, yeah, son. That was like ARoD Plus. I bet the boys’d be so proud.”

On the post-game lobby WildCat again browsed all the numbers and fit together all the pieces of data in order to paint a complete picture of the match. He stared at the numbers and the graphs intently, then opened his browser and compared the game with other high-level matches from Korean servers.

Crescendo opened a text document, scrolled down the many pages full of text, and began her rapid typing on the newest page. Every now and then she looked back at the team from the corner of her eyes only to return to her screen and continue writing it all down.

Shellshock’s phone rang and he answered immediately, “Hey, Pete.” He listened for a bit and returned, “Yes, actually. Also, I think Panda wants to tell you something,” he turned his phone toward Panda who yelled out “Get wrecked, boys!”

A loud, hearty laughter spilled from the phone, and then returned to conversation level. “Thanks, man. Means a lot.” He listened some more, and then surprised responded “Oh, really? You’d do that?...Fucking awesome, dude...Right on...Yeah, thanks a bunch...Like good old times, right?...Sweet. Also, CS:GO soon?...Okay, hit me up when you can...Peace, Petey.”

He returned his attention to team, “Okay, so Hoplite’s impressed. And he’s actually impressed enough that he says he’ll try to talk Royale and Ampersand into setting up some scrim blocks with us.”

“Oh, for real?” Panda asked.

“Unless he was troll me. But he wouldn’t on something like this.”

“Awesome! Now we’ll have even more butts to kick,” Panda exclaimed.

“That’s the idea,” Shellshock said. He gazed over and found Tokyo, who had freed one ear of his headset and now sat relaxed with shoulders lowered.

“How about we take the rest of the day off? I think I’ve been pushing you guys a bit much recently. How’s that sound?”

“You serious, Simon?” Rex asked.

“Yeah. You guys deserve it. Especially after that game.”

“Okay, man. You’re the boss,” WildCat said elated.

“As a matter of fact, let’s take tomorrow off too. I’ll take you guys out to see the city. We’ll look at landmarks and anything else you guys are interested in.”

“Oh yeah! I forgot we were in New York,” Panda said. “Whoops.”

“Sounds like fun,” Tokyo droned from his seat.

“Glad you guys think so. So no more League today. And no League tomorrow, either. Just do something relaxing. Sound good, Sonia?”

She held a thumbs up to acknowledge.

“Awesome. Enjoy the rest of the day. If you wanna talk about anything you know where to find me.” He looked to Tokyo again and “Geoff, you want to have that talk now or some other time?”

“Now, I guess.” He slowly rose from his seat, put his headset on the armrest and followed Shellshock out the apartment.^H

As the door closed the rapid typing and clicking and clacking continued to emanate from the room.^X

23

Patience and Fortitude

Although plenty of yellow-morning rays spewed in through the windows, the rough-white apartments lights illuminated the glimmering wooden floor and bounced back from the milky white walls. Some of them were accustomed to playing in the dark, but Shellshock, careful to monitor and upkeep the quality of the team, made it policy to have lights on and prevent eye strain. It was a strange thing he had encountered, that few people in this line of work took suitable measures to keep their eyes healthy.

Panda strolled into the room letting out a contagious wide-mouthed yawn.¹ Three desks and seats were vacant, and other than the team banner and a new poster on Tokyo's wall, the walls remained a blinding bare white.

"Oh snap, what's this thing?" Panda's cool, minty breath radiated the area.

On the poster's forefront was a fist held straight up to the air, a black tattoo of three chain links at the wrist. Above the image the text read "A man chooses" and below "A slave obeys." A signature in silver ink ran over the poster's glossy finish.

"Yo," Rex peered over toward Panda just enough to meet his eyes, his right hand still moving his mouse around, "you never played Bioshock?"

"Ehh. *Nu*. Who signed it?"

Tokyo froze a second, hung his headset around his neck and at snail's pace spun his seat to face Panda. Staring Panda in the eyes with his usual unwavering, blank stare, he slowly droned out "You really don't know who Ken Levine is?"

"Sh...should I?" Panda asked with wide eyes.

"Do you know who Neil Druckmann is?" Tokyo continued.

"Was he, like, a singer for a band or something like that?"

After a few seconds Rex chuckled at Panda's guess. "Geoff, you're last man standing. Bomb's near A Long."

Tokyo rolled his chair away from his desk. "Play for me," he told Rex. Turning back to Panda he continued, "Who's Shigeru Miyamoto?"

"Gimme your headset, you fuck!" Rex extended his hand as he rolled to Tokyo's desk.

"Real men don't need sound to win," Tokyo said dryly. He quickly turned back to Panda and "Who's Miyamoto?" he insisted.

"He made Zelda and Pokemon, right?" Panda asked with shifty eyes.

"Okay. So who's Neil Druckmann?"

Rex rolled back to his own desk, put on his headset and spoke into the mic. "Scumbag Geoff's testin' Panda on game developers."

"Wha!?" Panda yelled, "I don't know any people who make games."

1 He would have infected the others if their eyes and ears were at all aware he had yawned.

“Why not?” Tokyo asked sliding back to his computer. “Don’t you think you should know the people who create the art you enjoy?”

Panda squealed out loudly, “Video games aren’t *art*. They’re just people running around killing each other.”

“Panda,” Rex lamented, “may Geoff have mercy on your soul.”

“What’d I do?”

“What makes you say games aren’t art?” Tokyo asked, his attention still on his computer, and with intention behind every word.

“I mean, isn’t art supposed to be...uh...something...of expression? Something that starts with the letter M?” Panda mused.

“Medium of expression, yes,” Tokyo quickly spat out.

“Yeah, that. But no one’s expressing anything through games, right?”

Rex let out a delayed snicker, “Now he’ll never shut up.”

“You’d call—throwing Smoke Nade—you’d call music art, right?”

“Well yeah.”

“And you’d also call theater art, wouldn’t you?”

“Umm, I guess so,” Panda half-asked.

“You’d call damn near anything Shakespeare wrote art, wouldn’t you?”

“I hate Shakespeare!” Panda blurted out, “But yeah, my teachers said it was art, so I guess it is.”

“Really, Panda? You’re shitting me right now, right? You’ve gotta be.”

“*What?* What’d I say this time?” Panda cried, his arms flailing around wildly.

“Shelly, I dropped the bomb at B, time to go super tryhard,” Rex told his headset, “And I don’t think you can rely on Geoff.”

“*I’m here,*” Tokyo croaked into his mic, “Take the bomb and I’ll cover your ass, Simon. And throw a nade at fence.”

As Tokyo and Shellshock crouched around the map, Panda slowly and silently tiptoed away toward his own desk.

Tokyo noticed from the corner of his eye and called “Dude, I’m done with you yet. Get back here.”

Panda jumped the rest of the way onto his chair and protested, “Nope! Floor’s lava!”

“Ugh, fine. We’ll continue later,” Tokyo promised as he returned to the game. From his seat, the victorious Panda snickered through his teeth, hissing at short intervals.

Rex, Tokyo, and Shellshock moved around the brown and gray and dusty map carefully and coordinated. They called out areas and players and weapons whenever necessary, and changed up their strategy at a moment’s notice. They won shortly after,² Rex expressing “I don’t even know how we won that shit. You’re too heavy, Geoff.”

And Tokyo fired back “I haven’t played in forever, dude.”

2 The text on their screens reading “Terrorists Win”

“No johns, man.”

Tokyo stammered on a response, then waved it away with a “Whatever.”

Shellshock entered, immediately asking “WildCat up yet?”

“Nope. Prob'ly still sleeping like a baby,” Panda muttered. On his monitor a yellow crest with blue banners read “Your Turn” while a card was being drawn from a deck.

“Anyone know what time he went to bed?” the old man asked walking down the hallway. He knocked on the door twice, “Jason, wake up. We’re waiting on you.”

“Damn, man, I fucking suck at this game,” Panda groaned.

Rex, leaning over to get a better view suggested he “Should prob'ly clear the board first. Oh, and Priest is pretty annoying to be honest. Heals for days.”

“Soraka sucks.”

“Not this one.”

“By the way, Rex,” Shellshock began, “I didn’t realize it until we played just now, but you sound kind of like the guy from that ‘door stuck’ video. That’s not you, is it?”

“Oh shit, he kinda does sound like him,” Tokyo affirmed turning to face them.

“What video is this?” the perplexed Rex asked.

“Dude, it sounds just like you,” Tokyo said rolling over to Rex’s desk. “Search for ‘Door Stuck.’ Should be the first one if the years’ve treated it well.”

Grumbling quietly, Rex turned to look up the aforementioned video, if only to quell the commotion in the room. By now Panda had also joined the group of spectators around Rex.³

“*Ob snap!*” Panda hollered, his arms waving in the air, “That *is* you, Rex!”

“I mean, I guess it kinda sounds like me, but trust me, that ain’t me.”

“No need to be so modest, George,” Shellshock added. “It’s fine if you don’t know how doors work.”

“Q, q,” Rex said dryly.

“Y’know, looking at this video again,” Tokyo thought, “I never realized how well the animations fit in with the player’s voice. This could easily pass for a machinima if you take out the HUD and shit.”

“*Again* with animations, Geoff?” Rex wept with his voice.

“I know, I know, but still, the running and jumping and prancing around all really sell the video. Just goes to show good animations make a game look visually good regardless of art direction.”

“You plannin’ on making a game or something, Tokerino?”⁴

“No, I’ve just read a lot about game design. And speaking of, someone at Volvo worked on that character model and those animations, just like someone at Rito worked on Karthus and his animations. That’s hours of work. And someone spent the time working on game assets and music and then pieced it all together.”

3 With wild hair flattened in all directions WildCat slowly walked into the bathroom, wondering why a crowd had formed at the desks.

4 Shellshock slipped away toward the refrigerator to check how supplies were doing.

“Fshwa,” Panda waved his hand, “they’re not expressing themselves, though.”

“Sure they are. The kinds of characters they make and the style with which they make characters are definitely art.”

“I dunno, Tokerino, sounds like you’re hella reaching. Sounds hella sketch.”

“When we get back I’ll link you to Double Fine’s development documentaries. If that’s not enough to convince you games are art, then I’ll know for sure you’re trolling the shit outta me.”

Panda snickered silently with a wide smile on his face, “Okay, sounds fair to me.”

When the team was finally ready they departed, leaving behind the game, the gaming house, and all worries of work. They walked up and down the rank and file of the grid-like streets of the city and explored its many regions, and they talked to its many people of many cultures and of many languages. And the people were always open to talk, and they were always so readily friendly, and they all spoke a common language because their commas were profanities.

And away from home they forgot the troubles of the game as they ate food from all across the world that had somehow found its way to a tiny family-run restaurant in the middle of the city. They took pictures of their adventures and sent them to their parents and their friends, many of whom would most likely never see the city with their own eyes.

They posted some of their adventures on social media as well, and they were instantly flooded with responses from their fans and from other aspiring pro players, and from salaried pro players. While parts of the community were quick to respond negatively and harshly and critically, they also saw and enjoyed the parts of the community that made the struggle worthwhile.

When among the floods and tides and streams of pedestrians, they seamlessly blended into the fast-paced crowd that always sped in every direction accompanied with the tapping and clacking of old, worn soles. The team members native to the city taught the visitors the art of crossing at the red light, and the art of dodging the citizens that always sped through the streets. And all it took was awareness and timing and rapid calculation, all things that were necessary in their line of work.

While traversing the many places of the city few people recognized them, much to their surprise. The life and joy and smiles and excitement of their fans further encouraged the players. When they returned, they would put in even more effort than they had been if such a thing were even possible. They took photos together and signed any piece of paper they could find, and even in the middle of their busy day they were willing to support their favorite players.

The fans lamented the fact that they weren’t carrying their mousepads and their keyboards for the players to sign, but Shellshock promised he would set up a meet and greet in the future for an opportunity to do so. And everyone’s excitement grew again.

They visited one of the few surviving arcades in the city, and in a massive floor large cabinets were cared for and put on display like the antiques and treasures they were. The motley collection of games drew them in, and like the children they were they played and competed for hours. And try as they might, no one managed to break any of the high scores. Players initialed HAL and SEB and ASS had already claimed the top spots across multiple games.

But one of them managed to claim tenth place on the top ten scores, and the initials were aptly writ FFG. Some of them vowed to return some day to practice those games again and again and again to reach the top, for it was in their blood.

As daylight sunk, consumed and absorbed by the night sky that loomed overhead, streetlamps shone over the always-busy streets. Even as darkness covered the streets, the city did not relent and cower and return to their homes.

The zest and zeal of the city, and the business and work hours of some, persisted well into the night hours. Some forgot of their troubles in the loud and packed bars all around the city, while others sought refuge and comfort from their own troubles alone or with another in enclaves of art and entertainment. And some forgot of their troubles in their offices and forgot who they were because they worked and worked and worked, because one day they would be at the top, even if it meant killing themselves and who they were in the process.

And across miles of skyline, sporadic city lights from the highest skyscrapers danced and dazzled and sparkled, replacing the stars that ought to shine brightly in the dark sky.

"Anyway, before we head back I felt it'd be nice to visit these guys," Shellshock pointed at two lion sculptures resting atop a set of steps.

Panda, Crescendo, and WildCat ran up, skipping over a few steps, toward one of the lions. Tapping its head Panda confidently asked "This is, like, one of those things people rub to get good luck or something, right?"

"Mmm, not quite," Shellshock peered in Rex direction as he started up the steps, "You know, though, don't you, George?"

"Yeah," he replied lightly following behind him, "I forget their names but it was to inspire people during the Great Depression. It was LaGuardia, right, Geoff?"

"Yeah. Patience and Fortitude," Tokyo droned, walking ever so slowly behind Shellshock and Rex. "LaGuardia named them after the qualities he thought we'd need to survive, endure, and overcome the depression."

"Like the name of the airport Shelly picked me up!" Panda yelled excitedly, now sitting atop the lion with WildCat and Crescendo.⁵

"The very same LaGuardia," Shellshock confirmed.

"Honestly, despite how corny it may sound," Tokyo spoke softly, "we probably need patience and fortitude again ever since the 2008 financial crisis."

⁵ They took photos of themselves atop the lion, sticking out their tongues, making silly grimaces, and holding bunny ears behind one another's heads.

“I think I’d agree with that,” Shellshock echoed the sentiment. “Shit’s rough for some people. And I know our own plight isn’t as grave or dire as some other people’s situations, but even so, I think we could make use of a little patience and fortitude ourselves. There are a rough set of weeks ahead of us.”

When they grew bored of the lions they began for home, back to their training grounds, to once again engulf themselves in nothing but practice, practice, practice.

Practice, practice, practice with patience and fortitude.

24

Lost in Translation

“Awright, I’m up. Let’s get to it,” Shellshock announced entering the room. He took a sip from his mug, set it down on the coffee table at the center, and when he looked up he was immediately overcome by the urge to yawn. He covered his mouth and then “Damn it, Jorge!” he yelled, “stop yawning.”

“Oh, sorry, Shelly,” Panda said as he yawned once more, covering his mouth with his arm.

“Okay, before we reintegrate with our practice regiment I just wanna go over a few things.” He peered down at his notebook and continued, “Regarding the scrim session against Collateral: those matches were pretty much Solo Queue games. We’ve obviously got a lot of work to do, both on an individual level and as a team. We need to be able to consistently replicate that last game.”

Shellshock noticed Tokyo sitting with eyes closed and inquired, “Geoff, you awake?”

And “Mhm,” he replied without moving a muscle.

“Okay. So as always the highest priority for us is going to be consistent practice. Keep working on your champion pools and keep those mechanics refined. Next on the to-do list is duo queuing. I need you guys to keep working on your communication.

“Third: I’m going to have individual meetings with all of you, and after that round of meetings I’ll have meetings with two or three of you at a time.”

He picked up his mug from the table and took a long sip, then went on “And lastly, and this is a new thing,” he stressed, “from this point onward drop the Shelly and Shellshock and Simon. Just say Coach from now on.”

“Tch, sure thing, Coach,” Rex said.

“But...but what’s wrong with saying Shelly?” Panda asked sadly.

“Nothing. I’m just trying something.”

“Oh. Alright. If you say so, Coach.”

“Any questions on what you should be doing today?” Shellshock asked and waited a while as he quickly scanned the team’s eyes.

“Noperino,” WildCat said after a few seconds of silence under.

“Okay, then. So let’s head back to practice,” he gestured them up off their seats and dismissed the team. “And Sonia, office,” he declared, pointing in the general direction of the office with this thumb.

The team headed for the door and in his typically excited manner Panda said “Yo, Rex, let’s duo! I wanna try some hella aggro plays today.”

Rex eagerly replied “Tch. Son, last time you tried playing aggro you Flashed into four in fog of war.”

They left the apartment but some bickering words still persisted through the closed door.

“Alright, let’s go,” Shellshock said as he picked up his notepads from the coffee table and headed for his office. He took a seat at his computer and invited Crescendo to sit on the chair against the wall nearest the door.

He flipped through some of the pages of his notepad and then turned his attention to Crescendo. “Okay, so we’ve been a team together for a short while now. Do you have any thoughts on any players so far? Or are there any other ideas formulating in your mind?” his chin lodged in his palm which was raised against the chair’s armrest.

She woke her tablet and tapped at the screen a few times. Before she began typing she pointed at Shellshock’s computer and gestured typing with her fingers.

“Hmm?” he asked.

Crescendo pointed at his computer again.

“You want to use my computer?”

She nodded.

“Yeah, sure thing,” he agreed sliding his chair to the side.

She opened a word processing program and began typing with her lightning fast fingers:

– I figured this would be easier than handing over the tablet after each sentence :p

“Ah, I see. I like your idea.”

– So I’ve been thinking about managing the team during the game without being shotcaller and I think I might have something that could work. But I want your thoughts on it.

“Of course. That’s why I’m here.”

– Based on the examples you’ve shown me, and also based on my background, I think I can equate my role to a conductor of an orchestra, which I also thought of when we were watching that one replay a while ago.

“Mhm,” Shellshock hummed.

– I’ve been thinking of maybe using pings in a similar fashion to a conductor. Using pings to signify more than just MIA, OMW, and so on. The only thing I’ve really fleshed out on my own is communicating tempo. So kind of like how a conductor dictates the beat and rhythm of an orchestra, I think I could maybe ping three times to increase our initiations or aggressive plays. And then maybe I could do a different ping to play more defensively. I’m not sure if that makes sense? > _>

“Yeah I know what you mean. I like the idea so far, so let’s play with it a bit. What other elements of music does the conductor manipulate?”

– Aside from beat/tempo there’s cueing. Basically just a cue that signals when a particular instrument or section comes into play. And then another thing the conductor can control is dynamics: volume down or up. Or their more official terms: diminuendo and crescendo. c:

Shellshock chuckled. “Cute.”

– Other than those directions most of the other communication is done via eye-contact and hand gestures and facial expressions. But I don't think we could make any real use of those for our purposes. :c

“Mmm, yeah. I don't know how we could use that either, honestly. Nothing's coming to mind. But that's fine for now, let's just try to expand on these other things. Explain cues to me. Because as I understand it, everyone has the...uh...sheet music is it? Yeah, so I'm assuming everyone already knows what the overall plan is, but to execute it properly every musician and the conductor need to be on the same page, right?”

She nodded.

“Alright. So...so let's say we have a poke comp. And let's say you want to play defensively but still poke...and let's also assume you can't afford to type in case the enemy initiate...how do you go about communicating this to the team? What do you ping?”

They contemplated in silence. Crescendo's fingers slightly fidgeted atop the keyboard ready to type the instant she thought of the solution. And every now and then she pushed aside some bayonets of hair.

But they sat in silence.

For a while.

She frowned and slowly typed: I don't know :c

“That's fine. Y'know, the reason I asked about the overall plan of the orchestra is because I thought of something similar on my end. Regarding something like space travel I have this notion that every tiny part of a rocket has to be *on point* in order to do a properly landing.

“If NASA's off by a single digit or if they don't properly calculate or account for gravitational force or wind resistance or whatever it may be, they've effectively wasted millions of dollars.”

In a heartbeat Crescendo began typing: That's almost the exact same thing I had in mind. There's a quote by Day9 that I've memorized by heart now. He relates music and esports together. It was a piece in the New Yorker and he said “Imagine playing in a concerto on a piano, and if you miss one note the entire orchestra stops playing and you're kicked off and you lost your job.” And that's kind of where I starting thinking about imitating the conductor's role.

“Yeah, it's exactly like that. So then what we have so far is absolutely a good start. And we've still got some time to develop our communication skills. Y'know, if we think this over for another day or so we can have another jab at this communication strategy and then we can bring it up to the team and we can get their input. Maybe they'll have some other approach to this concept and then we can really start creating a playstyle unique to this roster.”

– Sounds good.

“What about individual players? Have you had enough time to figure them out? Anything you have so far that you want to share?”

– I have *some* stuff. But I think I want a bit more time.

“Fair enough. Actually, I’ll give you the information I’ve got on the players so far. I’ve had a bit more time and experience with everyone and I think I have a decent grasp on what role everyone might be playing on this team.”

– Ooh. Neaterino.

“Oh boy. Jorge’s got you on copy pasterino now, too?”

She snickered silently and typed: It’s contagious.

“I can tell. But anyway, yeah, let’s pick this up some other time. Keep trying to find more ways to implement the idea of a conductor to the game and let’s see where it takes us.”

– Yup. C:

“Alright, so I’ll let you head back to practice. Keep up the good work, Sonia.”

25

Miasma

Crescendo entered the practice apartment and immediately her ears captured mouse clicks as Panda followed the beat of the rhythm game on his screen. Tokyo and Rex sat at their stations, on one monitor their queue timer counting time spent searching for a match, on the other monitor a map of the US with certain states colored red, others blue, others an undecided mixture of the two.

Hearing the apartment door close loudly, WildCat turned, and upon noticing Crescendo beckoned “Yo, Blue, come duo. Queue still hasn’t popped.” He canceled his matchmaking queue and sent an invite, and on Crescendo’s taskbar the minimized game client began blinking orange. “Wanna practice anything in particular?” he asked as she approached her desk.

She accepted the invite and they simultaneously began the search for a game¹

(12:34) Crescendo: Not really.

Crescendo: Anything is fine.

She opened her friend list, scrolled through her groups² until she found FFG³ and opened a new chat session with Panda.

(12:34) Crescendo: What champs are you planning on practicing today?

Panda’s client chimed upon receiving the message, and he instantly Alt-Tabbed to read it. “Yeah. I have a list opened on Notepad. Anything I should focus on?”

(12:35) Crescendo: Let’s assume we’ll be playing on current or similar meta.

Crescendo: Practice what you’re not comfortable with.

Crescendo: Prioritize practicing the strongest current meta champs.

“Sure thing, Cap’n,” Panda dramatically saluted in her direction before returning to the intense clicking of his rhythm game.

Crescendo: Btw do you have post its?

Panda again Alt-Tabbed away from his game, then mumbled “I don’t think so. Why?”

Crescendo: Might be better to have post its stuck on your monitors

Crescendo: Constant reminders of your goals even when computers are off :p

“Oh, good thinkin’,” he said. “Hmm, but you know what? I think I’ll get Shelly to buy ‘em for me,” he planned as he snickered through his teeth.

1 The algorithm estimating an approximate search time of twenty minutes

2 listed alphabetically, from amp and ARC to ROY and SOLO Q GODS

3 Each team mate’s status reading “In Queue,” Shellshock’s reading “Away”

Crescendo: You mean coach?

“Oh shit. Yeah, *that’s* what I meant,” he assured her.

Crescendo: Real.

She minimized the game client and opened a browser, typing in her preferred news site, and instantly a map in red and blue and an undecided mixture of the two appeared on her screen. She opened chat sessions with Tokyo and Rex, asking both

(12:38) Crescendo: Planning on voting?

Still facing his second monitor, Tokyo read her message from the corner of his eyes and dryly said “Probably not.”

Rex turned to read the message, then slowly said “*Probably.*”

“Well, honestly,” Tokyo returned with some hesitation in his voice, his eyes still fixed on the map on his screen “on second thought I think I *should*. On one hand, if I do nothing and allow a Republican into office, Comcast or some other large ISP might try to force the net neutrality...*debate* to resurface. And considering the recent political climate, they’d probably succeed in doing so.”

Rex let out a strained groan. “Dude, that’d be so rough. I never even *thought* about that.”

“On the other hand,” Tokyo continued as if Rex had said nothing, “if I do nothing and allow a Republican into office,” he tilted his head slightly as if to better speculate, “we might end up fighting another unnecessary war somewhere overseas...because why the fuck not?”

Crescendo: WAR~

Crescendo: WHAT IS IT GOOD FOR?~

Rex chuckled and began “*Absolu*—no wait. It’s actually good for oil. Gotta find a way to keep them prices low,” he reasoned.

Crescendo: ~w~

Crescendo: FINISH THE VERSE D: <

Without an ounce of forethought Rex complied and sang “*Absolutely notbin’!*”

Crescendo: >:D

Momentarily he sat silently staring at the map on his screen, but then let loose a suppressed chuckle. Then he returned to the topic at hand “Y’know, Republicans’d prob’ly also let the education bubble burst. And fuck if they ever do anythin’ beneficial for teachers or students.”

Crescendo: Fuck teachers and students.

Crescendo: Comcast and Burger King are more important people.

“I know, right?” Rex asked with a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

Crescendo: lol

“Were you plannin’ on voting, Blue?” Rex quickly peered toward her station.

Crescendo: I think I *HAVE* to now.

Crescendo: I don’t want to risk losing net neutrality :C

Rather than continually copy and paste messages between chat windows Crescendo opened a group session with the team and asked

Crescendo: If you were going to vote, who would you vote for?

“Ehm. Aren’t Democrats the good guys?” WildCat asked, having followed the conversation up to this moment.

“Sure,” Rex said. “So are the Republicans. And so is Darth Vader. And Vegeta. And Bowser. And the Count of Monte Cristo. And the Count of Sesame Street. Everybody thinks they’re the good guy.”

“*What the fuck?*” WildCat dramatically squawked. “Don’t shit talk Count von Count, Rex. He’s my math buddy. And what kind of name is ‘Count of Monte Cristo?’ Sounds dumb. But seriously, aren’t Democrats the ones who actually treat people like people?”

Crescendo: Don’t say things like that, Kitty.

Crescendo: You’ll hurt Bank of America’s feelings.

Crescendo: Republicans are the real heroes.

Crescendo: Who treat people like real human beans.

WildCat let out a desperate grunt. “*Fuck* you, Crescendo. I’m serious.”

Crescendo: C:<

“I honestly don’t think *either* of the two treats anyone like people,” Tokyo claimed. “They just treat people like votes. But of course some votes are more valuable than others if they have a bunch of campaign donations behind them.”

“*Ugh*. I give up,” WildCat conceded.

“Pretty much,” Rex tag teamed in. “But anyway, for Democrats, *I* would personally go Warden,” he asserted. “But Geoff says Warden’s all bark, no bite with her policies and platform. But see, *I’m* thinkin; she won’t be bought or bribed. Or if she is, she won’t be bought or bribed as easily as any other candidate.”

Rex continued with his thought process and contrasted “Clinton obviously has experience, but...she voted in favor of the Patriot Act. Tch, and I know that *now* she’s defending privacy, but I don’t like her gut instincts. An impulsive vote on the Patriot Act was shit, and coupled with the immunity the NSA has, well, privacy’s a long-gone commodity and a thing of the past.

“But that’s just the reality we have to deal with now, cuz that shit ain’t goin’ away. No president or Congress would ever be able to undo it no matter how hard they may try.”

Crescendo: T_T

Crescendo: Fack. Then wat do?

With eyes still locked on the data-filled screen Tokyo asked without expression “When the hell did you become so cynical, George?”

“Nah, son, this ain’t cynicism,” Rex threw back, “it’s just something we have to live with now. Ain’t no turning back. We’ve gone *way* past the point of no return on surveillance.”

Crescendo: Wtf

Crescendo: Don’t exaggerate Remy

Crescendo: America isn’t a police state.

“No, it’s not. But I’ve played enough *Counter Strike* to know that terrorists win.”

Crescendo: Then who’s the best candidate? D:

“Idunno, Blue. Vote for whoever you think is best. It’s not as if there’s ever a right answer. And no president will ever be perfect no matter what,” Rex concluded.

Crescendo frowned at Rex through her screen and loudly typed

Crescendo: Welp

Crescendo: Thanks for the insight

Crescendo: >:|

She opened multiple tabs and with each searched for a candidate’s background, browsing through their policies and position throughout their careers.

“But y’know what?” Rex thought further, “Republicans ain’t so bad. You can shit talk ‘em all you want but at least they know how to create jobs. Anytime they ship other people’s kids off to war there are less people competing for those limited jobs. It’s a solid platform for a renewable, low-wage work-force.”

“I think I read that fanfic,” Tokyo lazily muttered.

Crescendo: Wow

Crescendo: Pretty fucking morbid for a joke. o.o

Rex again let out a delayed chuckled. “Is there really a—”

“No,” Tokyo interrupted. “I was just...trying to be witty. But it *might* exist, I don’t know. Maybe it’s like a *House of Cards* fanfic or something.”

“And if it doesn’t exist you should write it, Geoff. It’ll reek of satire.”

“Maybe I could...” he paused to think a while to refine his idea, “maybe I could do a crossover with an RTS. Probably *Command and Conquer*. Only instead of *Red Alert* it’ll be *Blue Alert* cuz ‘Murica. And I’ll compare the mechanics of RTS to add a layer of

commentary of the...*unquestioning* obedience of the worker and the soldier. But by the end of the fanfic readers'll learn the only reason they're so obedient is because they've been raised and conditioned with the belief that with enough hard work one day each will have his own empire."

"I would...*read* the shit outta that," Rex commented.

"That'll be the title, too," Tokyo thought, "*To Each Their Own Empire.*"

Crescendo: Dat premise doe.

Crescendo: Also srsly

Crescendo: I'm pretty sure Republicans are all for space exploration

Crescendo: But every time they try to work out the budget for NASA

Crescendo: they accidentally give it to NSA instead :o

"Sounds about right, Blue," Rex said. "*But,*" he sang, "I've played enough *Civ Beyond Earth* to know that most Earth-like planets are shit. There's fuckin' aliens and fuckin' miasma everywhere 'n shit. It's like every inhabitable planet's full of Cassiopeia poison. Besides, even if we do end up in space we're probably still gonna have the same shitty two-party system."

Crescendo: Maybe :p

Crescendo: But also maybe

Crescendo: Before colonizing a planet

Crescendo: People get to choose the kind of government they want

Crescendo: And maybe people carry around a voting device 24/7

Pandango: wtf is this chaaaaaaaaaaaaat

Crescendo: and they can pick between anarchy and democracy

Crescendo: A govt policy inspired by Twitch Plays Pokemon

"I *would...play* the shit out of that mod," Rex said.

Crescendo: :D

Crescendo: We should all play Civ 5 some time

Crescendo: Five man free for all c:

Crescendo: Six if coach decides to play

Crescendo: And we'll make a Final Frontier ruleset

Crescendo: Where space victory is the only acceptable victory

"I don't like that game," Panda finally joined in, "they take so long to play. And each turn is *so slow.*"

Crescendo: >:C

Crescendo: Fine then we'll just play a five man free for all

The matchmaking queue popped simultaneously on everyone's screen. They all clicked Accept and entered the ban phase.

“*Ob!* We got a trio queue,” WildCat said excitedly upon noticing Tokyo on his team.

“We got Rush Hour on *our* team,” Panda said proudly. “We’re gonna shit on whoever’s on the other team.”

On three monitors one conversation took place.

NeoTokyo: real

BLS Echelon: lol

BLS Echelon: rito pls

Shukuraya: three top lanres one team?

Shukuraya: how do we pick lol

Crescendo: Flip a three sided coin.

Shukuraya: lel

FFG TURTLE: kappa

NeoTokyo: I’ll jungle this rouond I guess

NeoTokyo: you two decide who gets top

On two monitors other agreements were made.

ARC Ampharos: hi friends :)

DeusRex: yo

xNietzsche: ehm

DeusRex: ban reksai pls

ARC Hyperdrift: holy molly

ARC Hyperdrift: thsi team is stackeed

xNietzsche: what roll am i lol?

Pandango: rush hour pls carry

Pandango: u got top i think

xNietzsche: k

Once the makeshift teams coordinated and decided on makeshift strategy the game began loading players in.

Kennen	Blood Moon Thresh	Prestigious LeBlanc	Blood Moon Kalista	Victorious Elise
BLS Echelon	Crescendo	Shukuraya	FFG TURTLE	NeoTokyo
Jaximus	Valkyrie Leona	Snow Elf Tristana	Orianna	Victorious Jarvan IV
xNietzsche	ARC Ampharos	ARC Hyperdrift	Pandango	DeusRex

“*Ob shit!*” Panda yelled. “Entire fucking game is stacked!”

“Aww,” WildCat moaned, “Tokyo I thought you were gonna have Blood Moon Elise. Now I’m sad.”

“Dude, I don’t have Blood Moon for her,” Tokyo said. “Besides, I have a free skin.”

“But now we won’t have super-awesome Blood Moon synergy.”

“Tch. Doesn’t really matter. I’m gonna make Geoff irrelevant if he’s jungle,” Rex broke in.

“Go ahead and try, dude,” Tokyo replied.

“What we *really* need,” Panda began, “is a nickname for the Kitty and Blue lane kinda like Rush Hour.”

[00:04] [All] FFG TURTLE (Kalista): pls report toyko for no blood moon

[00:06] [All] ARC Hyperdrift (Tristana): i got you covered dude

[00:08] [All] FFG TURTLE (Kalista): ty

[00:12] [All] Pandango (Orianna): anyone stremaing this game?

[00:13] [All] Pandango (Orianna): sooooo stacked

[00:16] [All] ARC Hyperdrift (Tristana): y

[00:20] [All] ARC Ampharos (Leona): i am

[00:22] [All] Pandango (Orianna): also

[00:22] [All] Pandango (Orianna): gais

[00:26] [All] Pandango (Orianna): whats a good name for ffg bot lane

[00:27] NeoTokyo (Elise): kennen buffs any good?

[00:29] [All] Pandango (Orianna): so we can have that vs rush ohur

[00:31] BLS Echelon (Kennen): about to find out

[00:34] NeoTokyo (Elise): o

[00:38] [All] ARC Ampharos (Leona): how about

[00:38] [All] ARC Ampharos (Leona): space kids

[00:42] [All] Shukuraya (LeBlanc): that sucks lol

[00:46] [All] Crescendo (Thresh): It does :p

[00:47] [All] ARC Ampharos (Leona): :(

[00:49] [All] NeoTokyo (Elise): i've never played this hero

[00:50] [All] NeoTokyo (Elise): how do i shot web?

[00:51] [All] Pandango (Orianna): ask ur viewers for names

[00:55] [All] ARC Hyperdrift (Tristana): dose it ahve to be movie reference/

[00:55] [All] ARC Hyperdrift (Tristana): ?

[00:58] [All] ARC Ampharos (Leona): press f to showt web

[01:00] [All] ARC Ampharos (Leona): or d

[01:01] [All] Pandango (Orianna): nt really lol

[01:04] [All] Crescendo (Thresh): I have a good idea

[01:07] [All] Crescendo (Thresh): Wolfgang Amadeus Crescendo :D

[01:09] [All] xNietzsche (Jax): kik

[01:09] [All] xNietzsche (Jax): i like it

“No, dude,” Panda said, “it’s gotta be a name for both of you.”

[01:16] [All] Crescendo (Thresh): Apparently Panda doesn't like it.

[01:20] FFG TURTLE (Kalista) is asking for assistance

[01:22] FFG TURTLE (Kalista): come

[01:23] FFG TURTLE (Kalista): their in this bush

“I’m not going,” Tokyo said. “You used the incorrect spelling of ‘there.’”

“Eh...it was a typo,” WildCat reasoned. He leaned back on his chair for a better look at Panda’s screen.

[01:28] FFG TURTLE (Kalista): hurry up pls

Panda noticed from the corner of his eyes and yelled “The *fuck*, Kitty?! Screen peeking? *Real?* Real.”

Immediately Crescendo threw a Death Sentence into the darkness, latching onto Panda. He yelled in panic and both teams engaged, a fusillade of mouse clicks and key strokes vibrating in the air.

“No, no, nonono,” Panda cried amid the chaos, and “*fuck!*” he groaned upon death.

“Teehee,” WildCat giggled, “that’s what you get for being on the other team.”

“Fucking matchmaking,” Panda lamented. “I hope Rush Hour wreck your shit,” he clicked toward mid lane.

“That’s so troll, dude. You’re starting to sound like a traitor,” WildCat said.

[01:52] [All] Crescendo (Thresh): Do you guys have an open spot on ARC?

[01:53] [All] Crescendo (Thresh): I think Panda wants to join.

[02:03] [All] ARC Ampharos (Leona): oshite realy?

[02:07] [All] ARC Ampharos (Leona): i think weh ave a bench warming spot oepn

[02:10] [All] Pandango (Orianna): i’ll take it!

[02:12] [All] Pandango (Orianna): ty rush hour

[02:20] [All] ARC Ampharos (Leona): ull also have to do our dishes btw

“Dishes?!” Panda yelled. “Fuck. I hella hate you guys.”

“Hella troll, though,” WildCat fired back.

[02:50] [All] ARC Hyperdrift (Tristana): panda marry me pls <#

“Nevermind, I love you guys.”

[02:54] [All] Pandango (Orianna): anytime bby<3

“*What?!*” WildCat yelled at his screen.

[03:04] [All] FFG TURTLE (Kalista): D:

[03:06] [All] FFG TURTLE (Kalista): But I thougt you only loved me hd

[03:13] [All] ARC Hyperdrift (Tristana): you never atke me on dates anymore

[03:18] [All] ARC Hyperdrift (Tristana): u borked my heart </3

[03:27] [All] ARC Ampharos (Leona): you know what?

[03:35] [All] ARC Ampharos (Leona): I’m willing to comrpomise with oyu guys

[03:42] [All] ARC Ampharos (Leona): we can have four way marraige

[03:44] [All] ARC Ampharos (Leona): if panda does the dishes

[03:54] [All] FFG TURTLE (Kalista): can I bring crescendo?

[03:56] [All] FFG TURTLE (Kalista): i need my support

[04:04] [All] ARC Ampharos (Leona): ok

[04:14] [All] Crescendo (Thresh): D:

[04:16] [All] Crescendo (Thresh): But then I’ll be the only girl.

[04:22] [All] Crescendo (Thresh): Can I bring Neecha?

[04:24] [All] xNietzsche (Jax): yes pls <4

[04:37] [All] ARC Ampharos (Leona): ok

The apartment door opened and closed loudly, Shellshock's footsteps tapping against the wooden floor as he neared.

"Hey guys. Are these games almost over?" he asked.

"Just started. We're all in the same game," Panda informed the old man.

"Oh? Everyone on the same team?" he asked in reply.

"Nah. Me and Rex are with Rush Hour and Nietzsche."

"Oh. Well then I guess I'll just count it as half a scrim, then."

"Real."

"*Very* real," Shellshock said. "Anyway, let me know when the game's over. We gotta go get some stuff done."

"What kind of...*stuff*?" Panda asked.

"Nothing important," Shellshock said. "Just measurements for team jerseys."

"What? We don't even know if we're going to be LCS yet, though," Panda thought.

"Of *course* we are," Shellshock said confidently. "Why wouldn't we?"

"Idunno. Just sayin'."

"See, this is why you're on the other team, Panda" WildCat called out, "cuz you don't believe."

"Hey..." Panda paused to think, "...shut up."

"*Anyway*," Shellshock continued, "shoot me a text once the game's over and we'll head out afterward."

"You got it, Coach," Panda assured.

[10:52] [All] Crescendo (Thresh): We're getting jerseys soon. :o

[11:04] [All] xNietzsche (Jax): :o

[11:06] [All] xNietzsche (Jax): send cute pics pls :D

[11:12] [All] ARC Ampharos (Leona): can I has jersey with autograph?

[11:17] [All] NeoTokyo (Elise): Signed jerseys are twenty bucks

[11:20] [All] ARC Ampharos (Leona): lol

[11:25] [All] NeoTokyo (Elise): I'm srs.

[11:29] [All] ARC Ampharos (Leona): qq why?

[11:34] [All] NeoTokyo (Elise): so i can pay for a more valuable vote

[11:39] [All] ARC Ampharos (Leona): ...

[11:42] [All] ARC Ampharos (Leona): wut

"Yo, count me in on that. I wanna have a louder voice too," Rex added.

[11:47] [All] NeoTokyo (Elise): price just jumped to 40

[11:50] [All] Crescendo (Thresh): 60 :D

[12:03] [All] ARC Ampharos (Leona): wow man

[12:06] [All] ARC Ampharos (Leona): you guys are toxic

[12:07] [All] ARC Ampharos (Leona): trying to rip me off

[12:10] [All] ARC Ampharos (Leona): gonna report u

[12:20] [All] DeusRex (Jarvan IV): fine then we'll just leave this planet

[12:22] [All] DeusRex (Jarvan IV): find another oen

- [12:24] [All] DeusRex (Jarvan IV): with blackjack and hookers
[12:26] [All] DeusRex (Jarvan IV): and be toxic by ourselves
[12:27] [All] DeusRex (Jarvan IV): fill the planet with miasma
[12:30] [All] NeoTokyo (Elise): don't listen to him
[12:34] [All] NeoTokyo (Elise): he doesn't know what's he's talking about
[12:39] [All] NeoTokyo (Elise): we'll have our own planet
[12:42] [All] NeoTokyo (Elise): with esports and anime
[12:47] [All] NeoTokyo (Elise): it'll be way better than earth
[12:50] [All] xNietzsche (Jax): u guys
[12:52] [All] xNietzsche (Jax): are fuckign wierd lol
[12:57] [All] Crescendo (Thresh): But you're coming with us Neecha.
[13:00] [All] Crescendo (Thresh): And so is Rush Hour.
[13:03] [All] Crescendo (Thresh): No partner left behind.
[13:07] [All] xNietzsche (Jax): :(
[13:10] [All] xNietzsche (Jax): I want a divorce
[13:14] [All] Crescendo (Thresh): Divorce is illegal on our new planet.
[13:19] [All] xNietzsche (Jax): damn
[13:23] [All] Crescendo (Thresh): It's okay though.
[13:25] [All] Crescendo (Thresh): We still love you. <3
[13:27] [All] xNietzsche (Jax): <3
[13:30] [All] ARC Ampharos (Leona): <3
[13:36] [All] FFG TURTLE (Kalista): <3<3<#<3#<3,3<3,3
[13:39] [All] Pandango (Orianna): <3

Chairman Dances

Every second vast amounts of files and letters and offers and inquiries were sent and received, from coast to coast, across oceans, and around the world in every possible direction. A file was sent in the morning and was received seconds later at midnight. Without rest thousands and thousands of letters and résumés and cover letters traversed the net, and thousands and thousands of notifications appeared on a screen somewhere around the world.

Files, files, files. Folders of files.

Files with names and dates, achievements and accomplishment. Lives here were scanned and judged in seconds; scanned and judged and dismissed in seconds. Scanned and forgotten and stored, saved for later should the need arise.

Burning eyes and stiff necks prompted breaks, eye-drop breaks and coffee breaks and smoke breaks.

Break just started? Too bad, break's over. Get back in there and do your job. Quick breaks everywhere before once again returning to the files, files, files. Folders of files.

Where do all of these résumés come from? We've only got a few positions to offer.

Check this one, Mike; young kid here wants an administrative role. The audacity! Just turned twenty-six, fresh outta school and already wants my boss's job. What on earth's he thinking? He's gotta learn to climb from the bottom like the rest of us. That's how it's done around here. Where'd he get this idea he can just start at the top? What a joke.

Y'know, John, boss started here fresh outta high school. Worked his way up and look at him now. Still in the company and still doing good things for us. Never even had to go to college, his whole life was set by the age of eighteen. He's an old fart now, but he's still going strong. I'm almost sure he'll never retire just so no one takes his title. Gonna be a fierce battle within the department the day he leaves.

Look here, I got another. Kid got let go from her last job. Minimum wage in her state must've shot up and the Mom 'n' Pop company probably couldn't keep everyone on the payroll. Must've had to let a couple kids go.

Roll back up and look at her schooling, John.

History?! What?! What good's a degree in history gonna do anybody? I don't even understand people anymore. What money's history gonna bring in?

Baffling, John. People don't have a clue what they're doing these days. Going to school for something as useless as history. What's even the point in learning history? Just watch some TV program and you'll learn everything there is to know.

Bizarre, Mike. Why would anyone bother learning about nonsense that already happened and doesn't matter anymore? People these days ought to be thinking about their lives in the present and the future. Don't teachers these days teach students how to prioritize their lives? Isn't that what we're paying them for?

So sad to see, John. So sad to see.

Text, text, text. Walls of text everywhere.

Emails, emails, emails. Tons and tons of unread emails.

Every background and field of study was brought under scrutiny, their practical uses questioned and challenged without a word in their defense.

Philosophy? How much does a philosopher make? Any would anyone be interested in this? All they ever do is sit there and judge others.

Animation? What good does animation do? There's no money in making cartoons.

Language? Ha! *That's* a good one. What? That's a *real* major? What do they have to do, learn to speak a language and then they graduate? They're already speaking English, that's all anybody ever needs. What a useless thing to study.

Mathematics? What's the point of learning *math* after high school? No wonder people aren't getting jobs out there if all they want to do in life is count numbers.

Why are there so many art majors? What were they planning on doing? Wasting their lives making paintings? Where did we go so wrong?

Hour after hour, day after day, week after week, year after year, files continued pouring in from all over the country and from countries abroad that nobody's ever heard of, a country whose name no one could pronounce.

From time to time the hand-picked candidates visited the offices to partake in the interviews for their positions. They were invited in groups, they were encouraged to meet and interact with those who were also looking to secure one of the few remaining jobs at the company.

Face to face they shared their backgrounds, hometowns and previous jobs, told warm stories of their schools and traded contact information, the most vital thing one could do. They smiled and remained at ease face to face with those who could very well take the job in their stead.

And such was the case from north to south, east to west, coast to coast. Day by day, week by week, year by year, more and more workers competed for less and less. Thus, the defined path to life went on.

A plan was designed and constructed long ago, a product of infinite wisdom, a fixed and infallible plan. A beaten path, a set of guiding principles, a new North Star, mapped out to perfection, with precision, and modeled to be flawless. And so the process continued onward in its rigid and self-explanatory method. It was the right way. The only way. It was how parents did it. How teachers did it. How business owners did it.

No life could be complete without having followed the religiously laid out plan. And no success existed outside these ideas, outside these norms. Yet this plan was necessary, crucial, vital, because they have been proven to work. And prosperity awaits those who follow in these very footsteps.

The northern hemisphere cooled and chilled. Once green leaves gradually turned bright and glowed against the dark, brown bark. As the days passed red and orange and yellow fluttered through the air, slowly falling and gliding onto the pavement.

Days grew darker and colder, and brown, curled, crunchy leaves littered the ground. Festive icons and posters of sales were hung upon storefronts, urging passersby to be thankful for the things they had.

And as a holiday drew near families planned reunions and gatherings, emails and phone calls across states, across continents, across oceans.

And how, some would ask, are things at work?

Bad, Ma. There is nothing stable anywhere. Nothing pays enough.

Are you sure you're not just wasting your money on unnecessary things?

No. I always pay bills first. Then I only have a little bit left for food afterward. There's not enough. I don't even know how long I'll have work.

You could have it so much better if you went somewhere that paid better.

But there's nowhere left that will pay better. And even minimum pay is hard to get. I don't feel wanted anywhere. And I *know* I'm not wanted anywhere. There is nothing left for me, no place for me. Where on earth can I possibly go?

You just have to try your best. There is opportunity out there for everyone. You just have to search for it and find it.

I've tried, Pa. I've searched. I've checked. I've made it my job to search and check. There is no room, there are no opportunities left for me anywhere. It's hard. I'm scared, and I don't know what I'll do if I lose this job.

Yes, we know life is hard. But that's just the way things work. Everyone must go through such hardship. When we were your age we already had a house and a car and we had enough to start a family with just one job. You must be doing something wrong.

I've done everything right, Ma. But the math doesn't add up. No one accounted for inflation. Historically you were better off.

Making excuses won't get you anywhere, son. That just won't get you anywhere. You just have to work harder.

But I'm already work harder. I'm *always* working harder. But that's still not enough.

You just have to try harder.

And those who still aimed for these already-hit targets continued sending their data and letters and résumés everywhere they could. Their futures, they had been told, were secured, guaranteed, and promised if they just followed the steps. And so they continued sending their files which listed their accomplishments and achievements. Their files were sent and received only to be stored in folders. Folders of files, files, files.

27

Martial Cadence

“TP’s up,” Tokyo announced, “Flash in two”

“Dragon should be up at about in about two as well,” Rex followed up.

[48:02] [Crescendo \(Nami\)](#): ~50:00 D

Behind the team Shellshock paced the length of the room, his eyes hopping from screen to screen inspecting every move. His sharp eyes sought the flaws, his sharp ears sought the silence. And each passing day he noticed less and less flaws of every kind.

[48:10] [Crescendo \(Nami\)](#): 4-0-1

They could make out slight enemy movement across the map. Every now and then from the corner of their eyes they noticed an enemy icon moving in and out of vision range on the minimap.

“Alright. I’ll buy then head bot,” Tokyo confirmed.

“I’m backing too, then going top,” WildCat told the team.

“What’s everyone’s Summoner’s?” Rex asked.

“Got ‘em both,” Panda said, and “Me too,” WildCat added.

[48:22] [Crescendo \(Nami\)](#): Got both.

Now no ward or minion wave had vision of Royale’s position, causing a momentary instance of silence in the team’s communication.

“They’re all MIA,” Tokyo observed quietly. He hesitantly moved toward the Bot-side Krug camp and placed a ward over the wall onto the Red brush.

“They’re probably trying to flank us up here,” Rex thought.

“If they’re not giving you any openings and they’re not letting you use your advantages you better be fighting hard, guys,” Shellshock spoke authoritatively still pacing back and forth. “If they’re not giving you any opportunities use what you have to *create* opportunities. From thin air, if you have to.”

Crescendo dropped three pings, forming a triangle in a defensive wedge. Panda and WildCat stood furthest from the unwarded jungle while Crescendo and Rex stood ready to tank the brunt of the damage. In this formation they pushed top wave to the exposed Inhibitor.

“Shuriken’s bot,” Tokyo announced upon spotting her defending Bot’s Inhibitor Turret. “If they gank me I’m dead.”

[49:10] [Crescendo \(Nami\)](#) **has targeted the Inhibitor**

[49:10] [Crescendo \(Nami\)](#) **has targeted the Inhibitor**

[49:11] [Crescendo \(Nami\)](#) **has targeted the Inhibitor**

“Aight. I’m going ham,” Rex told Crescendo.

They moved forward with the plan. Four pushed onto Top Inhibitor, and Bot-side Tokyo and a wave of minions was locked in combat with Shuriken and a wave of minions.

“We’re about to get outplayed,” Tokyo said sloppily. “She’s letting me push down here. And they’re letting you push up there. They’re not at Dragon or Baron and none of our wards have spotted them.”

“Base race?” Panda threw out the idea.

[49:26] Crescendo (Nami) has targeted the Inhibitor

[49:26] Crescendo (Nami) has targeted the Inhibitor

“Could be,” Rex said.

Tokyo backed away from the turret, “I’m recalling.”

An instant later Shuriken advanced toward Tokyo’s position, and the rest of Royale emerged near Final Frontier’s Mid Inhibitor Turret.

“They’re Mid. I’m going back,” Rex announced.

[49:37] Crescendo (Nami): Panda B

[49:39] Crescendo (Nami) has targeted the Inhibitor

Two recalled from Top, but Bottom-side Shuriken thwarted Tokyo’s attempts to do the same. She chased and poked and kept vision on him as he quickly ran to defend Mid lane.

WildCat and Crescendo destroyed Top Inhibitor and began a recall of their own. Rex and Panda kept their distance, knowing a defense of their Mid Inhibitor would be futile.

“Y’think you can get someone, Panda?” Rex asked.

“Umm...” Panda muttered with a quiver in his voice, “I don’t think so.”

“I’m comin’ in on their flank,” Tokyo alerted the team. “But I’m caught between these four and Shuriken.”

“We gotta go in,” Rex said.

Minions pushed in toward Nexus turrets as WildCat and Crescendo Homeguarded past the base walls.

“Let’s go Panda!” Rex shouted.

A skirmish spread two screens, Tokyo, Rex, and Panda going on the offensive. They ran and gap closed toward Covert.

Flashes, Ignites, and Exhausts were burnt. Orbs of damage and shock blasts and blades flew in every direction, Panda dying before taking down his target. Rex and Tokyo fought on by the downed first-tier Middle Turret.

By the newly-destroyed Inhibitor Crescendo sent a roaring Tidal Wave against two. WildCat fired, fired, fired, his precise clicks avoiding skillshots and crowd control by pixels. Royale Flashed forward the finish the job, Crescendo Exhausting a millisecond later. They killed one, two, and half health marched forward.

“We’re comin’,” WildCat pinged.

“I’m dead,” Tokyo said. With his last bits of health he slowed Shuriken, providing Rex with the chance to retreat toward Crescendo. Three fought three Mid lane, all health bars half or less.

Both sides kept their distance, shyly stepping forward, inching forward hoping to land some cheeky damage. Spotting a misstep by Covert, Crescendo threw an Aqua Prison. But he Flashed forward, quickly landing one, two, three autoattacks on Rex for the kill.

“Holy fuck! This kid,” Rex exclaimed.

Both Marksmen danced Mid lane between their autoattacks, Supports providing additional hits every now and then. Izbiri launched a Death Sentence, Crescendo Flashing to take it in place of WildCat.

With her final bars of health she healed and sped WildCat, a second later landing a bubble on Covert. With the stun in place he hit and crit Covert for the kill, took down Izbiri for the double kill.

Shuriken Flashed in for an autoattack, finally taking WildCat down.

“Fuck.”

“Wow. She only need like two or three autos,” Rex commented.

[51:07] [Crescendo \(Nami\)](#): She stayed out of the fight until the end. :<

“We got the best possible outcome considering the situation, guys,” Shellshock alleviated them. “That was perfectly fought from both teams.”

[51:10] [\[All\] Crescendo \(Nami\)](#): G_G

[51:15] [\[All\] Dendra \(Maokai\)](#): gg

[51:17] [\[All\] NeoTokyo \(Trundle\)](#): gg

[51:20] [\[All\] Royale Phyros \(Zed\)](#): gg

[51:21] [\[All\] Royale Phyros \(Zed\)](#): fun game :)

[51:25] [\[All\] Royale Izbiri \(Thresh\)](#): geeg

[51:25] [\[All\] Pandango \(LeBlanc\)](#): jeejee

[51:27] [\[All\] Pandango \(LeBlanc\)](#): ty for teh games

[51:29] [\[All\] Royale Izbiri \(Thresh\)](#): slow down guys

[51:32] [\[All\] Royale Izbiri \(Thresh\)](#): you're getting too good too fast

[51:35] [\[All\] FFG TURTLE \(Caitlyn\)](#): <3

[51:36] [\[All\] Crescendo \(Nami\)](#): :D

“Hmm. Two losses,” Shellshock muttered to himself as he dabbled with his phone. “But that’s the be expected against Royale. Good games, nonetheless. Now,” Shellshock commanded as he finished sending a text “let’s turn to face each other. No phones, either. Let’s take a minute to breathe then think back on the game.”

They sat in a semi-circle facing Shellshock who twirled a pen in one hand, held a clipboard in the other. The team sat with tense looks on their faces, as though they were carefully listening to something.

“Now,” Shellshock continued after the pause, “let’s figure out what we learned from this scrim, what we still need to learn. Where do we go from here?”

Still in silence, holding in their words and ideas, the team sat and waited for someone else to be the first to speak.¹

“C’m on guys,” Shellshock said, “Thanksgiving won’t start until we finish this meeting.”

Finally Rex broke in “So even very early on they focused on Panda a bunch. What do we do to prevent that from happenin’ next time?” Rex asked.

“How was the vision near Mid?” Tokyo asked.

Panda slowly made his way to the conversation “I pretty much only had my trinket. They kept killing my pink ward so that was kind of useless.”

“They were doing a very good job of clearing and denying deep vision,” WildCat read from Crescendo’s tablet. “Maybe in future games we place less aggressive wards, more defensive ones and try to figure out their vision habits.”

WildCat returned her tablet and said “But we did have that one pink ward near Red buff for about twenty minutes.”

“Yeah, that was a good ward,” Rex commended them, “it let me counter-jungle their top jungle a bit. So I don’t think they check that bush often.”

“Okay,” Tokyo acknowledged, “so back to Mid. How do we get better vision control? Cuz if we don’t figure this out we’ll just let the enemy bully Panda around in laning phase.”

“We could do a couple of different things,” WildCat jumped in, “If we push up a wave maybe Crescendo and I can, like, drop an extra ward or two near their Blue buff or, like, Wolves.”

“Yeah, then if those wards spot the enemy jungle I’ll know to hug the other side of Mid,” Panda reasoned.

“I could do the same Top. Push wave then drop a ward near Raptors,” Tokyo said.

“Aight, so we gonna focus vision near Mid to keep Panda safe, then?”

Crescendo handed her tablet to WildCat and he read “Are we going to want to keep both sides of Mid warded? What if we don’t have enough gold for those wards?”

“If I play an assassin I’m probably gonna need *at least* one side warded,” Panda said.

“Geoff, if it came down to it, you think you could be the sacrificial ward?”

“What d’you mean?”

“Like, if we can only spare one ward for Mid. Would you ward Mid instead of Top?”

“Uhh...sure. I’d rather not be blind, but if that’s what the team needs I suppose I could handle it.”

“F we do that you could help me clear a camp and I’ll use the gold to ward Top.”

“Alright,” Tokyo agreed.

“Teamfights?” WildCat read from Crescendo’s tablet. “Late game?”

“So for this game our assassination was pretty much useless,” Rex said. “We just couldn’t find good enough positioning for Panda.”

1 Shellshock noticed Panda furtively glancing to his right toward Rex and Tokyo, then to his left toward WildCat and Crescendo.

“Just means we have to rethink our vision during mid and late game,” Tokyo said.

“Two things,” WildCat read, “first, I think we were playing too passively. Maybe that had to do with our vision or lack of vision. If we’re going to have an assassin we should think about repositioning our pinks deeper into enemy jungle.”

“Second,” WildCat scrolled down, “We looked really split on whether or not we were playing offensive or defensive in teamfights. Half the team went in with Panda for the assassination, then Bot had to peel and fend for itself against Royale’s frontline. How are we going to split our attention in teamfights?”

He handed back her tablet and continued on his own “I think in cases like that either Tokyo or Rex could help peel while the other goes in. That’s just for the peel part, though. I don’t know about the assassination stuff.”

“I just—” Panda began, a certain irritation in his voice, “I just don’t think I can play as well when I’m outside of my comfort zone. I don’t even play LeBlanc that much so when I need to play someone I haven’t had a lot of practice with I just play way worse than I should.”

“Y’know,” Shellshock said, “everyone’s working on something they normally wouldn’t be doing. Everyone’s doing a number of things to contribute to the team, and working on your champion pool is just one of the many things on your plate.”

“I know,” Panda groaned, “but I just don’t think I can get over this particular thing. I know it’s not even that hard, but I just, like, get really nervous that maybe I’m not doing much for the team.”

Crescendo began another quick burst of rapid typing and Shellshock continued in his attempts to ameliorate Panda’s concerns “We still have some time to work things out, Jorge. I *completely* understand what you’re feeling and I’m pretty we can work this out together. It’s just a matter of gradually self-improving.”

“Crescendo says she’s nervous a lot of the time as well,” WildCat said. He continued reading and snickered a bit “She’s never really sure when and where to ward and she ends up dying sometimes.” He looked up and said “I was kinda like that too when I first started playing on LAN. But over time I just said ‘fuck it, yolo,’ and I stopped caring about the nerves and I just played like I did in Solo Queue.

“But we didn’t have coaches back then,” he went on “so just talk to Coach and he’ll help you out. I used to always forget to use my trinket but Coach and Blue kept reminding me. But that’s just cuz I’m dumb.”

“I know,” Panda assured everyone, “I’ve been talking with Coach every day but it’s taking so long to get anywhere and that’s why it feels like I’m not getting anywhere at all.”

“I’m sure that by the time it’s game day,” Shellshock spoke loudly and clearly, “you’ll be *plenty* ready to handle yourself out there, Jorge. And until that day comes I’ll keep working with you to get through it, alright? Let’s also set up calls while you’re home so we can keep working through this, sound good?”

Panda nodded slowly, his gaze came up from the floor toward Shellshock and he agreed. The quiver of his voice was gone and a sparkle glared from his eyes.

“Sounds like a plan, then. Now, we’ve had a few weeks to test out coordination with pings for cues and formations. What’s everyone’s thoughts on it?”

“I’m diggin’ it,” Rex said. “It *does* feel like it’s missing something, though. But I’m not sure what.”

“I don’t mean this in, like, the wrong way,” WildCat said, “but I don’t really think I get anything from it. But that’s just because we already play well together. But that’s just in lane. In mid and late game it’s really awesome.”

“I’ve been thinking about it,” Tokyo added, “and I think that in addition to just the pings we can have a confirmation from the rest of the team. I don’t know why but my mind instantly jumped to medieval warfare.”

“Oh *shit*, yeah,” Rex gasped. “Dude, that makes *so* much sense.”

“What is it with you guys and war?” Panda asked giggling.

“Hey man,” Rex drawled playfully defensively, “we’re just keen on our history and military science. So here’s what Geoff’s thinkin’,” he returned to his more serious tone, “in the chaos of huge battles, captains and other high ranking commanders would issue orders. Then, someone who was playing an instrument, like someone beating a drum, would play something specific that meant to charge or to rally up or whatever.”

He continued with excitement in his voice and in his expression “So usually only the troops nearest the general could hear the actual order. And because the music was louder, those further away could also hear their new orders, but through the music. So that was one way to give new orders. And when they received these new orders they would all yell out loud ‘march,’ or ‘retreat,’ or ‘defensive positions,’ or whatever it was. So that way they had two ways of knowing for sure what they had to do.”

“So Geoff, you’re thinkin’ whenever Blue wants a specific thing we can all repeat the order so that she can make sure we all understand what the new gameplan is, right?”

“Mhm.”

“So Blue,” he turned to face her “when you ping three times into fog of war or a specific target, the rest of us would say ‘aggro,’ or ‘Ahri’ or whatever. But we’d only say it once, not like those hectic comms we sometimes hear.”

“This idea sounds intriguing,” Shellshock said.

“Why do we only say it once?” WildCat asked.

“Historically speaking they said it once as a sign of discipline,” Rex replied. “Peasant infantry was nowhere near as disciplined as trained knights.”

“Thoughts on this, Sonia?”

She had already handed WildCat her tablet, and this time there was a glowing in her eyes. “It’s fuckin’ awesome!” WildCat yelled her excitement, his arms jumping to the air, Crescendo’s arms mimicking his. “I kind of really want to try this out *right now*, to be honest,” he expanded the ‘tbh’ she had typed.

“Heh, sounds like everyone’s on board then.” Shellshock thought. “Maybe if we do a scrim over the break we can give it a shot. But,” he added, “another thing I considered for possible practice is playing with no shotcalling, without a word, without typing, without informing anyone of anything. I originally thought this may be a bit too advanced, but if we can practice and contrast these two styles I’m certain we’ll gain some more insight into our own playstyle and our identity as a team. If we’re up for it, I’d *really* like to see what you guys can do with it.”

The team eagerly agreed. Then a short clamor burst from the middle of the team and died down, their attention back on their coach.

“Okay, *really* good meeting guys,” Shellshock said. “We covered a lot and we’re a lot more productive than when we first started. And since Jorge and Jason are going home for a week I figure we could do replay analysis at some point over the weekend. You guys can still duo queue and we’ll slowly start working on getting those finishing touches on our teamwork and coordination and those smaller, finer details.

“Our practice time’s almost over, guys,” he raised his hands by his sides, “we’ve come quite a long way.” He quickly peeked at his watch then addressed Panda and WildCat “so I know you two have flights in a few hours so let’s end here. If you guys want,” he addressed the rest of the team, “we can go drop them off at the airport.”

“Sure. Sounds like fun,” Tokyo said.

“You guys going home or staying here?” Panda asked.

“I’m going between here and home,” Rex said turning back to his computer.

Crescendo quickly turned to her computer, causing her chair to collide with the table. A small Christmas tree on the edge of her desk shook and a plastic ornament dropped, a hallow sound resonating as it bounced upon the wood floor three, four, five times.

Crescendo: Oh shit

Crescendo: My balls are dropping.

Rex instantly burst out laughing and pressed the side of his first to attempt to muffle the sound. Pockets of giggling rose from the other seats as Shellshock retrieved the ornament and hung it back on the tree.

“What’d you say?” he asked as he leaned in to read from her screen. In turn he half laughed, half exhaled, and lodged his forehead against his palm. “Sonia, you’re too much, you know that?”

“She’s so troll,” WildCat commented.

She held up her hand for a high five, a wide grin resting on her face. Shellshock hesitantly replied. “Only because that was a good one,” he clarified.

Crescendo: Anyway. I live really close

Crescendo: So I’ll just go between here and there on Turkey break. ouo

“What about you, Geoff? Anything planned,” Shellshock turned attention to him.

“I’m just staying here,” he said still leaning his chin on his hand while he scrolled through down a page.

“No you’re not, you’re coming to eat with us,” Rex turned to him.

“Oh,” Tokyo sarcastically replied, “I’m hanging out with George’s family, then. What about you, Simon?”

“*Coach*,” Shellshock corrected.

“Oh, right,” Tokyo muttered in the same tone. “So what about you, Simon?”

“*Ugh*,” Shellshock dropped it knowing he would lose, “I’m just sticking around here with the family. Nothing extraordinary.” He quickly glanced at his watch again and “Anyway, I’ll leave you guys to it. Get ready head out to the airport and call me when we’re all set.”

“Got ‘em, Coach,” Panda jumping off his seat and walking to his room.

“Cool. And good work today, guys.”

28

Stand United

Seconds ticked by and sooner than expected November turned to December. The cool air turned colder and the final leaves, now brown, fell and drifted and faded away, victim to the current of the wind.

On a daily basis the team scrimmed with all sorts of practice partners: those with years of experience who were already competing in the league, those who were also fighting day by day to claim a spot in the upcoming split. These days tensions rose quicker and the practice, practice, practice became rougher, rougher, rougher. Together six fine-tuned their ideas, their play, their mindset, as the seconds ticked by.

Each day they analyzed a game, broke it down to bits, and made sense of it all. Each play, each ward, each movement on the map, all had to make sense. Every member was to understand both the microstrategy and the macrostrategy alike.

Understand the basics, the foundations, Coach would say, and the larger elements of the game should Tetris into place. Understand the small pieces and the big picture should make sense.

Daily meetings grew longer. Together they discussed every detail of the game, from the smallest and least significant to the grandest and most game-changing. Across the board they discussed lane match-ups, power spikes, ward placements, team formations, splitpushes, counter-ganks, jungle invades, and together they refined it all. However, all this was secondary to communication. On this they all agreed vehemently.

Coach spoke daily with Crescendo, with Rex, with Tokyo, on working in unison. He calibrated and synchronized the three; and they decided on what was most important to least important: Communication, Vision, Nexus, Inhibitors, Turrets, Barons, Dragons, Buffs, CS. But don't play with Baron too much, Coach would warn, we've all seen the Ampersand Baron throws. Baron is a last resort.

Coach spoke with Panda twice daily to ease and calm and relax the jittery nerves. Quiet and slow the mind, take deep breaths, feel the wavering thoughts, the shivering nerves leave.

Damn, I feel hella calm, Coach. This must be what Tokerino feels like all the time.

Upon the large monitor they watched games of their potential opponents, the way they watched replays of every high-level team. And *look* at them, Coach would say. *Look* at them, *look* at them, *look* at them. *Look* at them play and learn what they do. *Learn* their mindset. You should know what they're going to do before *they know* what they're going to do. *Look* at them and *know* how to beat them.

The online ladder grew even more relentless these days, just when no one thought things could get any tougher. The deadline approached quicker and faster with every passing second. The top two teams on the ladder excluding those already in the league or the challenger series would have a shot as a Wildcard team.

Every day mattered at this point. Every mouse click, every CS, every Teleport, every turret, every ward, every piece of gold.

Riot announced the venue for the Finals. An east coast event, a rare occasion. Given the improved network infrastructure, ping on the east coast had improved as well. There would be no noticeable differences in ping, Riot guaranteed. With a capacity just above Season 3 Worlds Finals, Madison Square Garden in New York would host the event. Right at their doorstep.

Press caught wind and the articles spewed out. “Esports in the Big Apple.” “Make Room for eSports in The Mecca.” “Competitive Video Games at MSG.” “League of Legends Expands with Grand E-Sport Spectacle.”

And those first discovering the advent of competitive games commented to share their words of wisdom with the world.

Why would anyone pay money to see something like this? It’s just people playing games???

What a waste of youth. If I were still 20 yrs old I’d do something worthwhile with my life.

Rito really outdid themselves this time lol. Can’t imagine the traffic though.

WHEN’S MAHVEL?

Can’t wait for FFG to win. Can’t let those imports take our jobs lol

Four teams constantly fought for the top two spots on the ladder. After each game the ladder rotated and shuffled to reflect the changes. Every change caused minor heart attacks and panic attacks and pushed each team to fight even harder.

And still the deadline was approaching.

Team Exile. Erupting Force Squad. Assassin Knights. Final Frontier Gaming.

Like most competitive teams around the world, these three teams vying for a spot as a Wildcard participant had imported top-tier players from other regions. Some imported Korean players, others imported Brazilian players. Some imported Spanish players, others imported Chinese players.

Final Frontier remained one the few North American teams picking up and training regional players. Fans had dubbed them America’s Final Hope. The Apple Pie. The Rex, Wild, and Blues.

The deadline crept closer, closer, closer, and the team constantly fought off sleep and Exile. Time and time again they traded wins and losses, constantly hovering in first, second, and third place. But they need top two. And they fought for it, and they fought for it.

And come deadline time they got it.

They rested soundly that night.

In one week a best of five with Exile would decide who earned the last remaining LCS spot.

In just one week’s time.

Part Three

Oh Mother...and here I figured you'd had enough of me by now. You could'a *undone* the Calamity itself...but instead you wanna stay? In a world like this? I've gotta admit, Kid...I ain't yet put much thought in that idea...of carrying on...with you here. We can't go back no more. But I suppose we could go...wherever we please. And if anyone's left out there...I sure would like to see the look on their faces...when we dock this thing right on their doorstep. Getting ahead of myself, though. I'm gonna need a first mate. What do you say?

– *Bastion*

Stat sua cuique dies

Stat sua cuique dies

Mæl is me to feran

Aleto men moi nostos

Aleto men moi nostos

C'est pour cela que je suis née

Kono michi ya

Yuku hito nishi ni

Kono michi ya

Aki no kure

C'est pour cela que je suis née

Ne me plaignez pas

C'est pour cela que je suis née

– *Journey*, “[I Was Born For This](#)” (**Audio Warning**) - [Translation](#)

...against this framework of competitive game design, we can understand why the marginal advantage gives a game flavor and excitement for both the player and observer. The marginal advantage not only provides the player with the joy of overcoming obstacles, of finding new and more effective methods of winning, but also allows a player to express himself, to have his own unique style. By exploiting the marginal advantage, the expert player is both a problem solver and an artist...

– Sean “Day9” Plott

Humankind cannot gain anything without first giving something in return. To obtain, something of equal value must be lost. That is alchemy's first law of Equivalent Exchange. In those days, we really believed that to be the world's one, and only, truth...

– *Full Metal Alchemist*

Years of Work

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Sunrise

Both teams stood on the stage. They looked outward into the massive stadium. The arena expanded outward and upward on balconies far as the eye could see. All seats were empty and groups of people moved in all directions carrying every kind of equipment possible.

“Jorge!” Shellshock’s voice rang.

Panda turned to him, “What up, Coach?”

Shellshock repeated in the same tone “Jorge!”

“*What?*”

“Jorge, get up,” Shellshock said shaking him.

Finally Panda woke from his slumber and he looked around curiously. With a grimace on his face he squinted and with his hands shielded his eyes from the bright lightbulb above.

“Get up, Jorge,” Shellshock said again, “it’s game day.”

Panda sighed annoyed. “I was dreaming we were still rehearsing.”

“*Really?*” Shellshock asked surprised. He stuck with his tone and asked “And did we beat Exile in the rehearsal?”

Panda loosened up and dropped back down onto his bed. He closed his eyes and asked “How do we *win* a rehearsal, Coach?”

“Don’t know. Anyway, get up. Hit the gym and get your blood pumping. I need you awake and alert today.”

He lay still on his bed, pulled the covers over him shoulders and whined “But it’s *cold*, Coach.”

“Yeah. New York winters tend to be pretty cold.”

Panda covered himself from head to toe and said “I’ll get out of bed if you turn off global warming, Coach.”

Shellshock turned toward the light switch and flicked it off. “There. It’s off. Get up.”

After a while Panda let out a long, loud breath of air. “I hate you, Coach” he said and stood up and began stretching.

“You’ll thank me later, Jorge,” Shellshock assured. He walked out the room and an audible groan escaped from Panda’s room.

In the computer room four setups were on and awaiting a password input. Shellshock went to Panda’s station at the center, below the large team banner, and turned it on. As the fans spun and breathed to life he peered out the window looking into the dark, drowsy city.

At regular intervals of three, four, five street tiles lampposts shone brightly, pushing away the dark-lavender of early morning. A vehicle or two drove through the darkness, the luminous car lights cutting through the black unknown.

Panda began for the door and loudly said “Aight, Coach, I’m headin’ down.”

Shellshock followed and they waited for the elevator as the indicator pinged from the first floor to the sixth.

“Where is everyone?” Panda asked. “It’s p-quiet this morning.”

“They’re already downstairs,” Shellshock replied, the elevator doors opening before them. “You’re the last one awake this morning.”

“Oh. Shit.”

“Yeah.”

“What *time* is it?”

Shellshock glanced down at his watch and read “Seven twelve.”

“*Dude*,” Panda exclaimed, “that’s so early it’s still *yesterday*. Beam me up, Shelly, I’m goin’ back to bed.”

“Riot shuttle’s gonna pick us up around twelve. You can take a nap on the way.”

“*Ugh*,” Panda groaned. “I still hate you, Coach.”

They reached the basement and the elevator doors opened. Shellshock held out his arm allowing Panda out first. “You can hate me all you want, Jorge. But you should’ve probably slept earlier last night.”

“Yeah, probably. Lol,” he said.

They entered the designated gym area and a constant whirring sound and a running beat echoed through the air. Some tenants of the same building ran on treadmills, each at their own pace.

Sneakers chirped loudly as they rubbed against the ground, accompanied by a rhythmic, hallow sound. The rest of the team ran within a small, enclosed arena bouncing an orange ball against the ground. WildCat dashed around and waved toward Crescendo, calling aloud “Gimmie, gimmie!”

She sped forward in one direction, shook free of Tokyo’s guard, and bounced the ball, predicting where WildCat would be in a few seconds.

“Make ‘im work for it, George!” Shellshock urged as he approached. Rex stretched long and intercepted the ball, turning the direction of the game. Shellshock again called out, “Make ‘im work for it, Sonia! Make ‘em fight for every inch of ground, Jason!”

The screech of sneakers quickened as two moved offensively, two defensively. Rex viciously launched the ball to Tokyo who caught it with ease, scrapped the ground with his heel and jumped to take the shot.

The sphere cleanly slipped through the hoop and the ball’s bounce quickened as gravity pulled it downward.

“What’s the score, duderinos?” Panda asked.

“Just tied it,” Rex exhaled.

“Coach, Panda, come play,” WildCat beckoned. “We’ll make it three-v-three.”

“I don’t...I don’t have sneakers on, guys.”

“But then the game’s unbalanced, Coach,” WildCat went on. We need your OP to counter Panda’s OP. Just turtle for us and you won’t have to run.”

“Alright, if you say so,” Shellshock let up.

Six played on the field, five running, one walking, in a rapid and ever-changing pace. Pulses rose, heartbeats quickened, and senses sharpened. This morning began sooner than the team was accustomed to, all planned to wake and shake the team alive.

The game went on free of fears or thoughts or doubts of the deciding games to be played later that day. On the court they played and joked and exclaimed all manner of things for an hour, muscles tensing and flexing, blood flowing endlessly through veins and arteries.

After the mandatory hour the team returned to the apartments, drops of sweat trickling down the sides of their face, controlled panting and breaths of exhaustion emanating from everyone.

They completed their morning routines, washed away their weariness, ate away their hunger, and welcomed a new day refreshed. Seconds ticked by and sunrise came and went and still the hour drew nearer.

In the practice room the team put in their last few games of Solo Queue, playing and joking and toying with each other the same as any other day. Only now they had all donned on the team uniform, all matching in the deep-black jersey, the bright-white logo printed at the center. Sponsors were given real estate running down from shoulders to the dark-gray sleeves.

All uniforms were the same save for custom sizing and the large text running atop the back.

NeoTokyo.

DeusRex.

Pandango.

WildCat.

Crescendo.

In a well-fitted suit Shellshock observed them in their final games, and before long called a meeting. In these final moments they discussed every detail yet again, perhaps the final chance to do so, Coach said.

As the sun rose higher in the sky and neared to the west, seconds marched onward and the hour crept ever-closer to game time.^x

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Eye of the Storm

The team swayed in the van, forced by inertia left or right or forward or backward. Each time traffic moved ahead or stopped in place the team again swung in one direction or another, influenced by the flow of their surroundings.

“Power spikes,” Shellshock said aloud from the front seat.

“Triforce, Lich Bane, BORK on certain champs,” WildCat replied instantly. “Levels six or nine or eleven on some champs, too.”

“Tch, we gotta make sure to buy the items, first,” Rex said. “Gold’s useless if it’s just sittin’ in our pocket.”

On one shoulder Tokyo pillowed Panda’s head, from the other he read from Crescendo’s tablet “Blue says power spikes are times when we should look for dragons or picks.”

“Good,” Shellshock said. “Team comps.”

“Poke, pick, siege,” WildCat recited, “eh...”

“Teamfight, splitpush, skirmish, kite,” Tokyo completed the list.

“Goals of a siege comp.”

“Towers,” Rex said. “Towers, towers, towers. Siege comps group at power spikes to take those towers.”

“Siege comp needs wards to cover for flanks. A siege comp should avoid fighting in the jungle,” Tokyo said.

He read from Crescendo’s tablet again, “Blue says we need wave clear and disengage in a siege comp.”

“Good. Teamfight.”

“AoE CC, AoE Damage, teamfight coordination,” Tokyo said.

“We should pick fights when we have numbers advantage or when we have equal numbers. After fights we take towers,” Rex said.

Along the way the team continued their last-minute studying, covering every detail of the game Shellshock had written down. And within the confines of the van the team continued to sway to the force of the van, to the influence of traffic.

They slowly approached the venue and The Garden overtook the horizon. On the surrounding streets stood massive crowds of people. They shuffled in all directions, most heading toward the arena’s entrance. Plastered across the external walls was a large poster reading League Championship Series North American Expansion Tournament.

Among the many dark colored coats were pockets of bright blues, raging reds, eye-popping purples, shining silvers. Many had shown up dressed and armored in their favorite characters, among them some Braums, Lissandras, a Steel Legion Lux, a Frosted Ezreal. Here hid a Zed, there an Orianna. A Soul Reaper Draven and

Dunkmaster Darius posed confidently as press captured it all amid the air of clamor and excitement drifting through the crowd.

The driver pulled up to the street as close as he could, carefully inching through the crowd that spilled onto the road. “I can’t get any closer than this,” he informed the team.

Shellshock peeked at his watch. “We’ve still got about an hour or so before the first game. Maybe we can practice in the team room,” Shellshock said. “Is Jorge awake?”

“Yeah, I’m up,” Panda replied.

“Make sure you don’t leave anything,” the driver warned as Shellshock stepped of the passenger seat.

“You heard him, guys.”

“Yo, Tokerino,” Panda said, “your shoulder’s hella comfortable. I should make you my new pillow.”

“No,” Tokyo said.

Panda snickered through his teeth, “Doesn’t matter, you’re my new pillow now.”

“Real, dude.”

They left the van, instantly merging into the crowd in the cool December air. They slowly began for the entrance, the path bogged down and clogged by the mass of fans. Here danced an Iron Solari Leona and a Lunar Goddess Diana. There an Officer Vi and Officer Caitlyn brought law and order to the crowd. Many people wore the same green, plush hat with a pair of ears sticking out the top. Others hugged white Poro plushies in their arms, soft, pink tongues sticking out.

Eyes from the crowd locked onto Crescendo’s bright, blue hair in order to decipher what champion she was cosplaying. But from somewhere in crowd someone yelled “FFG!”

Eyes and faced turned quickly and before them walked America’s Final Hope. The Apple Pie. The Rex, Wild, and Blues. A second later an electrifying chant erupted, many voices ringing in unison “USA! USA! USA!” Large placards and signs were lifted up into the air with the team’s logo or some drawing of a champion or of course drawings of American flags. Other text written alongside ran Notice Me WildCat Senpai, Maravilla is Love Maravilla is Life, Pick Teemo, FFG: American Heroes, DJ Crescendo Rito Pls, Pick Windrunner, Eclipse for President, and of course WHEN’S MAHVEL.

Of course.

All eyes motioned toward the commotion as the deafening chant continued “USA! USA! USA!” Press neared, fans neared, and a circle had formed around the team. Shellshock tried to talk to the team, but his voice was drowned out in sharp chants. Fans handed black markers with posters and papers and plushies and hats asking for autographs. Fans approached shyly asking for pictures and selfies with every player. And amid the chaos the cold air had dispersed and the crowd had brought with it a warmth and a cheer like none the team had experienced the past three months of hard work and dedication.

Along the way more fans poured in from every direction for more pictures and more autographs and more hugs and for simple interactions. Fans of the rival team shared the moment and they too asked for autographs and photos. And together the crowd continued to burn away the cold air looming overhead.

The journey indoors was slow and long, but game time drew nearer and the fans reluctantly let the team go. Inside, more fans tiptoed and leaned in every possible direction to catch a single glimpse of the players before they entered backstage. An event official dressed in Riot attire led the team to their practice room, warning them that few minutes remained before they were expected on the main stage.

The team arrived at last to their practice room. A quiet room with six computers laid out against the walls. They tossed their coats onto the chairs, took out their mice, keyboards, and mousepads. And at last Shellshock briefed the team a final time.

Five stared at Shellshock intently, and he in turned looked each of them in the eyes before muttering the first words.

“So, we’re finally here, guys,” he failed to hide a smile. “It’s been a long, fast road, but we’re still not done. Everything we’ve worked for, it all comes down to today. All this time we’ve worked for this very moment.”

He looked at team equally dressed in their black uniform, the team’s logo square in the center.

“Y’know, the thing about esports is not many people’ll get to experience it. Hell, the fact that *I* played *Counter Strike* is miraculous. I’ve always thought about passing that on to others, giving younger players a chance to prove themselves, and that’s you guys.

“There are *thousands* of people out there who believe in you guys and want you to win, and I’m in that group of people. And I hand-picked you guys and I’ve come to know you all pretty well these past months, so I know that you’re all capable of greatness. So,” his voice concluding, “let’s get out there and show everyone that we’re not here to lose.”

“*Murica boys!*” Panda yelled. “S’go wreck some face!”

A Riot official knocked and opened the door and said “Five minutes. If you guys want to set up in-game settings now’s a good time to go.”

“Alright,” Shellshock clapped his hands once, “make sure you’ve got everything. Let’s go.”

They followed their liaison down some hallways, on every wall a television played the stream counting down ten minutes. Coming up FFG vs XII. Best of Five.

At last they entered backstage area with high ceiling, and a rumbling, pulsing aura filled the air. A unified cheer resonated loudly nearby immediately followed by a chant of “XII! XII! XII!”

As they walked on the chanting grew louder and louder, the rumbling ground and walls and the vibrating air growing ever more tense.

The escort began to slow as they approached a darker area backstage. He neared an entrance and told the team “Stage is just out this way. Good luck!”

“Awesome. Thanks,” Shellshock replied. They walked through the opening, out onto the stage near their designated play area and a roar erupted from the darkened seats “FFG! FFG! FFG!”

The booming chants shook the air, thundering rapidly and pounding against the team’s ears. The bellows soon transitioned to “USA! USA! USA!” with sporadic shrieks intertwined between the chant.

In the eye of the storm energy spewed into the atmosphere, massive energy flaring and gushing out of freshly opened valves. A restless vigor flew endlessly around each member of the team, like the vivacity of a thick, heavy, blizzard wind. An animated zest coursed through their veins, internal jolts kicking their bodies alive; an erratic zeal swam through their arteries and nothing could still the riot in their blood.

Even though standing next to one another they could not hear each other’s words.

Well into the darkness of the room the team could make out placards and posters with insignias and messages written on them. Stadium lights dazzled and danced into the crowd as the chanting slowly, slowly grew lower. Skycams hovered and slid across a preset path to capture every inch of the venue. Some cameras made their way closer to the stage and captured the players as they emerged.

Five computers were lit before them, clients already signed in to each player’s respective account.

FFG NeoTokyo.

FFG DeusRex.

FFG Pandango.

FFG WildCat.

FFG Crescendo.

Each member of the team took their place and began connecting their equipment, and a referee walked toward Shellshock, handing him a headset and a transmitter.

On the other half of the stage Exile were doing the same.

One by one each member of the team put on their headsets and then the loudness of the stadium drowned away in the white-noise static. A few feet behind them Shellshock paced the length of the team.

“Jorge, is your headset working?” he asked.

“Yeah, it’s all good,” Panda replied.

Panda grabbed the fresh hand warmer on his desk and began toying with it in his hands. “*Dude*, this thing’s so warm.” He pressed it against his hands and knuckles and rubbed it against his arms.

“Sonia, headset working?”

She half-turned in her seat and gave him a thumbs up.

“Alright, then we’re all here.” Crescendo heard the slight digital chirps of his voice as it transmitted over the headset. “So everyone set up in-game settings. Remember, if

you need me to remind you your settings, I've written them down. That includes mouse sensitivity and screen resolution. Let me know. And again, we're here to win, guys. Let's make sure everything's perfectly set up for us to do so."

"Yo Geoff," Rex said, "how's your Chaucer memory?"

Tokyo snickered, "This isn't Solo Queue."

FFG Crescendo: You should type it to XII in the first game :p

"Do it, Tokyo," WildCat urged. "Do it, you won't!"

He recited from memory in his Middle English accent "Whan that Aprill, with his shoures soote; The droghte of March hath perced to the roote; And bathed every veyne in swich licour; Of which vertu engengred is the flour..."

They entered a custom game and began last hitting minions, their minds and bodies performing the basics and fundamentals of what they've been practicing. As they quickly grew accustomed to the static, with Shellshock's voice in the comms and the team humor building, they quickly forgot that thousands of people were sitting in front of them. All their attention was focused on their sole monitor, and now all that mattered in the world lay directly ahead.^X

31

Souls on Display

The sun shone brightly as ten in the morning approached the west coast. Eleven and noon neared further inland. On the eastern seaboard clocks ticked onward to one in the afternoon. Down south and past the equator, the hour marched closer to two and three. Across the great Atlantic and to the other hemisphere the final seconds of four and five melted in the first seconds of five and six in the evening.

Many, many cables traveled beneath the ground and underwater traversing and conquering vast distances. Many, many watts and many, many bytes ran through the cables, all of which were intercepted, decrypted, and read by data centers in the name of national security. And solely for the purposes of national security, people were told. The cables were digital roads and were an entangled web spread the whole world wide. And orbiting overhead, network satellites were aimed earthbound. Solar powered satellites constantly transmitted data down to the surface.

The data and the bytes and the information rushed to computers and phones in cities and towns around the globe. Cables and data flowed to many, many homes and bars and offices where the bytes were interpreted and decoded. The computers and phones displayed text and visuals, the bytes contained all manner of sounds and music.

Through the cables social media clamored and flooded with anticipation as short quips of support were sent for all the world to see. Pictures taken within crowded bars and theaters showed the viewing party that had gathered for the day. In homes friends had gathered together and they shared pictures of their viewing setup. In every photo at least one monitor was tuned into a stream showing two logos and a countdown timer.

Many photos were uploaded from within the venue, photos showing the enormous scope of the stadium, the massive and packed arena, the casters at their desk adjusting their headsets, and the players in the spotlight on the main stage. Above the players were giant screens showing two logos and a countdown timer.

A global stream uploaded data, and the data played music and displayed a standby message with two logos: Coming Up FFG vs XII. Best of 5. Tweet @LoLEsports #LCSExpansion. 00:00:15.

The timer ticked down to fourteen, thirteen, twelve, eleven. The screen and music faded away into a black screen and the many voices of the venue yelled: ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four three, two, one! And a unified cheering erupted from the broadcast.

A hand appeared from the black screen and in its palm it offered a purple orb. The hand then turned to a clenched fist and punched the screen, giving the appearance of broken glass. The fist again lunged for the screen, shattered the glass to pieces, and a red logo filled the center: Riot Games.

The broadcast continued. A shot of the towering skyscrapers of the city faded in from black and a tense symphony of sharp strings filled the background. A rapid succession of shots of the city's landscapes played:

The deep purple New York Harbor busy with large cargo ships traversing waters, leaving behind a trail of waves that rippled and melted away the frosted waters.

The Empire State Building lighting up in many colors as night took over.

Brooklyn Bridge and Columbus Circle with cars and trucks of all shapes and sizes speeding in all directions.

The Statue of Liberty standing stalwart and green, unnerved and unshaken.

Freedom Tower reaching skyward and its glass panes deflected the bright, burning shine of sunlight.

And finally Madison Square Garden dressed in esports. The game's logo plastered proud, large banners displaying game champions, large banners displaying the logos of the teams playing within the venue. And beneath it all the globally unifying call: #WeAreLCS.

The music continued as the broadcast displayed a Korean player in Exile uniform with captions translating from his native tongue "We've worked really hard to make it this far. We're going to work just as hard to keep going."

Rex appeared on screen in Final Frontier uniform and he spoke in his casual tone "For us this is war. It's gonna be a fight to the death one way or another."

Footage changed to another Exile player who spoke in his Spanish accent "We know Final Frontier is a very good team. Our screams are about 50-50 but today we'll see which team wins out in the end."

Panda appeared on screen and said "I think Exile's gonna be kinda tough but I'm sure we can out-tough them."

There the video ended to a coda of high notes and the stream began playing live footage. An overhead camera panned over a swaying, hectic crowd. Half the stadium was bathed in the blue light and the other half bathed in red. Signs and posters and placards waved fanatically in the air. Back light produced from phones and tablets shone brightly and were spread sporadically throughout the sea of darkness.

Text on the screen read 'Live from New York, New York,' and the excited voice of a caster spoke.

"Hello and welcome to the North American LCS Expansion Tournament live from Madison Square Garden in New York. I'm Remington Bisland III and I'm joined by Matthew "Masua" Leesman. How are you doin' today, Masua?"

"I'm doing very well, Rem. And I'm *really* excited because we have anywhere from three to five more *League of Legends* games lined up for today."

"Absolutely. Today marks the final day of Expansion games for NA LCS with either Final Frontier Gaming or Team Exile claiming the last available spot in North America. Yesterday we saw the clean sweep with Maxim Gaming successfully *and* convincingly holding down the fort against challenger team Golden Guild."

“That was a very dominant series for Maxim. They showed up to play and they certainly didn’t disappoint.”

“Over in Europe it’s a rather different story because EU LCS now welcomes two *new* teams to the mix with Team Decadence and Barcelona Titans securing their spot on the grand European stage.”

“There are some very...*interesting* ideas brewing over in Europe, Rem. If you watched those games you’ll know the kind of shenanigans some of those teams were able to pull off and...let’s just say they don’t play a very typically version of *League of Legends*.”

“That sounds *very* compelling, Masua. But unfortunately I missed those games. Now how will I ever see the magic going on over in Europe?”

“Well, Rem, you’re in luck. We just so happen to have a site dedicated to all games past, current, and upcoming. You can head on over to LoLEsports and find team information, player information, game stats, analysis, articles, and *much* more.”

“I’ll be sure to check that out, now how ‘bout we get going with today’s games?”

“I’m very eager to get to it.”

“Well today’s challengers are Wildcard teams. These are teams that have worked their way up the 5v5 ladder, but they’re also teams who aren’t already playing in the Challenger Series or in the Championship Series. Starting on Blue side today is Final Frontier Gaming. This a *very* young team that was put together earlier this year but they’ve still been able to successfully climb the ladder, easily outperforming a lot of veteran teams.”

“It’s always great to see new teams take the scene by storm, Rem. Teams like this generally don’t make it *this far this fast*, but the fact that Final Frontier have managed to pull this off is testament to their dedication, teamwork, and drive to make it to the LCS. And not only is this a young team, there are also some young players as well as *new* players who have never played competitively before. I definitely want to see what Final Frontier brings out today.”

“Watching new teams vie for LCS spots is always a blast, Masua, because we get to see fresh minds and fresh players bring their own style to the game. This year won’t be any different.”

“I think the other Wildcard team playing today is one of the best opponents for Final Frontier, Rem. It’s Team Exile, a longer standing organization with players who have more experience in competitive *League*. But their issues could stem from the number of language and communication issues during teamfights. We’ve got a Korean player, a Spanish player, a Brazilian player, and two American players. There are *at least* three languages on that team. Historically we’ve seen *very few* multilingual teams make it far, but Exile were able to claim one of the two spots for this series so maybe they’ll exceed expectations and perform better than their ‘predecessors’ so to speak.”

“To expand on that we had a chat with both teams’ Head Coach to gain some more insight on the players and the team dynamic, let’s hear what they had to say.”

The stream faded into a video. A small label on the screen read Simon “Shellshock” Penn, Head Coach, and the team logo for Final Frontier was displayed beside. “I don’t think our lack of team experience will hinder us from performing well. Over the past couple of months I’ve gotten to know my players and I know what they’re all capable of. It’s been an absolute pleasure working with all of them, through the good and bad, through the ups and downs, through the challenges and hardships. But I’d like to think we’ve endured it and come out on top. They’re all very smart in their own way and anytime we’ve shared our ideas on the game I always learn a lot about their perspective on things. They’re hard workers and I know they’ll do their best against Exile, whose players and support staff have also put in a lot of work.”

The video transitioned to Exile’s Head Coach, the label next to the team logo reading Richard “Belnaut” Franklin. “Our team’s raw skill and talent is what makes us who we are. There weren’t a lot of other Wildcard teams or Challenger teams that had more than one player whose native language wasn’t English. While we use some basic English to communicate in the game we think pings do a good enough job of helping us refocus our priorities. I think that this leads to us having a playstyle that not many teams will be used to. We know Final Frontier will be a difficult opponent, and if we’ve learned anything from playing scrims and racing them on the ladder it’s that they don’t give up easily.”

There the video ended and faded back into the live program.

“Both coaches there showing a lot of respect for the other team,” Rem said at the caster desk.

“Yeah, these teams have played each other quite a bit to get here. If you were watching the Ranked 5s ladder after each update you constantly saw four teams trying to fight for the top two spots. It was very hectic.”

“Yeah, yeah. Maravilla said in the show’s introduction that they were 50-50 with FFG in scrims, so this stage behind us will be the final proving grounds for all ten players. And with that, folks, it looks like we’re ready to head into the first game of this series. Let’s head straight into the starting lineup.”

The stream displayed a graphic of two rows and five columns with Final Frontier appearing in the top row, Exile in the bottom. In each box was a live player cam with each player’s role and name.

Remington continued with the introduction, “Starting on Blue side is Final Frontier Gaming with Head Coach Shellshock, NeoTokyo in the Top Lane, DeusRex in the Jungle, Pandango in Mid Lane, WildCat with a huge smile on AD Carry, and blue haired Crescendo on Support.” Applause and cheer rang for each player mentioned.

“And on the Red side is Team Exile,” Masua went on, “Belnaut standing as Head Coach, Eclipse in the Top Lane, Ages playing with his hand warmers on Jungle, Maravilla in Mid, and Fathom with Umbreon teaming up in Bot Lane.” Again the fan support broke into the air.

“Our featured matchup for this series is the battle in the Mid Lane. In Final Frontier’s corner is Pandango! And in Exile’s corner is Maravilla!” Rem declared.

“The pick and bans for this series is going to be kinda interesting, Rem, especially considering the current meta. Mid Lane has been a very dominant lane in Solo Queue and many of the teams playing in the Expansion Tournament have been focusing a lot of their attention onto either early Mid picks or very late picks to prevent counters. And something to highlight about this particular matchup is playstyle. Both Mid Laners are known to be extremely aggressive and things can get *really* hectic *really* fast because both Maravilla and Pandango are capable of turning a single kill into a huge power spike for their respective team.”

“For those of you watching at home, maybe your eyes will be focusing on other lanes. Head on over to Twitter to join in on the conversation and share your thoughts with us on today’s set of games. Our question for today: Which player are you most excited to see play? Be sure to tweet us at LoLEsports and we’ll read our favorites on air.”

A short cheer drifted through the stadium as the massive screens above the players displayed the beginning of the Draft Phase.

“So to start off, I think the trend of Mid Lane priority will keep going,” Masua predicted. “I would be extremely surprised if Blue-side FFG doesn’t first pick a champion for Pandango, but I do think that if they’re afraid of a potential counter-pick they might just save that pick for later.”

“Final Frontier first bans Zed. As you said earlier, Masua, both Mid Laners can take the smallest of advantages and turn it into a huge swing, but it looks like FFG simply don’t want to have to deal with it at all. And Exile’s first ban will be the Syndra. That’s a pick Pandango values a lot due to her range. And Syndra’s one of those champions that can become *very* scary with just a few kills.”

“Something we haven’t touched on is the array of experience on the teams. On Exile, most everyone has some experience with competitive play, and for the most part they are all somewhat veteran players. But on Final Frontier’s side neither Pandango nor Crescendo have played competitively before joining this team, so this *will* be their debut to any league or circuit. And the reason I bring this is up that with the Syndra ban it seems like maybe Exile wants to focus on the inexperienced members of FFG and try to get them off their comfort zone during the Draft Phase.”

“That *does* seem to be the trend here with these *very* quick bans. Rounding out the remaining bans: FFG bans Lissandra and Janna, while Exile bans Xerath and...it looks like Exile’s taking their time on this last ban. Maybe they were caught off guard.”

“As we mentioned earlier, Rem, Mid is a highly volatile lane this meta, and these are two of the most explosive Mid Laners in this tournament. *Four* bans are focused on Mid and maybe this last one will be another one. I’m wondering how many of those bans were comfort picks.”

“Another thing to take into consideration is the sort of four-pronged Lissandra ban. She could have been played by both Mid Laners *and* both Top Laners, but now she’s off the table for this game. And it looks like Exile’s final ban will be Gnar who can be a real threat if there’s no strong disengage on Exile’s lineup.”

“Final Frontier immediately lock in that Orianna and it looks like they’re opting for a teamfight composition. A Gnar initiation with a Command: Shockwave to follow-up could have been an absolutely deadly combination. We’ll have to see if Exile attempts to take away any Ball delivery champions in their first two picks, but there are so many champions with gap closers who can charge forward for a good Shockwave placement.”

“Exile *once again* taking their time, only now it’s with their first picks here. Really makes me wonder if Final Frontier already have a strong Draft for this Game One. There on your screen you can see Shellshock talking confidently to the FFG squad, and switching over to Belnot talking to the Exile boys...it looks like they’re *really* talking through their picks.”

“Thresh and Rek’Sai for Exile’s first round of picks. If these Ball delivery methods had fallen into FFG’s hands it would have been an *extreme* amount of additional CC with the knock up and the massive slow from The Box. I also really like that with these picks Exile are hiding the damage they’re going to be bringing into this match.”

“Wow, *very* quick lock ins from Final Frontier here: Vi and Leona.”

“With these picks, Rem, I’m very interested to see which of these two teams are going to control these fights better. There are already good picks on both sides but we’ll have to see how well they execute their strategy because so far there’s *a lot* of aggression in these FFG’s picks.”

“Yasuo and Rumble here for Maravilla and Eclipse, a good mixture of both physical damage and magic damage on the side of Exile. And FFG’s last two picks coming in quickly again with Corki and Olaf.”

“And it looks like Exile were anticipating that Corki pick, Rem. Caitlyn is a pretty safe ADC and she also gives Exile the choice to siege Final Frontier’s towers because FFG’s teamcomp is *very* teamfight oriented. We might see a game of cat and mouse with FFG trying to fight with numbers advantage and Exile trying to siege and splitpush.”

“Coaches now giving their final words and final advice to their players as the clock ticks down and there you have it, folks, picks and bans are set and ready to go. Players are loading in and here are both coaches shaking hands before heading backstage. But before we get onto the Rift be sure to head online and let us know who *you* think is going to win. Tweet us at LoLEsports with hashtag FFGWIN or hashtag XIIWIN and we’ll update the fan vote throughout the series. Who do you think will win this first game, Masua?”

“It’s hard to say. On the Blue side there’s a fair amount of engage and if they can coordinate their teamfights and position well they *should* win this first game. But if

they can't quite manage to work as a unit or if Exile can kite well then the game should go to Exile."

"And ladies and gentlemen we're finally onto the Rift here with this Game One between Final Frontier Gaming and Team Exile. This series will be a best of five and the winner will secure the last remaining NA LCS spot for the upcoming 2017 Spring Split. Ten players have entered into this match but only five will emerge victorious."

"That final LCS spot is a *highly* coveted prize, Rem. Many players in the past and some of these players here today have sacrificed a lot of their young lives trying to make a viable career out of professional, competitive play. And that *isn't* an easy task either especially because if you're competing at this level you *know* your opponent has eyes on the exact same goal."

"And not only do these two teams aspire for the same goal, they also appear to have the same level one strategy. All five members of both teams are moving through their own Blue Buff, no wards placed yet on either side."

"Because this Bot Lane matchup is Corki-Caitlyn it's vital that Final Frontier do their best to avoid it if they can. Caitlyn brings a lot of range into that lane and she can easily harass Corki in the early levels and force him to miss out on some early CS and that can be *extremely* detrimental to Final Frontier. To further magnify the importance of this lane, Crescendo is also playing Leona and if she falls behind even the slightest bit she can't really make as big an impact as she should."

"Vision is now set up on the North Jungle and the South Jungle, both teams trying to get information to make informed decisions on how to play out this early game which will be paramount to both teams."

"Y'know, Rem, from having looked at the post-game stats when these teams climbed the ladder I can tell you the Corki-Leona combo is one of Final Frontier's favorites, and they're very well practiced on it. With the addition of Orianna and Vi there is a *very real* wombo combo threat that Exile need to be mindful of. Unfortunately now that Jungle camps are spawning FFG's Bot Lane lose out on the lane swap mind game."

"Both Duo Lanes are currently on the bottom side of the map and its looking as if Final Frontier may struggle a bit in these early levels."

"Exile's well-placed vision here reveals that they *will* go up against WildCat and Crescendo and ideally this lane *should* go in favor of Fathom and Umbreon. And here's a good move from FFG, the Bot Lane taking the small Krug for that tiny amount of XP. So far they've adapted pretty well to unfavorable circumstances and maybe they'll even try to go for an all-in at level two."

"Corki with Leona procs can do some serious damage in that Bottom part of the map. Elsewhere on the Rift everything seems to be going smoothly and calmly. Everyone playing this game rather slowly so far."

"Something we haven't touched on yet but might still come up throughout the series is who is Exile going to focus on the enemy team. Because if you think about it

there are two players on FFG who have no experience in competitive play and they might crumble under the pressure. If Exile camps and focuses Pandango or the Bot Lane with Crescendo, will those players then be too scared to play aggressively? Or maybe Exile instead want to focus the veteran players, set them behind, make them irrelevant, and force the inexperienced members of FFG to make things happen.”

“That could be a strategy Exile implement but for now things look fairly even in Mid Lane, some trades between Pandango and Maravilla leave them at about seventy-five percent health with health pots healing them up. Meanwhile in the Bot Lane FFG are at their turret, Fathom and Umbreon using that long range to their advantage. WildCat at about half health but keeping his distance to minimize the amount of harass he receives, and Crescendo still dutifully executing minions for the heals from Relic Shield.”

On the stage, players manipulated their controls to execute their desired moves. And from the crowd, each movement seemed perfectly refined, all seeming to be done without much thought.

“And these guys are just *perfectly* hitting all these minions under turret. It looks like they’ve trained for these kinds of situations and if they don’t lose any more health from Piltover Peacemakers they can *probably* stay here indefinitely.”

“Aggressive wards coming in from both Junglers as well as a defensive one from Pandango in that Mid Lane. CS is just about even all across the board. The only turret to take damage is on Bot Lane with Final Frontier pushed in against a Caitlyn.”

“This would be a great time for DeusRex to gank this Bot Lane and he *is* in the area. A ping goes down onto Fathom and it looks like they’re going for it.”

“DeusRex sneaking through tribush, meanwhile Umbreon is heading up, their eyes lock *and here comes the Vault Breaker; Zenith Blade onto Fathom, Umbreon not quite quick enough with the Flay. Fathom half health and forced to Flash.* Meanwhile in the Mid Lane Ages *coming in from behind Pandango forcing a quick Flash toward his turret.* He doesn’t seem fazed however, and is choosing to stay at turret to secure the farm.”

“Flashes burned usually means a repeat gank in the near future, and with both of those Flashes down someone might think to go for Dragon. And as for that skirmish at bottom, *that’s* why FFG love the Corki-Leona lane. That burst damage between the two can be deadly and the synergy that these two players have is starting to show.”

“Pandango not quite as lucky at CSing under turret as WildCat. He missed two or three of those ranged minions, and while they may grant less gold than melee minions they still do contribute toward those big, expensive items he’s going to be needing later on. First back for Bot Lanes here mean the Sightstones will be coming out and we will have more vision on the map and an even high ability to make plays on players caught out of position.”

“Now that we have first items coming in WildCat will start outscaling Fathom, especially once he completes his Trinity Force. That will be a *huge* powerspike and that

will be the best time for Final Frontier to start grouping up and taking turrets and Dragons. The sooner Final Frontier can get that going, the better an advantage they'll have over Exile based solely on itemization."

"Top Laners now recalling as well and starting to purchase their own items so we will see more damage coming from Eclipse and a mixture of damage and defense from NeoTokyo."

"Both Mid Laners now hitting level six means we'll start seeing some ultimates on the field. So far both sides have been playing a fairly passive game, but if anything brings out the action into the Rift it'll certainly be the ultimates."

"Junglers are also hovering near Mid Lane and maybe they'll go for a fight if they think they can pull it off. But no, nevermind, Pandango and Maravilla sort of mirroring each other: pushing the wave so they can recall, refuel, and spend their hard-earned gold on some shiny, new items."

"Junglers are backing as well but they're just shy on experience of level six. Eight minutes on the clock, no kills, no turrets, no Dragons to speak of yet, but Dragon will surely be the next priority for both teams. Pandango now heading on down toward Bottom Lane with an Athene's and Sorcerer's Shoes to add some more power behind his punch."

"Maravilla is also heading down toward Bottom on Exile's side with a completed Statikk Shiv. Both teams seem to know there's a fight coming in soon."

"Junglers are clearing camps for the last few experience points to hit level six, not only for the ultimates but also for the increased stats. Both Supports have just used their Sweepers to make sure their firepower can move into the brushes unseen."

"What's interesting about this Bottom Lane, Rem, is considering Exile were able to find the lane they wanted I'm unsure if they did enough to punish Corki's early game. Neither WildCat nor Crescendo are behind in experience and they're likely to hit level six once they kill this wave. The CS numbers aren't *bad* at all. This lane *should* have gone favorable in Exile's direction but they don't seem to have any kind of advantage to speak of."

"Bot has hit six *and here comes the engage: Solar Flare stunning only Umbreon. Teleports coming in from both Top Laners. Assault and Battery coming down onto Fathom but he Nets backward, DeusRex going too deep and resetting The Ball back onto Pandago. The Command: Shockwave being whiffed. Maravilla dashing toward WildCat, but Crescendo stunning him in his tracks. Maravilla forced to Flash out and DeusRex Flashing back to safety as well. The Box coming up to deter a chase. Ace in the Hole locking onto DeusRex but good guy NeoTokyo takes the bullet for the team.* FFG now opting to go up toward Dragon. No kills coming in from this teamfight but *a lot* of low health bars on both sides."

Movements were pure instinct. The players reflected parts of themselves in the game. On the massive screens, the ten players were demonstrating to the world what they were capable of, the very essence of their being.

“There were *a lot* of ultimates burned there, Rem, but because NeoTokyo held onto his Ragnarok and WildCat still has some missiles remaining, that *might* just be enough to dissuade Exile from contesting this Dragon.”

“Ages and Eclipse are sticking around trying to get some vision of the Dragon pit and some members of FFG are pretty low. If the Final Frontier squad aren’t careful they might lose one or two members for this objective, but WildCat and Crescendo are nearly full health and they *are* successfully zoning Exile away. Ages and Eclipse decide to back away and not take the risk. First Dragon goes cleanly to Final Frontier Gaming.”

“If we look back at this replay we can see that Fathom’s escape pulled DeusRex away from Orianna *just enough* that the Ball transferred back to Pandango causing the Command: Shockwave to miss. *If* Pandango had triggered his ultimate a second sooner he would have hit Fathom, Umbreon, *and* Maravilla which could have lead to much more than just Dragon. But because the Shockwave missed all they could manage to get was pressure on that Bottom Lane.”

As the match went on hundreds of thousands of fans conversed online. They commented on the game on a second-to-second and minute-to-minute basis. After each good play thousands of smarmy remarks and words of praise transferred around the globe at lightning speed.

But praise was not all that ran round the web. Cold words, harsh assertions, and spiteful statements were just as plentiful, if not dominant, in these online discussions. Yet these latter comments were not hateful, fans would claim, but merely constructive criticism.

The innumerable clusters of data continued round the world uninterrupted while the games went on, and midst the action players were neither aware nor concerned of live and fickle public opinion.

“This second Dragon should prompt the next fight here, but Exile have grouped in the area *well* ahead of time and they have cleared *all* of FFG’s vision in the area. Teleports are available for both Top Laners but there is no ward close enough for NeoTokyo to enter the fight.”

“Exile aren’t even starting Dragon, Rem, they’re just baiting Final Frontier to commit to this because they know FFG has to go into this fight blind.”

“FFG pings come down to completely abandon Dragon and take the Mid turret instead, but Exile don’t seem to want to make that trade. They’re heading up and *here comes the Void Rush, Teleports coming in. Shockwave completely misses Exile, but Exile responds with a beautiful four-man Last Breath from Maravilla. Crescendo landing the Solar Flare to slow three members of Exile but it’s not enough. Final Frontier on full retreat. DeusRex goes down, WildCat goes down, two kills for Maravilla. Ace in the Hole coming in from Fathom, Crescendo gives her life for Pandango and that is a three for zero for Exile.*”

“Both Top Laners canceled those Teleports half way through the channel because that was *such* a decisive fight in Exile’s favor with that engage alone. Because of expert

ward-clearing in the Dragon pit *and* because FFG had no wards left in their inventory they had *zero* clue they were about to be engaged on. Instead of trading Dragon for Mid, Exile forced FFG's hand and again, that *lack* of vision is *key* to Exile's success in that fight. Not only do they secure three kills, but they also get Mid *and* the second Dragon of the game."

"And in addition to the vision, Masua, we also have to look at items here. Not only were FFG low on vision but they had a lot of unspent gold in their pockets. WildCat has *only now* completed his Trinity Force, Pandango has *only now* purchased the components for Zhonya's, and DeusRex still needs a few hundred gold to complete Randuin's."

"If Exile had simply done Dragon, FFG wouldn't have died there. But Exile saw an opportunity to get more than just Dragon and they pulled it off *extremely* well. This was also *another* missed Shockwave from Pandango and if I didn't know any better I'd say he might have the LAN jitters. He's one of the two players competing today who are new to competitive gameplay and these ultimates just aren't the kind that is expected of players at this level."

"If that *is* the case it might affect the way the series plays out if the team can't find a way to work around it. We've seen many players in the past who are extraordinary players in many ways but don't perform with the same confidence in these live events. If we take a look at the current fan vote it's actually quite even. Forty-eight percent vote for FFG and fifty-two for XIL. Oh, wait, Forty-seven to fifty-three. They must've just watched that teamfight unfold."

Once more the denizens of the net flooded onto social media, stream chats, and forum threads to share their expertise as quickly as possible.

Egron: LMAO Ffg got fuckign shit on

Kinvac: FailFish

GatJ8: dam man pandangos ults tho

Axtavio96: mayb ethe sun was in therey eyes

clicktowin: Kreygasm the fkn yasuo

SearchingNoMore Posted 2 minutes ago
the lan nerves will be america's downfall D=

hellfire16 Posted 1 minute ago

I don't know why they put pandango on ori hes a way better assassin and this is the kind of meta where he should be put on something like zed or leblanc or fucking ahri. if they dont let him play something agresive like that i really won't feel sorry if htey loose =/

SearchingNoMore Posted 1 minute ago

They had a pretty good pick/ban phase to. Hopefully they fix the jitters

“All things considered, Rem, this is still anyone’s game. What matters now is how these teams make use of the advantages they already have. At this point I think that whichever of the two starts gaining more traction will be able to take this first game.”

“It may very well be Final Frontier who now *do* have some upgraded items and we can see the shifts in their playstyle here with three members pushing up this empty Mid Lane. Exile on the other hand pushing the side lanes trying to avoid that Triforce’d Corki-Leona.”

The characters on the screen went along in their map movements. Both teams pressed onward claiming more ground and in turn gaining more vision.

Each player spoke to the world in these moments. They expressed themselves, their thinking, in a medium not well understood. A player’s deepest self, deepest thoughts, the intangible, unknowable qualities of each player articulated themselves outward, manifested to be displayed on the massive screens for all to see.

Throughout the battles the shoutcasters relentlessly narrated the game and the fights. With every choice the players made, the shoutcasters understood and spelled out both teams’ intentions and strategies. If Final Frontier cannot find teamfights in their favor, the shoutcaster analyzed, they must instead apply pressure around the map. But because Exile are avoiding the powerhouse that is WildCat, the shoutcaster concluded, they are the ones taking control of the game.

As the seconds ticked by both sides grew more and more ferocious. The same was true of the spectators online who had now gained the power of foresight and claimed Exile the winner.

CaptDan Posted 2 minutes ago

exile are just playing with their food at this point. ffg can’t fight shit because they don’t have a fucking mid laner. Kick Pandango. import a korean.

20957205634 Posted 1 minute ago

lol crescendo and desurex can’t even initiate because all their ap damage doesn’t hit high priority targets on XIL. GG no re. game 2 pls

SearchingNoMore Posted just now

DeusRex? More like DeusRekt.

That_Vagabond Posted 2 minutes ago

Lol. This is the first game of the series and you’re already calling for a roster swap? Not even goona give them the benefit of the doubt?

CaptDan Posted just now

it was a joke. Calm the fuck down you retard.

“This next Dragon *may* lead to the deciding fight of this match. It’s up to Final Frontier to win this teamfight if they still want a shot at winning Game One, Rem.”

“NeoTokyo has already made his way into the area with his team, but Eclipse is still dealing with that huge minion wave in the Top Lane. FFG’s eyes are locked onto that Dragon and they *are* able to pressure Exile away. Dragon will be up in ten seconds but Final Frontier may be looking for a fight instead. *DeusRex Flashes forward and the Assault and Battery locks down Maravilla but Exile respond with aggression. Teleport from Eclipse coming directly into the Dragon pit, Maravilla Flashing over the wall, WildCat Flashes after him for the kill. NeoTokyo gunning for Exile’s back-line, running straight through The Box. Command: Shockwave lands onto two, The Equalizer landing onto four members of FFG, low health bars on everyone, and down goes Pandango, DeusRex goes down, Crescendo the next target but she’s too tanky. Fathom kiting away from WildCat and NeoTokyo but they don’t have enough Crowd Control to keep fighting. Crescendo finally goes down and that’s a four for one for Team Exile.*”

“That was an *extremely* close fight, and it looks like Exile are going to claim Dragon as a reward. Although the Shockwave *did* land this time, it didn’t *quite* hit the desired targets. If we watch the replay we see the Orianna Ball is on NeoTokyo who was charging straight for Exile’s back-line, but Caitlyn was *too* far back so Pandango *had* to pull the trigger before Olaf ran out of range, which caused Orianna to hit the two *tankiest* members of Exile for *almost* no damage. And after the on-point Equalizer, Exile easily cleaned up the low-health members of FFG. That fight could have gone the complete other way if just a *bit* more damage landed onto the key members of Exile.”

“The clock strikes forty-two minutes and Exile have three turrets, two Dragons, and are two thousand gold up on Final Frontier. What should Final Frontier do in this situation, Masua?”

“At this point Final Frontier are going to start slowly losing control of the map, and eventually they’re going to start slowly losing their base if they don’t make proper use of their team comp. They bring in a lot of burst and Area of Effect damage from the Mid and Bot lanes, so a safe bet for them would be to set up a Zeal death bush in the Jungle with a pink ward and hope to catch members of Exile out of position. Other than that they may just have to brute force a fight, take out a priority target and then push with the numbers advantage. Both of those options carry big risks, however, because the majority of Blue-side Jungle is warded and Exile can easily put two and two together if they suspect a death bush of some kind.”

“And that is also one of the worst feelings in the game, when you can’t even safely enter your own Jungle or farm the camps without having to worry about getting caught out. But Pandango is making good use of that Ball for a tiny bit of vision to make sure Crescendo is safe to place wards on these Bottom-side camps. All members of FFG now using the buddy system to safely explore, drop wards, and clear Exile’s wards in the Dragon area.”

In the south, Final Frontier pushed back the darkness, but the Red members of Exile regrouped at base and from there pushed on in the northern end of the map.

With the majority of the map shrouded in fog of war, members of Final Frontier held defensive positions, stepping forward only to secure last hits.

“And this is where things could get very dangerous, very fast for FFG. Without much control on their side of the map it’s difficult to get the gold necessary for completing items and builds. Multiple members on FFG are a couple thousand gold off from key items but Exile are four-man pushing Top trying to get that tier-two turret while Eclipse split pushes Bot and his Teleport will be up shortly.”

“One thing Final Frontier have in their favor is the wave clear from WildCat and Pandango who are trying to delay this push while NeoTokyo defends Bot Lane, but if Eclipse continues landing those Electro-Harpoons onto NeoTokyo he’s going to be able to keep his distance and keep up the pressure.”

“Notice how every time Eclipse clears the minions he ducks back into fog of war to bluff a Teleport, and at the same time NeoTokyo starts his recall both for the heal and for a Homeguard-Teleport should Exile choose to pull the trigger on Top lane. But that Top tower’s nearly down thanks to Caitlyn’s huge auto-attack range and Umbreon’s constant Death Sentences zoning FFG. At this point Final Frontier might just have to concede that turret. They held onto it for a while, but—”

“Eclipse Teleporting behind the turret, NeoTokyo matching it but he’s half-health—a Flash-Flay onto Pandango and the Solar Flare isn’t enough to save him and the Death Sentence pulls WildCat out of his Valkyrie directly onto the Equalizer; but an instant Mikael’s Crucible from Crescendo will be just enough to keep him alive, Crescendo forced to run interference and bait Exile away from the base but they’re not going to chase and instead are looking to take the Inhibitor. One for zero, Exile.”

“That might only be a one for zero, but if Exile can manage to take the Inhibitor they’ll gain a sixth team member in the super minions which will be a huge advantage in Exile’s favor. This entire game has been about focusing on Final Frontier’s damage, and Exile are making sure they deny Pandango a chance to catch his breath but we’ll have to see how the series progresses and whether or not FFG can come back from this game.”

“The first Inhibitor of the series goes down at forty-nine minutes, death timers are about to start reaching dangerous numbers and Exile may be looking to secure Baron before the final push to take down the Nexus.”

“In response to that loss in the Top lane, NeoTokyo is heavily pushing out Bottom, DeusRex and the Duo are pushing Mid and warding the road the Baron. In spite of how heavily disadvantaged FFG are, they’re still making moves to alleviate the team’s losses. If their composure carries on to the next games they can easily tie up the series.”

Final Frontier relieved pressure Bot lane, the AI controlled minions pushed back to the river. Exile grouped by Baron, clearing the vision Rex and Crescendo had placed just some moments earlier. Final Frontier gathered at the center of the map, clearing wave after wave of minions, a single ward notifying them that Exile were not on Baron.

The teams danced, players dashing left to right, WildCat dropping a Farsight Orb on Baron as if they had no vision. The dance continued and two waves pushed in Final Frontier's favor.

"—but now Mid and Bot are pushing toward Exile's base and FFG have a small window of pressure here. But the super minions are going to start knocking on the door of FFG's base and someone has to recall to handle the situation."

"Exile see NeoTokyo in base and they *are* going to start Baron. Umbreon is in a good spot to land a Death Sentence and FFG are out of wards—"

"Baron's half health!"

"WildCat trying to tag some members of Exile with rockets, trying to get some vision with Phosphorus Bomb, *NeoTokyo Teleporting in—*"

"No Vault Breaker!"

"Maravilla knocks DeusRex out of his dash, Baron for Exile, Assault and Battery locks down Fathom, four-man Solar Flare and Command: Shockwave, but Maravilla dashes onto the backline while the Equalizer burns them. Fathom goes down, Exhaust onto Marvilla but WildCat is already dead. Pandango goes down to Eclipse, Ages knocks up DeusRex in the Flamespitter, Maravilla joining in and Final Frontier cannot land enough damage. Umbreon locks down FFG, Crescendo drops, NeoTokyo drops, and DeusRex, the last man standing cannot finish Maravilla. An Ace for Exile!"

"And with that Ace Exile are just going to rushing down that Top lane to end the first game of the series. Exile played out that fight perfectly to prevent all of Final Frontier's attempts to either steal Baron or win the teamfight that followed. Even though FFG managed to take out Fathom, they weren't able to eliminate the rest of Exile's threats because of all Umbreon's great hooks."

"Fifty-six minutes in and Team Exile are going to take game one of the series against Final Frontier Gaming!"

"There weren't very many options left for FFG after having lost basically every major skirmish or teamfight after the twenty-five minute mark. And even though Pandango missed some of his Command: Shockwaves, the rest of the team were able to make up for some of his misplays. But so as long as Final Frontier don't crack under the pressure they should be able to bounce back from this defeat."

In the past hour the players had ceased to be people. They had simply become vehicles expressing their inner-most selves. The nature of each player was expelled directly from the soul outward before the presence of thousands.

Monitors broadcasting the game had become windows into the soul, windows overlooking ten competitors locked in a war zone. Ten soular beings, each of which had endured inner turmoils, were shown to the world here. Within each there was a fantastic drive, a commitment so severe, so grim a determination to prevail against all odds that no sacrifice was too enormous.

The victory banner formed on the massive screens above the players, the crowd in the stadium cheering, clapping, chanting. Both teams retreated backstage while the casters continued booming. WildCat lingered on stage a moment, his eyes locked onto the post-match lobby making connections, looking at the numbers, quickly figuring and examining the results. After a few more seconds he stood, then disappeared backstage.^x

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Battlegrounds

The grand colosseum stood in the lower part of the city where two busy streets intersected. The stadium was built some decades ago, designed and planned by architects and engineers, then constructed and pieced together in collaborative effort by contractors, laborers, carpenters. They drove heavy vehicles across state lines to carry in huge steel and iron beams that were as long as a dozen men. They used heavy machinery to haul the pieces into place, to sculpt a stable foundation, to weld and drive metal into the ground upon bedrock. They constructed perfectly measured rooms, planned the routes of wires and pipes throughout the edifice, and at the center they built a massive arena. After years of work they forged a wondrous monument, an arena meant to showcase creative performances, meant to serve as the battlegrounds of competitive achievement where presently the second game of series was underway.

Cars, buses, and trucks covered in a thin layer of puffy snow traversed the roads surrounding the battlegrounds. Though their predecessors were once built by heavy hands in sweltering factories where the loss of fingers, hands, and arms was common, these modern vehicles were assembled with the assistance of precise robotic limbs. A single computer could take the place of ten men and help produce four times as much in a day's work. Of all the mechanics, engineers, and technicians maintaining the machines, none were at risk of injury as severe as those who had come before.

The process of obtaining the raw materials necessary for these projects carried dangers of their own. Miles below the ground miners struck at rock, dirt, and sediment in search of valuable ores. In poorly-lit, man-dug caverns, among vile plumes of gas and dust, miners toiled away without relent. For many centuries prior the mines were simply a network of narrow tunnels and crawlspaces which were carved out with far more primitive tools. With each strike the miner always considered the possibility of a cave in, of the stone sky collapsing in on the underground community.

To purify the ore metallurgists constructed blast furnaces to cleanse the dirt and rocks that clung to the precious, valuable metals. With extreme heat metallurgists cast and bent the iron to their will to create tools and fulfill the needs of the people: a knife, a shovel, a sword, a hammer, a cart, a shield, a plow, a cannon, the barrel of a rifle, railroad tracks, an antenna, a trophy, massive steel beams, an engine.

The fresh snow stuck onto wheels and heels, and trails of black asphalt slithered about the roads outside the battlegrounds. Throughout the city where sections of asphalt had aged, the wrinkled and cracked pavement had become deep depressions which had been formed due to nonstop battering by many wheels and many soles. Beneath the deteriorating surface, potholes exposed the old brick and cobble roads of a bygone age. But the buzzing, honking, roaring, and sputtering of the city commute sped along without care of the detail and without worry of the seemingly minor inconveniences provoked by the depressions.

Pedestrians walked along in all directions amid winter's bite. They tugged their heavy coats closer, withdrew the shoulders inward, tightened their scarves, and pressed their chins close to shield any openings from the chilling winds. The clothing they wore was designed in a local city, but the textiles, fabrics, silks, and cotton were shipped many places half the world away.

In distant lands the clothes were manufactured, sewn, woven, pressed, and knitted. The makers of the clothing, often times children, were locked into confined spaces where the sewing machines never ceased to blabber, where temperatures rose too high for comfort. Laborers were paid few cents and dollars by the large companies who would later ship the finished products back home for hundreds, thousands of percent worth of profits. It was all a far preferable alternative than keeping the job at home, it was a cost-effective alternative than paying a man or woman a living wage.

Work and business and trade went along as usual on this day. The men and women traversing the sidewalks and roads continued along with their duties, making their way to and from work, doing what must be done to pay the bills. In these streets it was common for a young businessman, a recent graduate of a prestigious university, to lay eyes upon a young worker of similar age.

This young laborer, a waiter perhaps, struggled to keep his eyes open after the completion of his night shift. None the less he pressed onward to his second job in spite of his dry eyes, aching bones, aching muscles, and his sleep deprived state of mind. The young businessman looked on disapproving of the waiter's life choices for he had been conditioned to believe that everyone should strive to work an office job, and any job that one could perform without a degree was worthless, was one which should not adequately pay one's bills. Workers of those types of jobs, a businessman might believe, were incapable of hard work or rigorous study.

The young waiter walked along his path on autopilot on these roads he's traveled millions of times before. His mind, numbed and pacified by the shallow and empty nature of his work, failed to muster the effort necessary to care of his surroundings. Among his colleagues he was alone in his interests of the inner workings of technology and computers. Though he had patiently and tenaciously overcome years of schooling, in the process accumulating a mountainous debt, he was unable to work in his desired occupation because technology companies had learned these types of jobs could be outsourced.

In an office half the world away a man worked the young waiter's desired job, writing code for the software necessary to simplify others' needs. This code would one day be used for trucks to drive themselves, perhaps, to deliver and transfer goods from one place to another, and in the process compete with truck drivers, force them to work elsewhere. A business saved a fortune for each of these long-distance employees. For a portion of the salary the young waiter demanded, the distant employee thrived and his financial needs would be tended to with ease.

In the city, in a brightly-lit hospital, a child was born whose loving parents wished great things upon. These young parents together shared a vision of prosperity greater than their own for this child. And it was a surefire thing because nine months' time had been spent designing and planning out the child's future. From the moment of birth parents thrust onto their children great expectations, expectations which a child can neither resist nor understand.

In few years that child would be sitting in a classroom and, like many present students, impatiently wait for the end of school on the final day before the winter break. And students were all the same, they would wait, wait, wait, imagining all the things to be done before the end of the year. Ignoring the meaningless words of the teacher, the students would wait, wait, wait.

Before dismissing her students, the teacher would assigned some work to be done over the break. Simple work which she hoped would strengthen the class' understanding of the subject. She had to help her students however possible, not only because she wanted to, but because her teaching certificate depended on it. Should she fail to make a single monthly payment on her student loans, her credentials would be stripped away in an instant.

But she believed in her students, and she truly aimed to teach them that they may perform well on exams. It was in the school's best interests to score well on exams for it brought in more government funding, and the teachers whose students scored best on exams earned themselves a raise. Even so, this teacher, unlike her coworkers, did not simplify tests or lower their difficulty because she believed her students could persevere and overcome her challenges. She sought to ignite in her pupils some inner flame to bring forth the best in each of them and drive them onward to successful futures.

Universities across the country with open arms and huge smiles, welcomed fresh students to campus for many students were guaranteed to bring along federal funding. Because the country aimed to have a well-educated populace, the government continually increased the budget yearly to provide financial aid for its students. Seeing this wealth schools increased their tuition, and the government paid it. Then tuition rose again, and again, and again, and the government fulfilled its duty to its students, paying more and more and more. The cost of education, and thus its quality, had truly improved leaps and bounds in only a matter of decades.

To further fill their pockets, a school's administrators and bureaucrats forwent traditional, salaried professors for more temporary alternatives. More and more of a school's educators were comprised of a contingent workforce and for much cheaper than tenured professors. It was a win-win situation for all parties involved: universities paid lower wages to save money, and adjunct professors had found some employment and job security for at least the following four months. Across the board, the percentage of adjunct professors continued in this upward trend.

Businessmen and businesswomen who were schooled by great teachers worked in the many colossal skyscrapers of Manhattan. Hundreds of powerful, illustrious firms were housed in these titanic buildings. These were the surviving, successful enterprises that had been built on years of work and dedication. At the heart of modern cities across the world, these financial conglomerates managed, invested, and produced a vast stockpile of green harvest which fueled the world, but no amount of this green harvest would ever be enough to sate these giants.

The prosperous businesses and their behemoth buildings also employed maintenance and cleaning crews who worked daily to upkeep and sanitize the workplace. Security officers worked round the clock to protect and monitor the grounds. In every building and scattered in many streets throughout cities, security cameras recorded footage of the day. The cameras recorded footage every day, every hour, every minute, every second.

Far above, tethered to the Earth's pull amid aimlessly floating debris from previous flight missions, orbital satellites captured images of the rushing flow of city streets and images of the ocean waters spilling inland yearly, images of the polar ice caps shrinking yearly. Beneath the waves the Earth bled black where augers fractured the sea floor for a public that thirsted for oil. These pockets of black blotches spilled out onto the surface of the ocean from time to time, blotches recorded in satellite imagery.

From overhead a city might appear to be a colony of ants, every member functioning in perfect harmony. From such an altitude a populace might seem pleased, well-off, even more so considering the consistent rise in productivity. But from so high up the details became unclear, blurred, missing. The grimace of one's face, the loss of one's job, the slow, inevitable decay of one's neighborhood, all went unnoticed.

And massive telescopes faced the unknown abyss that stretched infinitely outward. The telescopes orbiting the planet captured images of distant nebulae, stars, planets, and galaxies, distant celestial bodies that emitted powerful rays of light in all directions.

Also hovering high above, out of sight and out of mind, were drones and machines, silent and unmanned, filled to capacity with modern weaponry. Crosshairs were trained onto various stretches of land across the globe ready to fire at a moment's notice. Suspicious areas and potential threats were always monitored in real time, night or day, by the long-range, precise technology.

And down below, too, hidden beneath the ocean, massive steel vessels loomed and waited off the coast of every continent. The war machines stored man's most advanced and feared weapons, warheads capable of destroying every inch of the planet thousands of times over.

Some billion shared this speck, this particle, this blue and green orb that rocketed through the universe.

And yet the world did not seem fragile to the masters of the universe financing the globe.

From within the powerful firms, the world looked like prosperity ready to be seized. Everywhere there was opportunity. Star students, newly hired, who had patiently overcome years of schooling were the new masters of the universe. Nothing in the world could threaten to take this all away. They had diligently worked through an industrial system that favored and rewarded only those deserving of success. It was a system built to perfection.

And this perfection required no change. The world was smaller because all nations of the Earth were connected. Because globalization had augmented and strengthened the financial world, globalization had also aided all other markets, had created more jobs, and had improved education, had increased the standard of living. And so, from the inside of these renown businesses, the outside world was a beautiful sandbox upon which to build one's life. It was a paradise that would never be lost.

But from the outside looking in, the businesses were monster that devoured all in their path. The goliaths were much too big to overcome, much too powerful to rally against, much too influential to lobby against. A union of workers, exploited and abused and overworked and underpaid, once had the courage and strength to demand better. But modern legislation was sponsored and paid for and written by the behemoths in order to diminish and dissuade and defame those seeking to amass a contemporary equivalent capable of challenging a contemporary giant.

Crammed into a ferryboat sailing west, hopeful migrants fleeing overseas terrors laid eyes upon a high rising monument whose torch raised skyward. It was the grand beacon of liberty. In this land rumored to have streets paved in gold, lands of an abundance of wealth, many sought not only refuge but a new home. The open borders were a welcoming promise of good things to come after months of interviews and years of verifying identities from piles of documentation.

The mantra claimed that glory and prosperity were attainable, that one's effort and time are the sole requirement. But many who had sacrificed all their effort and all their time had neither the glory nor the prosperity promised. And it was all their own fault, they had not devoted enough time or effort, they were unworthy of great things lest they worked a hundredfold more, so some people claimed.

Within the colosseum at the heart of the city, ten competitors displayed their time and effort on stage for all to see.

All the world's a battleground, and all the men and women merely soldiers; they have their defeats and victories, and each individual in their time fights any foes.^X

Eviction Notice

Technology

New Age Cyber-Athletes and Their Cyber-Sport at Madison Square Garden Part Three of Five – “Eviction Notice”

By Nick Buchanan

Part One: the venue, spectators, and culture of competitive video gaming.

Part Two: the events of the first two matches.

There are muted tremors and a shy quivering permeates the air in the stadium. The crowd is muffled and the excitement that once dominated the arena has faded to conversation. Team Exile are just one game from victory, one game from securing a dream job. I can gather from the faces in the stadium that many fans are worried. From their pensive eyes I can tell they are asking “Is this it?”

A fan clad in Final Frontier uniform says he’ll still root for his team. “I know these guys are fighters,” he says convinced. “This team didn’t make it to this stage by luck and I just think the players need to fight the nerves and play their best.”

A glimmer of hope remains in the fans who are returning to their seats for the start of the third match. The bright blue glow of smart phone screens and tablet screens reflect on the faces of spectators tapping away and joining in on the conversation on social media.

During this time many onlookers shared and discussed comments by Christopher Shields, “If you think about it Exile are more American than FFG because America’s a melting pot, right? :>” and “If this were a space race and Exile were Russian, maybe FFG would be funded to afford better players.” I later learned Shields was a long-standing e-Sports journalist and historian who goes by the alias “Durin,” and is known for posting provocative remarks to elicit response from fans.

Some in this conversation agreed with these remarks, others remained neutral on the topic, and yet others objected. Aside from the raunchy internet humor, the discussions spiraled in many directions akin to the discussions of conventional sports. These discussions are all too similar, they are filled with such furor and impassioned speech as those who engage in sports debates, undeniably so.

Although the players and the games are far apart from those most are accustomed to, the same flame and heart roars here in e-Sports that burns full bright in conventional

sports. And even so the scale of this event pales in comparison to the magnitude of world championship tournaments with much higher stakes and far greater prize pools.

The break ends and the commentators, players, and viewers all return to their post. “This is match point for Exile,” one shoutcaster affirms, “from this moment onward this is Exile’s series to lose. I hope Final Frontier have done some serious soul searching before this match because their backs are against the wall, and coming in from a 2-0 deficit, the odds are *never* in your favor if you’re in this situation.”

A monumental task lies ahead of Final Frontier Gaming. If they want to secure that dream job and snatch it from Team Exile hands, they cannot afford to make many more mistakes.

The draft phase begins and both teams discuss strategy with their respective head coach. The shoutcasters discuss the implications of each pick and ban. This is the chess match before the brutal battle. After some minutes the stage is set and the match is ready to begin. Coaches meet center stage and shake hands once more, perhaps for the last time, before disappearing backstage.

The audience click their wristbands and thunder sticks between red and blue to support their team as they switch sides on the map. When the match begins the players enter their trance that is reminiscent of a meditative state. Their focus is intense and they are conscious of nothing past the borders of their monitors. Although all the action happens on the massive screens above, this time I focus on the player face cams, and every now and then I glance at them on-stage.

On one team, lips are constantly moving, almost as quickly and as frantically as their hands and fingers maneuver on the mice and keyboards. On the other team two players seem to have the most say, but from time to time the team says something in unison.

When the crowd stares silently and in awe, I can hear the clicking and tapping of computer equipment. When the casters watch, waiting for some event to narrate, I can sometimes hear the commands of the team if loud enough: “Two minutes, twenty-seven seconds, Blue, Red,” and many other terms specific to the game from which I can derive no meaning.

The match reaches approximately twenty-five minutes and fans are as focused on the game as the players are focused on their actions. The match has been scarce in fights because Final Frontier are looking to reach “late-game.”

“This is an extremely cerebral match,” one shoutcaster says, “there is absolute intention and absolute precision driving each of FFG’s decisions as they pull off the Protect-the-Vayne strategy.”

There is an eerie and tense silence in the stadium as the match plays out. Save for light applause following each turret destroyed or dragon slain, the fans wait patiently and quietly for a fight and they feel that the best is yet to come.

And then the moment finally arrives. A word-for-word transcript of the shoutcaster as a decisive battle takes place:

“...Exile looking for a pick clearing wards but FFG are fully aware and the pings come in from Crescendo. DeusRex walks in eating two ultimates, Exile trying to take him out but he’s just too tanky. Exile find WildCat but a quick Cleanse and Monsoon will keep him safe. Wild Growth and Stand United drop down onto WildCat, and Exile’s health bars are burning red! A double kill for WildCat but FFG aren’t done yet, they Flash forward while three members of Exile are trying to run away. But they’re not fast enough; triple kill, quadra kill for WildCat! Can he get the Penta?! FFG speed him up and that is a really fast Vayne, and with two quick auto attacks he gets the Pentakill and Final Frontier nicely executing the Protect the Hyperdrift comp as they head toward Exile’s base!”

I cannot begin to comprehend the events that took place, but the stadium said it all. From the moment that play began the crowd erupted and they rose from their seats, at last able to release the tension that had been bottled up since the end of the previous games. According to the casters this fight gives Final Frontier the edge in this match unless they commit some massive missteps.

But they play it safe and go on to win game three. I can barely make out that some players from Final Frontier let out sighs of relief after the match ends. A stadium once shouting Exile chants now explodes, thunders, and roars in Final Frontier chants.

“Stoic faces from FFG as they head backstage after that one, Rem,” one caster addresses the other. “But what a spectacular performance especially considering how ‘low-econ’ DeusRex and NeoTokyo played that game, sacrificing a lot of farm, having very little gold, and they were still able to do so much with so little.”

Could this be the instant that grants Final Frontier the momentum needed to win three games in a row?

After the series I have the opportunity to speak with some of the players. Final Frontier Gaming’s Geoffrey Wagner, 23, who goes by the alias “NeoTokyo,” is a tall man who exudes an aura of calmness and confidence. His sloppy, unkempt hair partially blocks his eyes but he does not seem to mind.

I ask him about this moment in the third game, what everyone considered a turning point in the series for his team. He takes a few moments to gather his thoughts and twirls an electronic cigarette in his fingers as he plans out his response.

“That particular play arose in the moment,” he says. Though he speaks slowly and clearly, there is a certain monotony to his voice which I initially attributed to boredom. However, after speaking with other members of his team it turns out this is how he normally speaks.

“Sometimes in scrim (practice) we rush in when we see an opportunity even if it’s risky. We joked about what kind of name we would give this play and ultimately settled for the acronym GTFO. But you can name it the Eviction Notice so we seem more professional,” he said with an extremely subtle smirk surfacing at the edge of his lips.

Federico Martínez, 18, known to the world as Team Exile’s “Maravilla,” is a scrawny player from Spain. He seems goofy and is instantly friendly with those around him. I ask him the same question and he is quick to reply.

“It was kind of a surprise,” he recalls, “And it was kind of scary and I got a little bit nervous, but because we already had two wins I think we were confident enough to not get too nervous.”

I relay to him the name of the play as Wagner had informed me. Martínez laughs. “It’s good, it’s funny. I like it.”

Part Four: the series of events past the third match.

Part Five: interviews with players and coaches.^x

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Inner Flame

The final cheers of the third match began to wane and once again Shellshock waited immediately backstage in the corridors filled with the echoes of bellowing fans and the reverberating words of the shoutcasters.

The team emerged from the stage one by one with flat, dry looks on their faces as the chants “FFG! FFG!” shook the air. The players brightened and glowed when they laid eyes upon the man standing beside Shellshock. He was a larger dressed casually.

Rex held out his fist and the large man was quick to reply, other members of the team offered a simple wave, and Tokyo half-waved, half-saluted with two fingers.

Shellshock held his thumbs up at the team and mouthed some words, but his words were drowned out by the echoes of the shoutcasters whose voices boomed from the speakers engulfing the arena. He gestured urgently and beckoned them back to their designated team room, along the way flipping through his notepad.

Some feet away Belnaut similarly urged the members of Exile in another direction as they emerged from the stage. A player or two held his head low and sluggishly followed the rest of the team.

The entourage went further and further from the stage and the booming voices faded with each step. Once a fair distance away Shellshock glanced back and said “That was perfectly executed. Just two more of those games, guys. Just two more.”

“Your profile pic adds a few pounds, Hoplite,” Panda told the newest member of the group.

The man’s instant laughter challenged the volume of the shoutcasters, and then he replied “You’re a real rascal, Pandango.”

“S’anyone else from Collateral here?” Rex asked.

“No, just me. But they’re all watching from home. We’re rootin’ for ya. Rough first two games, but it ain’t over yet,” Hoplite assured.

“The comeback is real,” WildCat drawled.

At the practice room Shellshock held the door open for each of the players and once more with urgency beckoned them inside. Each member of the team was seated to face Shellshock and the television broadcasting the post-match analysis. On one of the tables in the room were five phones and a tablet, the latter which Shellshock handed to Crescendo who instantly began typing.

The players helped themselves to some of the fruit and drinks that were laid out on one of the tables.

Shellshock turned his attention to Panda and asked “Did you feel better this game, Jorge?”

He nodded quickly and replied “Yeah, way better, Coach.”

“Good. Just keep that positive attitude, alright? Clear your mind and just keep playing like you’re used to. You need anything? Water? Coffee? Granola bar? Apple? Orange?” he asked pointing toward the table.

“Nah, I’m good, Coach,” Panda assured.

“Okay. If you need anything that isn’t here you let me know.” He turned his focus to the rest of the team and continued “Overall that was *really* good, guys, but I don’t think we can risk playing that comp again. So, what happened communication-wise that game? Anything you guys want to cover first?”

“Tch, dunno, Coach,” Rex said, “Can’t really think of anything we could improve on after that game. Everything just seemed to go our way.”

“Vision was amazing that game,” WildCat read Crescendo’s notes, “we always knew where they were and what to do to counteract them.”

Shellshock agreed “I’m sure that was one of the big reasons we were able to make the comp work. Well, that *and* the proper rotations.”

“They’re showin’ a replay now,” Rex said pointing at the television.

All eyes turned to the broadcast. Analysts spoke over a slow-motioned Dragon fight, but the team ignored the words and talked through it themselves.

“Right, so here’s an example,” Shellshock said, “all the wards around Dragon and their East Jungle means we can see every choice they make.”

“We got some free objectives that game where they just watched us ‘cuz they couldn’t do anythin’ about it,” Rex added.

“We had too much disengage for them, too,” Tokyo mumbled. “They couldn’t really force us to stay in a fight.”

“Okay, so moral of the story: ward everything, keep an eye on Exile, and don’t give them any opportunities,” Shellshock announced. “Sound like a plan for the next two games?”

“Pretty much,” WildCat said. “They barely touched me that game. So if we get wards like that again and I get the same kind of peel we should be able to win pretty easy.”

“Alright, so because we’re going to be focusing on vision let’s think two steps ahead. What can Exile do to negate our vision? And then what can *we* do in response to that?” Shellshock prompted.

“F’t they learned anything from that game,” Rex thought aloud, “they might try a strong splitpush comp or a really heavy engage and AoE comp.”

“If they decide to take that road what’s the response?” Shellshock asked.

“We could try siege maybe,” WildCat suggested weakly, quickly adjusting his glasses. Crescendo handed her tablet to WildCat and he read “If they splitpush we could go super hard engage ourselves and just never let them split.”

“Alright, let’s focus on these two possibilities. We either siege or we hard engage in order to prevent a splitpush,” Shellshock narrowed the discussion. “What picks and bans could fulfill these compositions?”

“We’re Red-side next game so Sejuani ban for sure,” Rex thought, “maybe Rek’Sai. Umbreon’s got a pretty good Annie. Might be worth a ban. Oh, and toward the end of last game Maravilla played like shit. Maybe we can focus some early ganks on him and try to get him off his game,” Rex suggested.

“If you guys can secure the proper vision in their jungle you should be able to pull that off fairly easily, right?” Shellshock asked.

“I’ll try to get vision on their top-side jungle if I can,” Tokyo said. “Or, you know what? Fuck it, I’ll push up all game and try to draw Ages’ attention. If I pressure the fuck outta top, can we litter the map with wards?”

Shellshock turned to Rex and Crescendo.

“Prob’ly after we get Sightstone,” Rex said. Crescendo nodded to agree.

“You sure you’re comfortable pressuring top alone, Geoff?” Shellshock asked.

“If I can get a champion who can farm I should be fine.”

“Okay so if that’s the case,” Shellshock rethought, “our primary focus will revolve around getting Maravilla off his game. To keep Ages away from Mid, Geoff’s going to push up all game. Jorge, Sonia, Jason,” he turned to the respective players, “try to play to let Exile push or at least keep them from roaming. Farm under turret when George lets you know he can gank. And Jorge, if you can get some poke down onto Maravilla to make for an easier gank, that would be tremendously useful.”

“And again,” Shellshock continued, “vision is *key*. If we don’t have vision, don’t risk overextending for objectives or kills. If we can’t win the fight, *simply disengage*. If we get caught in a poor position, *simply disengage*. *Vision* is key. Now, team comp: what’re we looking to go for this game?”

Under Shellshock’s guidance discussions continued in the team room. Together they narrowed down the gameplan. They thought two, three, four steps ahead of a hypothetical Exile.

Together they thoroughly dissected and scrutinized their own ideas, second-thinking themselves five, six, seven times.

With an enlarged picture of the map on the screen they planned their moves throughout the course of the game. They thought and rethought and sought to improve upon previous performances, throughout the process discovering eight, nine, ten easily avoidable mistakes.

Their precious minutes slipped away in what felt like a matter of seconds and tournament personnel came knocking to alert the team their time had run out. But even along the way to the stage, the six continued the talks: vision here, movement there, fight under these conditions, retreat under these. The strategy and the plans and the mindset must be flexible, must be trained to endure testing times.

On stage the team again placed the large headphones comfortably in place. For a while, before the pressure of the game took hold, the members of the team returned to their relaxed and normal selves.

Shellshock gazed out into the sea of spectators lit in the red and blue stadium lights. Ahead lay a dark, nebulous space where clusters of distant flashing and twinkling shone. This vast space stretched far away in all directions, seeming endless. The controlled static of the heavy-duty headset drowned away all sounds creating a silent vacuum that resisted and negated the tension of the stadium. But the surrounding air vibrated ever so slightly, and the gravity of the crowd made its presence known.

Many times throughout the journey to make it to this stage, Shellshock had felt an internal glimmer that seemed to breathe whenever he was among the team. It was the sense of an uplifting nostalgia that had the ability to remove the stresses that ricocheted in his mind. But he could never quite put his finger on what this feeling was.

“Oh shit, boys, here we go,” Rex said. The players had moved on from the pre-game lobby and into the pick and ban phase. Exile's players lined the left side of the screen with Eclipse's box lit.

“So what priority picks are we going for?” Shellshock asked. Behind the players he walked toward Tokyo's end of the seating arrangement.

“We wanted an assassin for Panda,” WildCat recalled.

“Ahri maybe. Or Zed,” Panda suggested. “If Syndra's open we could picking her.”

Exile locked in a Syndra ban and Tokyo's box lit.

“Holy fuck, dude,” Rex exclaimed. “Four bans in four games.”

“Given this info,” Shellshock said, “what's our response?”

Crescendo typed into the team's chat and WildCat read for Shellshock's benefit. “Sonia said we planned on Rek'Sai or Sejuani ban.”

“We should hide the Sej ban s'long as we can,” Rex said.

“Then Rek'Sai first ban?” Tokyo asked for confirmation.

“For more effective splitpush, the Rek'Sai ban works,” Shellshock recalled the information from their preparation.

Tokyo banned Rek'Sai and the draft phase continued.

“For displacing them during teamfights we're sticking with Gragas, yes?” Shellshock asked the team.

“So long as they don't ban 'im,” Rex said.

“Then we're sticking to hard-engage from Bot lane. Have you narrowed the champs you might play, Sonia?”

“They banned Kalista,” WildCat informed Shellshock.

“Do we want to ban Sejuani now or...” Tokyo asked.

“Sonia said she'd play Thresh or Braum depending on what they pick,” WildCat told Shellshock.

“I'd say Sejuani now,” Rex suggested. “We can last ban Morgana if we're going with Thresh or Braum.”

“Majority in favor of Sejuani ban?” Shellshock asked.

The team agreed.

Tokyo banned Sejuani and the final bans were considered.

"I think Morg is the only real ban we should make here," Rex thought. "It's one of the better ways to make sure our engages stick."

"Sonia agrees," WildCat said.

"They banned Lulu," Tokyo said. "I can go Rumble or Gnar. With Gnar I can play safer, with Rumble I can do more damage."

"Okay, say we ban Morg," Shellshock thought aloud, "what are they likely to first pick?"

"Umm...maybe Yasuo, maybe Thresh," WildCat said.

"They might even pick Gnar," Rex said.

"Okay, let's see how it plays out then," Shellshock said. Tokyo banned Morgana and on the other side of the stage Exile deliberated their first pick.

The counter ticked down and both teams considered their choices. Exile's first pick of Orianna was locked in and Tokyo and Rex's boxes lit.

"Strong engage or disengage from Ori," WildCat said. "Probably trying to take it away from Jorge."

"That's fine, we're getting him an assassin," Shellshock said without worry. "Since we know Orianna now, which picks would be best suited here?"

"Definitely Thresh this first round," WildCat said. Crescendo stopped typing after WildCat's recommendation, which she agreed with.

"Picking Gragas here wouldn't be an efficient use of this round," Rex said.

"Geoff, you feeling like picking blind?" Shellshock asked.

"Sure, why not? Makes no difference to me," Tokyo replied. "If we're going to have Thresh and Gragas, then Gnar would provide additional CC, Rumble would provide damage."

"Jorge, would you prefer to play an AP or AD assassin against Orianna?" Shellshock asked.

"Umm...", Panda thought a second. "I'm way more comfortable on Zed than Ahri or LeBlanc or Fizz."

"Okay, so Rumble for the magic damage, then?" Tokyo asked.

"Yup," Rex said.

They simultaneously locked in Rumble and Thresh and the next two boxes lit up on Exile's side. They immediately chose Vi and Janna, and the ball returned to Final Frontier's side with Panda and WildCat's boxes lighting up.

"Okay, so strong engage *and* strong disengage," Rex thought. "Tch, they're gonna wanna kite."

"What'd they pick?" Shellshock asked.

"Vi, Janna," Tokyo relayed.

"So then if they engage on us, we can displace them with Gragas ult. Do we pick Zed this round or ADC?"

“Sonia said save the Zed for last,” WildCat said. “Kappa.”

“Definitely hide Zed till the end,” Rex agreed.

“What are you thinking here, Jason?” Shellshock asked.

“Ehh...Sivir can help with engage, and if we're teamfighting I can just do damage on top of Rumble ulti,” WildCat explained. “Yeah, I really like Sivir here.”

“We good with this comp, guys?” Shellshock asked the rest of the team.

They agreed and they locked in Gragas and Sivir at the same time. Exile took longer than usual but ultimately settled for Tristana and Gangplank.

“Trist and GP,” Tokyo said.

“Tch. Bot's going to be hard to gank,” Rex said. “Unless they push up really far and Geoff TP's in. I can focus on Mid against this comp, though.”

“So our strong engage or splitpush strat should go fine if we can get that vision we need,” Shellshock said. “Okay, so Jason, Sonia, play safe. We likely won't be able to get much. If it feels like they're obviously baiting you to land a hook or step forward, be mindful of Vi. George, Jorge, coordinate around ganks, keep talking to each other and try to starve him out of gold. Geoff, I know to trust your insight. Trust your instincts, be careful of ganks and as always, be ready to Teleport when or if the team needs you.”

Crescendo locked in Zed and both sides traded champions to their respective roles and players.

“So remember, guys,” Shellshock recounted, “play *safe* early game, *don't* commit to trades or ganks without vision on Ages, *wait* for six. Again, wards are key. Keep them in sight at *all* times to secure easier assassinations. If they group and we *can't* get a solo kill, splitpush *with* wards. Our best fights should naturally occur in narrow corridors. Got it?”

The team acknowledged that they understood.

“Good. Give it everything you've got; play together, play smart,” Shellshock said before parting from the team. He then walked toward the center of the stage and once more shook Belnaut's hand. Throughout it all the pressure and the tension continued rising as the spectators grew restless and chanted for the match to begin.

The tense atmosphere quickly dispersed as soon as Shellshock walked backstage. Back in the team room Hoplite sat facing the television while munching on some fruit.

“That draft went well for you guys,” Hoplite said turning to face Shellshock.

“That food's for my players. Fuck off it, Pete,” Shellshock said.

“I only took a few grapes and strawberries,” Hoplite replied mockingly.

Shellshock took a banana from the tray and extended it toward Hoplite, “here, have one of these.”

Hoplite snickered and turned back to face the television. “Seriously, good job with the draft.”

Shellshock took a seat beside Hoplite. “Yeah I think we should be able to play a bit more neatly this game. The comp's a bit more well-rounded than our previous ones.”

“You blend really well with the team, too. Don't lose that,” Hoplite emphasized. “A lot of other teams start suffering when players lose trust in their coach.”

“I've heard,” Shellshock said.

“And to be perfectly honest I was totally expecting you guys to be way more hectic during this prep, especially considering those first two games.”

“You'd think so, wouldn't you? Everyone's been exceptionally resilient so far. Except for maybe the jitters on Jorge. It's not much but it's such a huge hindrance to his performance,” Shellshock said. “I wasn't able to get him on assassins until this game. You should've seen how his hands were shaking after the first two games. He could hardly play at all.”

“*Really?*” Hoplite asked surprised. “He looked just fine when I saw him.”

“It was a completely different story after game one and two, Pete. We had to spend the entire intermission tending to his jitters,” Shellshock said dejected. “I should've *fucking* prepared for this,” he told himself angrily.

“The good thing is you managed to get him under control, Simon,” Hoplite said patting him on the back, “be glad it didn't persist past the second game.”

“I could have done so much more for them, Pete,” Shellshock said, now facing the television.

“I'm sure you did fine,” Hoplite assured him. “Look, let's just watch the game and see how things play out. You gotta be tough for the team, Simon.”

“Yeah, I know. I just, in retrospect I could've worked so much harder and I could've prevented LAN jitters entirely.”

“Alright, shut up,” Hoplite said. “Forget about what you *could've* done or what you could've said, and let's just watch the game, Shelly.”

They quieted down and focused their attention on the television, on the constantly moving bird's-eye view following the actions and movements of the players.

On two small squares on the lower part of the screen, player cams shuffled from player to player, every now and then displaying the entire team. The rough and rigid features of the faces from both sides revealed only the sense of concentration emanating from each player.

Shellshock inspected each and every move both teams made. He held a hand to his mouth as if to keep a reaction from spilling out. His focus remained on watching the minimap and the overall movement of the team.

With his hand still to his mouth he muttered to the air “Okay, good vision so far.”

“...and with NeoTokyo playing so aggressively and being so pushed up in the that top lane Ages is looking for his first gank here,” Masua's voice blared from the speakers.

“You should sense this one coming, Geoff,” Shellshock said.

“He knows, he knows,” Hoplite said.

“NeoTokyo's looking to ward as his trinket comes off cooldown but both members of Exile are closing in.”

"Ages and Eclipse begin moving in but NeoTokyo heads back down toward. In the Mid Lane Pandango angles himself toward the top-side of the lane to zone Maravilla, keeping him from clamping down on NeoTokyo. Very good play and positioning there from Final Frontier, escaping without any real trouble," Remington said.

"And this entire time DeusRex has been pillaging Exile's South jungle unopposed, helping himself to gold and pressure. Good early macro-play from FFG at the start of this match," Masua added.

"*Great job*, Jorge. Do more of that, guys" Shellshock told the television as if his players could listen. "Some pressure onto Mid would be good right now as well."

Both teams continued building strength, securing resources, and pushing away their opponents while Shellshock and Hoplite watched. Rex moved toward Mid lane from the North jungle and Pandango warded near South. Rex waited in the fog of war some seconds, Pandango strafed forward and backward to try to pull Maravilla away from the safety of his turret.

"...both Mid laners almost hitting level six but Maravilla's being a bit brave or greedy for those ranged minions."

"DeusRex shows himself on the map and Maravilla with a quick Flash toward Mid turret. He wasn't interested in what DeusRex was selling," Remington said.

"Camp the fuck out of him, George. Even if it's just to zone him from the minions," Shellshock told the screen.

"...meanwhile Bottom lane has been very quiet so far. With the Janna speed bonus in Exile's favor, it isn't going to be very easy to land a Death Sentence or even gank successfully," Masua explained. "It's going to be about how effectively Crescendo can roam and whether or not she can catch priority targets in the mid-game."

"Alright. Sonia, get Sightstone, go with George to ward South jungle," Shellshock said as some players channeled the first recalls of the match. "Careful with warding there, Jason."

"...NeoTokyo playing *very* brazenly this game. He's been pushed up almost every time we've seen Top lane and he's yet to die from a gank," Masua noted.

"It's kind of scary he hasn't died, actually," Hoplite said.

"Playing against Geoff is pretty scary," Shellshock said casually. "You ever 1v1 against him in lane?"

"No. And now I don't ever want to," Hoplite laughed.

"It's rough. It's super spooky," Shellshock stated. "Now imagine what it's like when he's try-hardening."

"I can't imagine it'd be fun," Hoplite said.

"It's not." Shellshock turned his attention back to the game, "We need vision of the camps if possible."

"A strong start to the vision game here from Final Frontier. The instant they can afford Sightstone and Pink Wards they just light up the map," Masua said.

Rex made his presence known by sitting in Bottom-side's warded Tri-bush, while Crescendo ran toward Mid.

“Either do it quickly or don't commit to it at all, Sonia,” Shellshock said.

“Crescendo is moving quickly to that Mid Lane, Maravilla unaware of the roam, *a Flash-Flay to pull him in, Pandango casts Death Mark, and Crescendo lands a Death Sentence to keep Maravilla in place. First Blood to Pandango!*” The fanatical chants of the crowd rang from the speakers.

“Okay, now head to Dragon,” Shellshock continued calmly. The team immediately gravitated toward the objective as if heeding Shellshock's words. “I'm so glad we never did that in scrim against Exile and saved it for this.”

“Yeah, it only worked once against us,” Hoplite said. “But never again. Dragon should be free, you've got Teleport advantage.”

“Ages heading Top again, looking to trade Dragon for that Top turret, *he's still not level six, lands the Vault Breaker, good follow up from Eclipse, NeoTokyo trying to trade some damage back. He Flashes away* and Exile don't seem to fancy turret diving. Cannon Barrage is fired on Dragon's coordinates but DeusRex will easily Smite to secure the first Dragon of the game.”

“Maravilla's Flash is up soon,” Shellshock contemplated, “but more pressure on him would help if we want to keep him from playing well this game. Maybe just take a turret elsewhere.”

Rex and Ages seemed to mirror one another for some time. When Rex sat Mid to pressure Maravilla, Ages was there to protect his teammate. Likewise in the Bottom Lane. Both sides were close to securing kills, but ultimately there were no deaths.

“DeusRex and Crescendo again teaming up to provide vision on this South jungle. Every time they spot Ages here NeoTokyo pushes up, then when Ages heads to the North or East jungle he loosens up a bit. Ages *has* to do *something* soon before Exile loses too many resources,” Masua commented.

“Three members of FFG are heading Bot and there's no vision from Exile to see this happening. WildCat's pushed the lane up to the Outer turret and here comes the dive, *DeusRex Body Slams against Fathom, Eclipse drops Cannon Barrage to assist, The Box comes up, Umbreon Exhausts Pandango, Exile Flash away and they manage to esc—NO! Crescendo Flays Fathom Mid-air and that's going to be a clean Double Kill for Pandango!* That's just a tower dive done well: all members present sharing tower aggro evenly and FFG leave with their lives and a turret kill.”

“Talk about aggressive play. Umbreon did everything he could to keep Fathom alive. There was a perfectly timed Monsoon, a perfectly timed Exhaust onto the assassin, he managed to shield his AD Carry twice, but FFG were able to sneak that dive in because of the poor vision in Exile's side. And poor Fathom, if only there were a Z-axis he might've survived, but following those two kills Final Frontier continue pushing that Tier-Two Bottom turret.”

“*Good*, good shit. Don't let up,” Shellshock said.

“Just looking at the overall vision on the map, Final Frontier have done a tremendous job of clearing almost all of Exile's wards. And what's more, FFG have been consistently replacing wards that've expired in the enemy jungle,” Masua said. “This constant surveillance over all of Exile's moves gives FFG...a *wealth* of knowledge which is just allowing them to get away with this extremely aggressive play. They've systemically created a situation where almost every choice Exile can make is likely to result in a net loss, whereas all of FFG's vision is paying dividends and is allowing them to soar further and further ahead so that the rich get richer. By monopolizing control over this jungle, and by playing the map so well, FFG are easily able to dictate the pace of this match.”

“If Exile can't regain control of their jungle they're going to find themselves in a very unforgiving situation soon enough,” Remington said.

“Considering Game Three, and then looking at this game, Rem, it's looking like FFG might just be able to pull off a reverse sweep,” Masua expressed. “This is really looking like a worrying trend for Exile.”

“I don't think Geoff can make it out of this one,” Hoplite told Shellshock.

Shellshock gazed at the screen a few seconds to take in the situation. “No, probably not. Just buy time for the rest of the team, Geoff,” he advised.

“Exile are looking for something in return here with Ages forcing a gank onto NeoTokyo. He quickly Flashes into turret range *but the Assault and Battery is already locked-on in addition to Cannon Barrage. Equalizer is used to clear the minion wave, but there's just too much damage and NeoTokyo finally falls* to Ages.”

“FFG's squad of four aren't done yet, however. They're looking for more blood heading for Mid and Maravilla may have overstayed his welcome.”

“His only hope of escape here is to recall inside FFG's jungle but DeusRex throws his barrel in the correct bush and he'll surely get this kill. Or someone will.”

“NeoTokyo's respawned and it looks like they're going to gift that kill credit over to him. That gold will turn into some much-needed magic damage once he goes back to shop.”

Over the course of the game Final Frontier continued taking ground, taking jungle camps, and the fog of war had become an additional member of the team. Time and time again they had secured a kill or two, then converted that to a turret kill or another Dragon.

The greater part of both teams converged in the Mid lane. Eclipse continued pushing Top lane while Pandango pushed Bottom lane. Eight players danced in Mid lane firing projectiles between both lines of skirmish.

“The onus is on FFG to engage this fight since Exile are going to want to peel and kite with Janna,” Masua informed the viewers. “Furthermore there's no real good target for Ages to ult. WildCat's been keeping his distance this entire game, NeoTokyo can just use Zhonyas Hourglass, and who's Ages going to ult? Gragas? Thresh? They're both tanky enough to survive that.”

“Engage soon, guys. The sooner we can take Mid, the better,” Shellshock thought.

“At the twenty-six minute mark Pandango is knocking on Exile's last Bottom turret, threatening to take that Inhibitor uncontested,” Rem said. “Exile's push in the Top lane is a bit slower, but it will reach that Tier-Two turret soon.”

In the Mid lane Final Frontier ran South into the fog of war. Exile, expecting them to join Pandango to push Bottom, followed through the jungle.

“A ward is placed and there's an instant Teleport from Eclipse, On the Hunt speeds up four members of FFG and Exile are caught between Pandango and the rest of his team. *Equalizer comes down onto Exile's exact location, Flash-Death Sentence onto Umbreon and his health bar just disappears to the Boomerang. Exile counter-engage but they've already taken a lot of damage and Ricochet bounces between every member of Exile. Pandango finds Fathom and he's down for the count and one by one the members of Exile go down. A clean Ace from a Final Frontier that's playing their hearts out!*”

Throughout the teamfight Shellshock watched without a word. He took in the movements and trusted the choices of each of his players.

“What an absolutely *stellar* move from FFG! They coerced Exile into the narrow jungle routes and then hit them with *everything*. NeoTokyo's Equalizer was chunking down Exile's health and then the Sivr Boomerang and Ricochet provided further damage in this tight, close-quarters area. Usually you don't want to take out the Janna first but in this instance, that pick might have decided the outcome of that fight—*a surrender?! A thirty minute surrender, Rem!*”

“Holy shit, they surrendered!?” Hoplite yelled.

Shellshock drew in a deep breath and then expelled it all in one go. He got up from his seat, picked up his notepad and Crescendo's tablet, rolled up his sleeves, and he walked out the door saying “One more.”^X

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Soulflare

“This is it, Rem, the last possible game of the series. Final Frontier have survived till game five. All of these players must be under some *extreme* pressure to perform, and something to take into consideration is the fact that these teams are about to enter their *fifth* hour or so of absolutely intense focus. Solo queue games online can be very mentally draining so I can’t *begin* to imagine what kind of stress these players must be under right now.”

“It’s times like these where it is to a team’s benefit to have support staff that values mental and physical endurance. But in the end it always comes down to the players and what they’re able to accomplish after *five* grueling matches. At this point it’s a matter of drive and ambition,” Remington said. “We’ve received word that the players are ready and here we go, ladies and gentlemen, the fifth match between Final Frontier Gaming and Team Exile!”

—

“Okay, so we’re going to try to first pick Rek’Sai,” Shellshock said to kick off the conversation. “And as before we want to ban strong engage, especially Sejuani.”

“Kalista ban, too, I don’t wanna play against that shit,” Rex said.

FFG Crescendo: Yes, fuck Kalista. :^)

“Right, Kalista, too,” Shellshock said looking at his notepad.

FFG DeusRex: :%)

FFG DeusRex: :^)

“First ban Kalista?” Tokyo asked.

The team agreed.

FFG Crescendo: We can hold Sej ban to the end to try to force them to ban it

“Sonia says hold Sejuani ban to the end. Try to bait them to ban it away from us.”

“Yup. So then our second ban would be...Lissandra, Leona, Braum, Thresh, Alistar, Nautilus. The list goes on.”

“Lissandra will probably be the best ban out of those,” Rex said. “And they banned Rumble. Looks like they don’t fancy playing against Geoff’s Rumble again.”

“They really banned Rumble?” Shellshock asked.

“Yup,” Tokyo said with no inflection whatsoever.

“Alright then. So Lissandra ban.”

Tokyo banned Lissandra and Exile’s second ban followed immediately.

“Oh wow, they banned Thresh, too!” Panda exclaimed.

“I guess they didn’t like that team comp,” WildCat said.

FFG Crescendo: My death hooks. :c

“Still last ban Sejuani?” Tokyo asked for confirmation.

“Unless anyone has any objections,” Shellshock said to invite other thoughts.

The team had none and Tokyo proceeded with the ban.

“Taking bets on a Gragas ban,” Panda offered. “Five bucks.”

“Tch. They might, actually,” Rex said. “But I don't think it'd be a good use of a ban.”

Half-way through the timer's countdown, Exile banned Zed.

“Wow. These guys, man,” Panda thought.

“Tch. I ain't buyin' this shit,” Rex said. “They ban Syndra all four games but leave her open this time? That's not very creative.”

“Jorge, if you were to pick Syndra and you got counter-picked, would you be able to go even in lane?” Shellshock asked.

“Uh, it'd depend who I'd be laning against,” Panda replied. “If it were like Fizz or LeBlanc I'd probably lose past level three.”

Shellshock took the remaining countdown time to consider. “Would the risk be worth the reward?”

“I wouldn't think so,” Tokyo said. “Unless we do some contrived laneswap, or something.”

At the last second Tokyo locked in Rek'Sai.

“If we play out the first three levels normally,” Rex suggested, “then have Blue go Mid to support Panda, or have Panda and Kitty swap places, maybe that'd work.”

“Okay, nevermind,” Shellshock said. “Forget I said anything. It's too much work to do in the moment. We've never even practiced anything like this.”

FFG Crescendo: @_@

“If only we had the godly Korean genes. GG,” WildCat said.

“We can just do something basic like Lulu Mid, really,” Panda told the team.

“Gnar, Elise,” Rex mused. “Haven't seen Elise played in a while.”

FFG Crescendo: Elise?

FFG Crescendo: PogChamp

“What's next for us? We have nice engage so far,” Shellshock said.

“We can pick Irelia this round,” Tokyo said.

“Irelia, Lulu? Save Bot for last?” Rex considered.

FFG Crescendo: We can take Lulu bot if Panda wants a different mid

“Sonia says we can use Lulu as support too if we want a different Mid.”

“Of course,” Shellshock agreed.

“With the addition of Irelia and Lulu we now have peel and threat to their squishies in this comp,” Shellshock said thinking over the picks.

“We planned our ADC to be high damage. We talked about Jinx a bit,” Rex said.

FFG Crescendo: If we go Lulu Mid, I'm thinking Morg/Nami

FFG Crescendo: Unless we need a tanky/engage champ like Braum/Leo

“Sonia says if we're going to play Lulu Mid, she'd like Morg or Nami, unless we need heavy engage like Braum or Leo,” WildCat told Shellshock.

“Okay, we'll see what they pick first, and then see what we need,” Shellshock said.

Exiled locked in Leona and Lucian and the last two boxes on Final Frontier's side lit.

“We can play well against that lane with poke,” WildCat said. “Sustain would help too.”

“If we're feeling confident we can go with Nami over Morg,” Shellshock said focusing on WildCat and Crescendo. “Unless you want Lulu. That's entirely up to you two.”

“We can do anything,” WildCat said. “Pick whichever you want, Sonia.”

They considered their options in the few seconds remaining of their final picks. In the end they chose to be brave and stuck with the Jinx and Nami lane.

FFG Crescendo: If we get pressure on/near bot we can maybe get a kill or two

FFG Crescendo: If not, then we can at least get a small advantage

“I can prob'ly hover near Bottom and Mid, but we should be really careful of Elise during early game,” Rex said.

“With this comp, what strat are you guys more comfortable playing?” Shellshock asked the team. “Both teams look like they can excel at picks.”

FFG Crescendo: During TFs peel for Kitty

FFG Crescendo: Otherwise pick/skirmish in jungle with numbers advantage

“I agree with Blue here,” Rex said in the open comms. “They've stronger engage tools and can CC lock us if we're not careful. We gotta play around those cooldowns.”

“They last picked LeBlanc,” Tokyo informed Shellshock.

“So both teams are good pick potential. Since we have stronger disengage on our team we need more defensive wards and defensive play this time around,” Shellshock reasoned. “Sonia, Jason, be *absolutely* careful when poking. Don't try to go for risky auto-attacks unless George is nearby. Poke, and don't commit too heavily.”

“Yup,” WildCat said.

“Jorge, it's likely they're going to try to get ahead on LeBlanc, so be careful with warding and when you're walking up to get CS. Ask George to apply pressure if you can feel *any* increase in pressure Mid.”

“Okay,” Panda acknowledged.

“Geoff, George, stay solid. Keep talking with the team, look for opportunities, and take what you deserve. Work with Sonia on the big picture and earn this victory from their grasp.”

“Do you have the quote, Coach?” Tokyo asked.

“Right, the quote.” Shellshock turned to the last page of his notepad and read “In a fight, anger is as good as courage.”

Tokyo closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and blocked out the world as he concentrated on some thoughts that ran through his mind. “Once more unto the breach,” he said.

“Remember why we’re here,” Shellshock continued. “No matter what they throw at you, you will stand your ground unshaken. When they hit you, you reply tenfold. Pick your fights wisely. If you have to fight to the death to secure objectives, fight the best you’ve ever fought. Starve them, blind them, scatter them, punish them for every mistake. Stick together, listen to each other, and let’s leave with that win we came for. Eyes on the prize, guys.”

“You got it, Coach,” Rex said. “Next time you see us, you won’t be paying us out of pocket. Oh, and you’re telling us that story involving the alcohol.”

“...no I’m not,” Shellshock replied.

“*Fuck*. Well, I tried. See you in a bit, space cowboy,” Rex said quickly before Shellshock departed for center stage. Coaches shook hands one final time, then disappeared backstage.

“Damn, Coach is gone,” Panda said as he watched Shellshock exit stage. “I’m scared,” he said playfully. “Let’s win this one fast, too. I wanna go back to sleep.”

“Sure,” Rex said. “Just solo kill Maravilla then go hypercarry, machine gun Lulu.”

“You think I won’t?” Panda asked.

“If you do, I’ll go AP,” Rex replied.

“Machine gun Lulu it is,” Panda said.

Irelia FFG NeoTokyo	Pool Party Rek’Sai FFG DeusRex	Pool Party Lulu FFG Pandango	Mafia Jinx FFG WildCat	Koi Nami FFG Crescendo
Gentleman Gnar XII Eclipse	Elise XII Ages	LeBlanc XII Maravilla	Striker Lucian XII Fathom	Iron Solari Leona XII Umbreon

[00:05] [FFG Crescendo \(Nami\)](#): They prob won't laneswap

[00:05] [FFG Crescendo \(Nami\)](#): But we should check anyway

[00:06] [FFG Crescendo \(Nami\)](#) is on the way

A beacon on the map indicated that Crescendo planned to explore through the West jungle, then a further series of pings showed the path the team would take to the North jungle.

“I’ll drop the first ward when we get there,” Rex said.

“Watch for their level one CC from Leona Q,” WildCat warned.

“Yeah, lemme go first so I can sense them if they’re moving.”

The team moved in toward the North jungle and placed vision just outside Exile’s northern base gates. They encountered no resistance and returned to their normal laning positions.

“They must've warded South jungle, so be careful levels two and three,” Rex said. “They never did anything like this in scrims so they might be trying something fishy.”

[00:53] FFG Crescendo (Nami): As a mermaid I take offense to that

“Nice meme, bro,” Rex told Crescendo.

“Kay, I'm heading top,” Tokyo said.

All opposing players showed in their respective lanes as the minions charged toward the center. The team remained silent as they moved left, right, forward backward, consciously doing what they had practiced many hours before.

In Bottom lane Crescendo managed to land a few hits onto Umbreon, but then turned her attention to the minions once Exile pushed the wave forward.

“They're pushing Bot,” WildCat said.

“Still no sign of Elise,” Rex informed the team. “Ward if you can. Be careful otherwise.”

In Mid lane Panda and Maravilla traded auto-attacks evenly. With the addition of minion damage both players were left at around half health and both players drank their health potions. Rex maneuvered toward North jungle, along the way taking Scuttle Crab.

In Top lane Tokyo struggled to stay at half health due to the range disadvantage, but he remained in lane and slowly healed up, dodging more than half of Eclipse's Boomerang Throws.

[03:12] FFG Crescendo (Nami) has targeted XIL Umbreon – (Leona)

All players neared their third level, and their third ability. “Can we get 'im top?” Rex asked Tokyo.

“Probably not. Maybe after I get first buy,” Tokyo said. “I can start sustaining forever now, though.”

“I think Elise is Mid,” Panda said.

“Coming Mid from base,” Rex informed Panda. “I'm gonna scout through Raptors. Do you have a ward?”

“Fifteen seconds,” Panda replied.

“Uh, okay, wait till I get there.”

[03:47] FFG Crescendo (Nami) has targeted XIL Fathom – (Lucian)

“Oh shit, that bubble,” WildCat said. He landed significant damage onto Fathom thanks to Crescendo's crowd control, then informed the team “Lucian's half HP. He just used his pot.”

“Can you cover Mid, Rex?” Panda asked.

“Sure, I'll be there after Raptors,” Rex confirmed.

The match continued for a while without much action and without much more communication other than the constant stream of information feeding.

“Gnar backed,” Tokyo said.

[07:38] FFG Crescendo (Nami) purchased Sightstone

[07:45] FFG Crescendo (Nami): We can start warding Drag

“Yeah, I’ll hover near Red,” Rex said.

“Maravilla’s pushing,” Panda said.

“Maybe Elise is there? I’ll head up,” WildCat said.

Rex, WildCat, and Crescendo ran toward Mid, a Cocoon flew toward Rex from the bush, stunning him.

“I’m stunned,” Rex said calmly into the comms. Panda warded the bush and Tokyo instantly began Teleporting into the center of the fight. Eclipse Teleported to a minion in the Mid lane.

[08:19] FFG Crescendo (Nami) has targeted XII Ages – (Elise)

“Elise,” the team said together, one time.

“I can jump on LeBlanc,” Tokyo said further.

Maravilla Flashed and jumped forward to land chains onto Crescendo. She Flashed backward and fired an Aqua Prison in response, locking Ages in place. She empowered WildCat and landed auto-attacks on the nearest target. The roars of the crowds began fighting through the headset, the stage trembling to the immense volume.

“I have shield, Rex,” Panda said.

Fathom and Umbreon approached from the South, dashing immediately onto Rex. Panda shielded him from danger and traded damage back onto Fathom. Behind the safety of Rex, Panda, and Crescendo, WildCat fired rockets onto the clumped up members of Exile.

Tokyo routed Maravilla from the fight toward the North, then raced South against Eclipse to join the rest of the fight.

“I’m dead, try to get Lucian,” Rex said. He and Ages died simultaneously despite Crescendo’s heals.

[08:24] FFG Crescendo (Nami) has targeted XII Fathom – (Lucian)

“Lucian,” the other four members of Final Frontier barked once.

Tokyo wedged his way toward Fathom, and Eclipse toward WildCat. Fathom and Umbreon retreated Southeast, the remaining members of Final Frontier retreated Southwest.

“Care for LeBlanc,” Rex warned.

Tokyo pushed Exile’s Bot lane past Dragon pit and ran to meet up with the rest of the team.

[08:29] FFG Crescendo (Nami) signals to be careful

“Retreat,” the team said in unison to Crescendo’s ping.

Eclipse, in Mega-Gnar form, slowed both of WildCat's defenders which then allowed Maravilla to jump in and assassinate Panda.

WildCat and Crescendo continued hitting Eclipse while kiting back toward Tier-Two Mid turret.

Tokyo retreated South between Red camp and Dragon pit and recalled safely beneath turret.

"I think that's Dragon for them," Tokyo said.

"We're gonna have to focus LeBlanc after that," Rex said.

[08:57] **FFG Crescendo (Nami)**: Once we get ults we should group/take mid

[08:59] **FFG Crescendo (Nami)**: 1320 My flash and LB flash

[09:02] **XII. Maravilla (LeBlanc) has slain the Dragon!**

"I can roam Mid, too, just tell me when we're getting him," Tokyo said.

The players reset to their default positions, the Bottom half of the map now lit with some wards. A lone ward provided vision in the Top tri-bush on the Top half of the map.

Exile quickly pushed the Bottom wave and disappeared into the fog of war.

[10:28] **FFG Crescendo (Nami)** signals that enemies are missing

"Bot's pushed. They may be ganking," WildCat said.

"Mid's MIA," Panda relayed to the team.

"None of our wards've spotted them. Play safe, though," Rex said.

"TP up at 13:25," Tokyo said.

WildCat and Crescendo hugged the turret, WildCat electing to farm from a distance with his long-range Zap.

"He's back Mid," Panda informed the team.

"I'm almost six," WildCat said.

Rex roamed in South jungle always on the lookout for Tremor Sense to infer any invades or roams from Exile. The team continued relaying information to one another, then chose to take Mid turret.

"Yeah, they backed," WildCat said confidently.

[13:11] **FFG Crescendo (Nami) has targeted the Inner Turret**

"Alright, push up," Rex said. The full force of five emerged from their jungle where Exile had no vision. They rapidly cleared the wave and began the siege at Mid.

A heartbeat later a ward in Southern river spotted members of Exile running to defend the turret. Crescendo pinged to retreat from the South and asked for assistance in North river. WildCat and Crescendo landed one last auto attack than ran up, Panda followed afterward, and Rex and Tokyo were the last ones out.

Crescendo pinged Top turret, the team agreed to the rotation, planning ahead for Dragon that would spawn in a few minutes. They dropped Top turret below 300 HP,

and when a ward spotted Exile on their way up, they retreated in the same fashion as before: WildCat and Crescendo first, then Panda, and lastly Rex and Tokyo who benefited from high defensive stats, Rex with a dash, and Tokyo with built-in tenacity against crowd control. The tankier members of Final Frontier always orbited on the outer layer of the team's formation, they were always positioned to be the first to intercept any danger.

Exile was scattered between Top and Mid to push back against the pressure of the minions, and Final Frontier prepared for Dragon.

“We can start right away,” Rex said.

[15:48] FFG Crescendo (Nami): Pinks here

Crescendo pinged in two locations around Dragon pit to indicated ward placement, and she placed her own Pink Ward at the center of the river. The threw everything toward Dragon and Exile moved in, a Teleport channeled to a ward south, just outside the Pink Ward's range.

[15:57] FFG Crescendo (Nami) has targeted the Dragon

“Finish Dragon,” the team said at once. Tokyo positioned himself between both teams, threatening to jump onto Fathom should he step too close.

Dragon's health shrank to a sliver and Umbreon's Solar Flare dropped down on top of Rex. He Flashed out of the stun, Ages Flashed in and stole Dragon, Tokyo ran toward Fathom near East jungle entrance, then Flashed west and jumped onto Maravilla who looked for an opportunity near Dragon pit.

[16:00] FFG Crescendo (Nami) has targeted XII Maravilla – (LeBlanc)

“LeBlanc,” the team said.

Eclipse jumped inside the pit, Crescendo ulted three members of Exile, delaying them just over a second, giving WildCat time to launch a Super Mega Death Rocket. All spells and abilities were concentrated on the support and protection of WildCat. Eclipse slammed four members of Final Frontier against the Dragon pit and Maravilla deleted Panda from the map, but Panda managed to Polymorph Maravilla.

The ground shook to the raw energy expelled from the crowd as WildCat landed critical strikes onto a critter Maravilla, forcing him back out of the pit while The Culling rained powerful blows into the pit.

Rex slashed at Eclipse to make it easier to WildCat to secure the kill. On the outskirts of the fight, Tokyo constantly switched his attention between Maravilla and Fathom, striking the nearest one and the one more likely to deal damage.

Maravilla jumped back into the pit, but Crescendo instantly Exhausted him. One auto attack and one Zap later, WildCat shut him down, but WildCat also fell to Ages' hand shortly after.

Tokyo fell back from Fathom and aimed for the low health Ages. Final Frontier secured the kill and three members remained on both sides, the damage heavily in Exile's favor. Crescendo, Rex, and Tokyo scattered to reduce their losses, but Tokyo eventually died to Fathom near Mid lane.

Rex, Tokyo, and Crescendo discussed the fight, the new plan, and a splitpush strategy was devised. For a greater portion of the game both sides collided again and again, and the team communication remained hectic throughout.

The crowd chanted in favor of both teams whenever either won a fight. Both teams enjoyed the glory of fights heavily in their favor, as well as bitter fights of absolute and crushing defeat. The enormous volume of the crowd seemed to grow stronger with each fight.

The teams fought. Their world trembled.

Exile secured a clean ace. Their world quaked.

Final Frontier claimed three kills. Their world shook them to their core.

The death count racked up on both ends of the spectrum. Thirty-seven kills for Final Frontier, thirty-nine for Exile. Six turrets for Final Frontier, seven for Exile.

The bloodiest match of the series reached late-game and both sides were still relentless.

“Death timers are too long, and Dragon's up in a minute,” Tokyo said.

“If we're base racing we have to choose now,” Rex said.

[52:23] [FFG Crescendo \(Nami\)](#): Wait for htem to show at Drag then base arce

“Waveclear,” Tokyo and Rex said. WildCat and Panda took defensive positions clearing the super minions that were pouring into base via Mid lane. Final Frontier super minions began knocking on Exile's Nexus turrets. They fought against many of Exile's minions but failed to destroy either of the turrets. Both remained with at least half health.

“They're pushing Top,” Panda said.

[52:49] [FFG Crescendo \(Nami\)](#): B 2 min

“Should I have TP'd into their base?” Tokyo asked. “Maybe I could've taken both turrets down.”

“Nah, too risky,” Rex said.

Vision in the jungle and in the river expired and the team quickly placed vision outside their walls. WildCat was the best waveclear available on the team and he dutifully went from lane to lane keeping enemy minions at bay.

With a push from Exile in Top lane, all of Final Frontier's Outer Turrets were razed to the ground, and all their turret vision was gone. They remained within the walls of their base, confined to a small portion of the map with Exile knocking on their doors.

36

Glorious

“FFG's minions have once more managed to reach Exile's Nexus turrets but there aren't enough there to take those turrets down,” Remington said.

“Exile are patiently sitting just outside FFG's base, maybe their plan is to catch Final Frontier on their way to Dragon?” Masua assumed. “Crescendo pops Frost Queen's Claim and it's going to spot Exi—*they're going in!*”

“Solar Flare locks down Pandango and Maravilla just decimates that health bar! The remaining members of FFG engage onto Maravilla and they CC him long enough for the kill, The Culling lands onto DeusRex and NeoTokyo who are now on full retreat. Tidal Wave is used to cover their backs but Ages Flashes over it! Crescendo and Ages fall but Mega Gnar is up and he Flash Ults FFG against their own Nexus. WildCat manages to Flash out but Fathom just shreds through the armor of NeoTokyo and DeusRex. WildCat, the last man standing against three members of Exile.”

“That's it! It's over!”

“After five games, after an hour of back and forth fights, both teams trading blow for blow, fighting to the last man, fighting till the last bit of life, Team Exile will secure themselves a glorious victory and claim that final spot in the 2017 North American League Championship Series!”

“Even after all of this, Rem, there's some *very real* talent in that Final Frontier squad and I'm going to be very interested to see what's in store for some of the players in the future. Maybe this roster will stick together and try again next split, maybe they'll make a change or two and come back stronger.”

The victory banner shone upon the massive screen above the players, the players from Team Exile jumped out of their seats, embraced one another, their coach Belnaut ran onstage from behind the scenes and joined in on the celebration. The crowd's chants of X-I-L, X-I-L rang throughout the stadium, shaking the ground, shaking the foundations of the building. Cameras on wires in the air captured overhead shots, cameras on the ground captures closer looks of each player's expression.

The players collected themselves and walked to Final Frontier's end of the stage.

One by one the six members of Exile walked down the line.

They shook Tokyo's hand. He stood tall as always and had a firm handshake. He said “Good games” to every member of Exile.

They shook Rex's hand. He offered “GGs” and he patted each on the back as they continued down the line.

Panda still sat in his seat, his elbows on the desk, his face in his hands. The members of Exile patted Panda on the back and continued down the line.

They shook WildCat's hand, but he was not wearing the wide smile for which he was known.

They shook Crescendo's hand. She also offered a firm handshake, but also a forced smile, and a respectful bow of the head.

Exile took center stage before the spectators, raised their hands victoriously and took a bow.

Panda still sat in his seat, face in his hands. Crescendo and WildCat walked over and put their arms around him to comfort him. Tokyo and Rex stood beside the team staring at the ground.

Shellshock appeared from backstage and upon noticing the team around Panda, ran to his side. Shellshock crouched beside the seat and held Panda in a hopeless embrace, brushing the back of his head. Panda let his head fall onto Shellshock's shoulder, and he shivered uncontrollably.

Extras

Matthew: Hello, Guy. That bump on your head getting any better?

Guy: Grr . . .

Matthew: You should know better than to try to sneak in when I'm sleeping. You're really easy to read, you know that?

Guy: I-I won't lose next time!

Matthew: Hey . . . Guy. Back in Sacae you were saying you wanted to become the strongest knight of all. Is that your dream . . . or your goal?

Guy: Huh?

Matthew: If it's a dream, then be done with it. There are plenty of dreamers with swords. Plenty stronger than you, plenty with more talent . . . To be the strongest, you have to beat them all.

Guy: I-I know that!

Matthew: What will you do when you hit your wall? That one opponent you'll never be able to beat?

Guy: . . .

Matthew: When you hit that wall that you just can't get over . . . That's when you'll realize. You're not special. You're a bit player, one of the masses.

Guy: . . .

Matthew: Most people give up then. They realize they're not young anymore, they don't have talent. They think up some excuse why they don't have to try. That's how they go on with their lives.

Guy: B-But I'm different! I won't end up like them! As long as I live, I'll keep fighting!

Matthew: I see . . . Then, best of luck, Guy. I'm rooting for you.

Guy: Eh . . . ?

Matthew: You're to become the best knight in Sacae, right? Then you'd best beat me one of these days. And you'll have to get stronger to do that.

Guy: Of course! I will!

– *Fire Emblem (Rekka no Ken)*

Logbook

A

From page 17

FFG > Articles > Competitive > LoL

A Global View of the State of eSports

on August 19, 2016

by NeoTōkyo

eSports is still an ever-growing industry that has gained traction at a global level, and has yet to show any signs of slowing down. Competitive gaming events around the world continue to draw in higher audiences both at physical venues and via online streams. Our competitive Dreamhacks and IEMs have confirmed that attendance has steadily increased about 170% per year since the rise of the streaming revolution brought about by organizations like Twitch and the long-gone Own3d. Even the non-competitive segments of Dreamhacks, Assemblys, Gamescoms, PAXs, and Comic Cons reveal increasing numbers over the years.

And while most people are now playing games on a daily basis, be it a few minutes of a simple mobile game on the commute to work, or heavily competitive games that require larger investments of time like your League of Legends, your DOTAs, your Starcrafts, and your Counter-Strikes, most of the best competitors still seem to root from Asian and European countries. With this information in mind, one has to wonder why American players are so far behind the best competitors from other parts of the world.

To find answers to some of these questions, regarding why North American organizations aren't quite up to par with Korean or German or French gaming organizations, we need to delve into the social constructs of these regions.

In eSports (and traditional sports to a far lesser extent) travel is notorious for jetlag, less practice time, and sometimes higher expenses. All of this is far more detrimental to gaming organizations that are still growing and lack the funds that Manchester United has access to. Perhaps the most brutal example of travel hurting a team (outside of American eSports) was in the Support player of the Russian powerhouse Gambull Gaming: before moving to their new "gaming house" their Support player could very easily have devoted an entire day to fly to the event. But their newly acquired office/gaming house hybrid in Saint Petersburg will no doubt make their lineup far stronger and perhaps even a worthy competitor against Korean teams.

For players in most other countries this is far from problematic due to population density and the gaming cafes of Europe/PC Bangs of Korea (even the arcades of Japan). These establishments are rare in America, especially when compared to Europe and Asia (for instance arcades hardly exist on their own, but are housed in malls or barcades or in other entertainment centers). Gaming cafes don't seem to be able to find a home anywhere in the states. Even in high density cities like my own

New York, a gaming cafe or arcade alone is unlikely to survive long, but in Seoul or Osaka, it could very well be a profitable business.

One of the reasons for this is the fact that in the American economic system, more time is spent outside of work compared to most Asian countries. A PC Bang in Seoul, or a LAN cafe in Shanghai, or a gaming cafe in Kilgis (or an entire building with four floors of arcade machines in Tokyo) that resides anywhere near a high school or university would likely see more profit and repeat business than in New York, Chicago, Phoenix, Austin, or even other cities that are home to game development companies like Double Fine or Valve, or content and machinima creators like RoosterTeeth.

While cyber cafes *do* exist in the states, they were not started up nor do they thrive off of the need to play multiplayer games in a social environment. This stems from the fact that individuals in America have access to purchase and build high-end computers for personal use, and access to high-speed internet at home. Income for a gaming PC or even worthwhile internet isn't necessarily as easy to come by in other parts of the gaming world (especially if you're a high school student). At the end of the day, there is no real demand for these places to exist in America, and therefore no one is supplying it or catering specifically for gamers like the rest of the world is: but it's for the very solid reason that it just wouldn't make sense in the US.

This intimacy and openness to social gaming (*real* social gaming, none of that Facebook crap) for a younger demographic sort of feeds into the professional gaming scene in perhaps two major ways. First, the more competitive and aspiring players have a place where they can hone their craft and practice and spar with others who have that same drive in them. Second, this close-quarters environment easily translates to the close-quarters living of Korean gaming houses.

Korean players are far more open to and more easily accepting of the idea of living and gaming, and essentially becoming a family since they are not as concerned with privacy or having boyfriends or girlfriends like more western players are. For most professional Chinese and Korean teams, the game is all that matters, and it's their job to win and show results against opponents who are also training with the same "all or nothing" mentality.

Korean players are fine with sleeping in one room dedicated to bunkbeds. They are fine with waking up at a designated time, working out at a specific time, practicing at the same time, dining, and making team strategies at the same time, because Korean culture tends to lend itself to that behavior, but in America everything is bigger because we just have way more space with bigger homes and bigger everything.

In a recent interview, OGN caster and Arcadia eSports coach Duncan "Montezuma" Mykles said of Korean culture that "... it's a culture that values what you've won and accomplished rather than compliments of your skills. I think most American and European players suffer from being told they're great and amazing players and they possess a certain skill, but then fail to win in a high-pressure environment. This may

lead to players subconsciously coming to terms with the fact that all that praise means nothing if you don't win anything. As a coach for Arcadia, I'm trying to bring the Korean infrastructure and training policies, while still being flexible with their American habits. But as I've seen in the Arcadia gaming house and as our LCS games have demonstrated, old habits do indeed die hard."

If Montezuma's theory is correct, and bringing the Korean training to an American team will improve it, we have yet to see this come to fruition. ARC have yet to play with the furor and precision that SK Dignitas have for the past few years and I don't think the excuse "old habits die hard" will hold up if Arcadia doesn't completely demolish the North American LCS like Royale did last season. But perhaps I'm simply unaware that the other North American teams have stepped up their game and have also been applying Korean training methods. This may very well be the reason Arcadia, with Montezuma's Korean-inspired guidance, have yet to take North America by storm. But perhaps Arcadia will show vast improvement over the remainder of the 2016 season. Whatever the case, America has got a lot of catching up to do.

B

From page 19

Confidential – Team Final Frontier Gaming

Simon Penn NeoTokyo, It is with great pleasure that I write 14:00 (7 hours ago)

Ohai,

How soon would the team get together? Will this be soon enough that I can leave my current job and deal with other obligations?

Also, is there a gaming house, or are we just doing this online for the time being? Would I have to bring my own machine if there's a gaming house or will computers be provided for us? If you're going to be ordering computers, consider having George and I build them rather than having them sent directly from manufacturers. It'd save a considerable amount of money.

When would we first be paid? How are you going to try to get Marwolf from Arcadia? Is there a particular sponsor you already have or have in mind that might sway his decision?

Are you sure it's a good idea to have Crescendo on the team, let alone be captain? He's never played at any venues with any teams and he doesn't even talk to people when he duo queues. Or do you have some interesting plan in mind?

How are we getting a spot for qualify for LCS? Did Hoplite tip you off on a way to get a team going? Are you going to be doing all the coaching and managing and stuff?

Let me know when you get the chance, dude.

WITH QUESTIONABLE LOVE AND AFFECTION,
NeoTokyo <3

C

From page 28

Confidential – Team Final Frontier Gaming
Sat, Oct 8, 2016, 15:23 (0 minutes ago)

Simon Penn NeoTokyo, It is with great pleasure that I write Oct 7 (Yesterday)
NeoTokyo Hello Shellshock, How soon would the team g 21:14 (13 hours ago)
Simon Penn <penn@ffgaming.tk>
to me

Hey Geoff,

Once I have a full roster, which I would hope is next Friday at the latest, I'll start paying out funds for all travel expenses. If you're worried about any employment stuff, I'll get you settled in with funds anyway on Friday even in the event we don't have a full roster.

As for the gaming house, I actually forgot to mention it in my first email lol. I'm a bad. I will be renting the apartment across from mine and that'll pretty much be our gaming house. There's a gym on the first floors so we can stay in shape and everything. But I'll send out another email specifying this since I forgot the first time. And of course I'll give you further information if you'll accept my proposal.

If you want to bring your own computer that's fine. We can even upgrade it if you need some newer components, make it fast and shiny and give it some higher storage SSDs if you want. And thanks for the offer, we will be needing you and George to build PCs, or help the rest of the team if they don't know how to. I'll be giving everyone funds to build their own machine or purchase one off the market, whichever they want.

I'm not going to be talking about sponsorships and partnerships until we get the full team together in person because I think it's something that we should discuss openly and honestly. While I may be making the business decisions, I'm going to want you guys to be well aware of what's expected of you and whatnot. So there's that. Same for payment. The only payment that won't require being here is travel, but I'm sure you and George will just take the subway down here, so you'll keep the travel funds for yourselves. As for Marlwolf, if we get him, we get him. Otherwise, I have other players in mind.

I believe Crescendo can be an excellent component to the team. Just because Crescendo doesn't have any LAN experience or any team experience, doesn't mean I'm going to give up or reject a player. Having watched streams, I know there's something more there. I've already exchanged emails with Crescendo addressing some of these concerns, but I'm sure it'll work out just fine. I will indeed be doing all the coaching and management. I'll go over this when the team is together. Let me know if you have any further questions.

A TOKYO BY ANY OTHER NAME STILL HEARTS,
Simon

D

From page 46

Rows of monitors and desktops were set up all across the massive arena. Huge crowds and clumps and groups of people walked across the floor to get to booths for particular games or particular shows or to attempt to get in the mile-long lines for the restrooms.

They faintly heard the timbre of the crowds behind the firewall of their earphones and headphones. Among long desks, five people sat behind their computer monitors tapping and clicking at their devices and shouting commands into their microphones with focused, energized eyes darting across all directions of the monitors before them. On the other side of their monitors sat the opposition, which clicked and tapped and shouted and focused with the same fervor and precision.

“Nonono, come hide here. I pinked it. They don’t know.”

“I’m comin’, I’m comin’.”

“Do they still have Oracles?”

“I think they do. Either way, we should just jump on the squishiest person that comes in. Get ready. All ults up. Leona ult on Cait if possible. Otherwise Vlad. Flash out of Malph ult if you can.”

“Ready, ready.”

“Go, go!”

“Vlad! Vlad! Vlad!”

“Where’s my peel? My fucking peel?!”

“Exhausting Zed!”

“Zed no ult, ignite.”

“CD on Lux snare?”

“Four...three...”

“Zed GA popped!”

“Cait! Cait! Cait!”

“Forget Malph, Thornmail!”

“Zed up. I have stun.”

“Keep kiting, keep kiting.”

“We’ll come back for you after Cait. Keep kiting.”

“I don’t ‘ave Flash.”

“One more E on Cait, Rex?”

“Few seconds.”

“CC Zed and Malph.”

“Fuck! That god damn Q!”

“We’re fine, we’re fine. Enigma, push down mid.”

“Going.”

“Alright, we won that, three for one. Push mid and bot.”

“Zed forty seconds.”

“Back off mid in ten seconds.”
“Defend top after.”
“We keep going bot. Another wave.”
“Starting to B.”
“Baron timer?”
“Uhh...fifty-three forty-three.”
“Go as five after mid and top.”
“Leave bot?”
“If they show, B for bot. Otherwise we go through with Dragon—Baron.”
“Got Last Whisper.”
“My ult’s back up.”
“Should fight before Zed’s GA is off cooldown again.”
“Force Baron for it, though?”
“...Tokyo?”
“Uhh...”
“Baron twenty seconds.”
“Ult ten.”
“Yeah. Force it. Bait if we can. Smite up?”
“Yeah, it’s up.”
“They have Oracles.”
“Anyone gets hooked, we lose.”
“Start it?”
“Hang on, hang on.”
“Shurelya’s up if we need it. No Flash, no Exhaust.”
“Come ‘ere, come ‘ere.”
“Shurelya’s! Go!”
“Zed! Zed! Zed!”
“Yes!”
“Malph! No ults on him!”
“Few more autos.”
“Three...two...fuck!”
“Rex!”
“Baron!”
“Blitz! Blitz!”
“Mid, mid, mid!”
“Game! That’s game! I’ll tank, I’ll tank!”
“Fuckin’ GG!”

They removed their equipment, passed fist bumps and high fives and hugs around the team. They shook the hands of their opponents over the monitors, arms crossed in every which direction while plain faces rested on the members of the losing team.

“Good shit, Geoff.”

“Your last ult on Malphite probably saved us another ten minutes.”

“That was way closer than I expected it’d be.”

“We’ll work on it. Little by little.”

“You know what, dinner’s on me tonight. You guys deserve it.”

They unplugged their equipment, their headsets, mice, keyboards, desktops, packed it in their bags still discussing the game they had won. Team spirit flowed from one player to the other, ecstatic voices and large grins passed from one player to the next.

“Alright, so that places us in . . . third place?”

“For now, yeah. If we beat Oasis tomorrow, then we secure third for sure. That’ll also place us in a decent spot to get second, and in a far more favorable position to finish top three.”

Bzzt.

“More girlfriend troubles, Tokyo?”

“Umm, not really. ‘GG. Congrats on the victory. Bring the team outside for a bit before you guys leave.’”

“Ooh, fangirls?”

“Sure thing, Cristiano Ronaldo.”

“ . . . well don’t leave me flaccid. Who is it?”

“Damn, nigga, we gonna see if a bit. If he won’t say, just wait a few minutes.”

“But Rex, what if it’s the FBI. Maybe . . . they’ve found them *fields* of reefer.”

“*Reefer*? Is this nineteen seventy?”

“Quit dodging the question.”

“So what if it *is* the FBI? I know some guy in the FBI who owes me a few favors. Besides, I know how to deal. Those guys don’t know how we New Yorkers be.”

“Oh, *really*? So if you call this FBI guy right now, he’d do you a favor?”

“I’d have ta force the favor outta him, but yeah.”

“And what’s this guy’s name? Special Agent Handsome? Special Agent King? Or maybe Special Agent Mulder?”

“Nah. The dude’s name is O’Malley.”

“One of these days I’m going to expect to see this O’Malley guy.”

They bantered on and on, firing shots among one another, joking and poking and prodding and entertaining and flirting ideas. They walked past booths for games in development, booths for animes and comics and mangas with artists and voice actors signing posters and taking pictures with fans. They walked past large, packed halls filled with people wanting to hear first-hand the upcoming projects of film and television producers. Once they passed through the many streams of people and worked their way up the escalators with all their bags and luggage, they made their way out of the venue.

“Hey, there! Congrats on the victory against Cognition. That was a helluva game.”

“Thanks, dude. It was actually pretty intense towards the end.”

“Oh, this is my girlfriend, Lillian. We were wondering if you guys wanted to head down to dinner someplace. On me!”

“Yo.”

“Well, not quite the fangirls Moltzart was expecting, but maybe he’s down for this.”

“Don’t mind if I pick at your wallet for a bit, Shell.”

“Anyplace you guys have in mind?”

“There was a Denny’s down over somewhere a few ways. That’d be my choice.”

“Ooh, yeah. Craving that Denny’s myself, now.”

—

“So where exactly did you guys come up with your team name? I’m assuming Dunkin’ Donuts? Or was there also some Alex Rodriguez in there?”

“Pretty much just the doughnuts. It was Tokyo’s idea and it just kind of stuck.”

“I read an article on the ridiculously stupid rising costs of tuition for higher education and it kind of pissed me off. Like, the numbers just shouldn’t be what they are, but they are. So now it feels like everyone’s getting into massive debt for no real reason. And it’s something I’m stuck with, myself. I have no idea how I’m gonna pay off four years of undergrad while working a soulless, stupid desk job where the most exciting thing in my day will be the scent of coffee. That’s just not what I want to do. It’s definitely not what I expected as I was growing up.”

“And what are you majoring in again?”

“English. Literature is something I’m extremely fond of. I know most people can’t stand reading stuff so passively, especially people my age because we grew up with more interactive and easily pleasing technology. But I just find so much good stuff from literature that I want to know all there is I can know about books and authors and stuff like that. And I guess that’s also why I read more news and try to keep up with what’s going on, even if all the news organizations in the US are owned by some lobbyist.”

“Sponsors, Tokyo. They prefer to be called lobbyists, but they’re sponsors. That’s how they get the Senate in the back pocket and the House in an eternal headlock.”

“Hmm, never thought of it that way. I guess you’d know more about that seeing as you’re a retired gamer, you old man, you.”

“Wisdom with age.”

“But yeah, I always think of the Joad family whenever it comes to political decisions. It’s funny, because it’s even influenced how I play *Civilization*. I always try to leave some gold available for the people when they need it, which is something that only really came about with the *Beyond the Sword* expansion pack. Dustbowls and plagues and fires are resolved in a single turn rather than a slow, eventual process. Fuck, now I just made myself want to read *Grapes of Wrath* again.”

12x Bytes

From page 59

SoliderSweet Posted 1 hour ago

And on this day the internet detectives deduced at long last that Crescendo is indeed female due to heavy investigations of an official press release.

SilentCrescendo Posted 1 hour ago

:P

Forte Posted 40 minutes ago

I KNEW IT! Your style is kind of like Neecha's but still relaly different and aggressive. Good luck on the road to LCS! :)

GoldenPikachu Posted 3 hours ago

I honestly don't think this is a very good team. I looks good on paper but if they're going to be up against teams like coL and MAX that have way more experience, there's little chance for this squad with only two or three months of practice.

Tokyo has experience w/ LANs and knows a lot about the scene, but he hardly strikes me as the kind of player who could put up a fight, much less win against players like Toxiform or Shuriken. He's an overall decent player in Solo Q, but Solo Q and the LCS are completely different. He's pretty good at writing about and analyzing eSports and matches and he should stick to that rather than play professionally. I honestly think him and Rex are on the team since he jus kisses Shellshock's ass and vice versa.

Rex is kind of lack luster as a jungler. His champion pool as of right now seems to consiste of mainly tanks, and his performances on damage junglers isn't the best. Some people might point to his time with Tokyo on AroD, but he played mid on that team and was more often than not a second support. I think in the jungle he'll just be that second support again and be outclassed by players like Dendra who has a history of amazing plays from the jungle.

Pandango is really unpredictable and I don't think it'll benefit a team to have a player who goes 10/1/0 in ranked on game, but then 1/10/0 the next. If he can't at least be consistent I think he'll just drag the team down. I think the other teams trying to get into LCS who have good mid/jungle synergy are going to have a field day with him.

Wildcat is actually a good player tbh. I don't see much that I can say against him other than he should have joined some other team a long ass time ago. I think he's the only player on this lineup that's actually LCS material or had the potential to be LCS material.

And for Crescendo, I'm sure she can lead in Solo Q and take the game hostage, but I doubt she'll be like that IRL when the team is right there especially if they're losing. A lot of teams get quiet when they're losing and I doubt she'll have the balls to risk throwing games that could get FFG into the LCS. Plus, she seems way too fucking shy and insecure. Everyone who watches her stream knows she doesn't talk and doesn't use a webcam and just types her insight and commentary on the screen in a Notepad document. And she also never talks when she duo Qs with anyone. Sounds like a real team player this one.

RedAznGuy Posted 2 hours ago

Interesting that you guys would pick crescendo and pandango when they have no lan experience. I don't mean to be sound like an asshole or anything but I just don't think that's a smart move.

Emberwolf Posted 1 hour ago

But over the past two years solo q has improved a bit when it comes to players taking it seriously. Maybe it's not like Korea where managers and scouts could find gods like Imposter but honestly Crescendo seems like the kind of player who can manage and lead a team to victory the way she talks the teams through objectives

FlameDudeX Posted 49 minutes ago

it sounds like you're giving a lot of credit to just shot calling, but I honestly think WildCat deserves a lot of attention as well. Like he has three accounts in Challneger, has played on amateur teams before and practically carried at small LANs in the past. The bot lane combo for this team looks super fucking strong and might even be strong enough to be one of the best duos in NA and the world. I don't think the rest of the team will contribute much other than being the tank or assassins or initiation that the team needs.

Skylord Posted 27 minutes ago

lol what the fuck do you mean only bot lane matters? Maybe you haven't payed attention to panda when he shows up in high elo

games, but he'll do the most insane shit like flash into unwarded territory if he has a hunch that he can get a kill or two. It's like he always tries to mix things up and never be predictable. If he does that consistently AND comes out on top, I think he'll be a sort of wildcard element that can neither be banned out or countered

Kennis Posted 12 minutes ago

Dude you have to count the chemistry that tokyo and rex have. That combination alone can easily result in crazy ass plays, ganks, and turn arounds in team fights.

E

From page 61

“Ey, yo!”

“Huh?”

“Did you really take those coins from the fountain?”

“*Man*, ain’t nobody gonna miss these fuckin’ coins.”

“What makes you think they won’t come back for their coins?”

“People throw their coins in and neva’ come back. Don’t you know how these things work? What kinda stupid are you?”

“...hang on, aren’t you Sebastian’s brother?”

“...”

“And aren’t you a little too young to use the word ‘fuck?’”

“Y—you’re not gonna tell my brother are you?”

“How ‘bout this: toss those coins back into the fountain and I’ll give you a ten. *And* I won’t tell him.”

“...”

“I used to take coins from this fountain for lunch money, too. Just take the ten, leave other people’s wishes alone, and I’ll forget this ever happened.”

A plop and a ripple followed each coin that slid off his hand as he tilted an open palm over the water.

“And here, dry your arms off. Otherwise you’ll get sick in this cold.”

“...so do you know him from school?”

“Yeah. Almost ten years ago now, but we still play games online every now and then. Anyway, here’s the ten. Try...try not to use it all at once.”

F

From page 81

“Hello,” a soft, introductory voice rang into his ears.

He pulled his face up away from his phone, turned to the direction of the voice to see a girl leaning against the elevator wall, her long, brown hair swaying in the air.

“Oh, hi,” he said in his usual, monotone voice and did his usual, sloppy wave. His eyes again returned to the screen in his hands.

“You moved in just the other day, right?”

“Mhm,” eyes still on his phone.

“I saw you moving in with Simon and...your, uh...part...ner?” she raised an eyebrow.

He jerked his head up to meet her eyes, “Wait, what the hell?”

“The guy who wanted to pee in the elevator.”

“What gives you the impression we’re gay?” He put his phone to sleep before slipping it into his pocket.

“Oh you’re not? Sorry,” she giggled and tilted her face down, “it’s just you two didn’t act like other guys around each other. Thought you were either brothers or gay.”

“Nah, we’ve just known each other since we were tiny. I guess you could say we’re brothers in that regard.”

The elevator stopped at ground level and the doors opened.

“Guess I’ll see you around?” she asked as they walked over the elevator gap.

“Yeah, probably,” he mumbled and peered in the direction of the front door with squinting eyes.

“I’m Anna, by the way,” she said after a pause.

“Oh. Um, Geoff,” he lifted his arm and held out his fist toward her.

She was hesitant a second, eventually recognizing and responding to the invitation.

“So yeah, see you ‘round.” He parted for the main entrance while she went toward one of the apartments.

17x

Condemn

From page 85

Dwayne

sport noun 1. an activity involving physical exertion and skill in which an individual or team competes against another or others for entertainment

But hey, go ahead and change the definition if that makes you feel better.

Carl Santos

Incredible!!! Now I know why the USA is being intellectually overtaken by other countries in the fundamental areas of education that matter: math, science, etc., etc. We are just producing imbeciles who are incapable of competing in today's job market. However, thousands of these "brilliant gamers" may win Nobel Prizes in their respective leagues.

Wayne E

This is a story worthy of Fox Sports?!?!?! You've got to be kidding me! What a joke!

Bryan Forester

I bet these fucking virgins havce never seen a vag in person lol...

AJ

The vitriol directed at e-sports seems to be stemming largely from an older generation that still does not consider video games to have any artistic or even entertainment value. This medium has been demonized as murder simulators and marginalized as "toys for kids" for decades; is it any surprise that its increasing prominence has led to this sort of reaction?

Austin

OMG. Has Fox Sports becomes a fake satirical outlet like The Onion?! Is this for real? Like really real?! This might be the funniest or... I'm seriously at a loss for words! Contracts, free agents, collegiate programs? I... I have nothing.

Brett N

Next up taking selfie's will be a sport...

Tanya Maria

Nerds taking over my sports page with their nerdy non-news stories get outta here with this junk...

Christopher Kaz

#Amazed How is this ANY different from what college athletics have become? It is stunning the number of comments that are likely hypocritically ridiculing E-Sports for offering 'no future', asking pejoratively 'will they earn e-money?', or the otherwise valid argument 'colleges are supposed to be places of learning'. How are E-sports any different from our national obsession with traditional college sports like football & basketball? E-sports is not inferior, or at best marginally better, than what college sports have become; this should highlight for all of us how absurd both are in higher education.

College sports, long ago, lost the argument that they exist to promote the shaping of young lives via teaching teamwork, discipline, and other specious character enhancing attributes. College athletics is about one thing and one thing only - money. Let's just dismiss the fact that a career as a professional athlete is about as likely as winning the lottery. We have allowed these athletic programs to overrun the goals of traditional academia. Whether it the allocation of funds away from academic pursuits, to coaches salaries & support staff, to luxury stadiums built by plutocrats & the elevation of athletes to that of Demi-gods.

We have, as a society, have relegated the hard-working academic student to obscurity so I say enjoy your E-sports students because college has already become a game for business & entertainment - just like life.

Stu Stevens

its simple these are games not sports

JulieWong

I think less young people read, and more young people play computer games. Is it a good thing?

Computer is changing the world, also irreversible.

And also less young people writing books. I'm 25.

Wade Brooke

Man...really.....? That MIGHT be whats wrong with this country...

Gabriel

Get a job and a girlfriend losers

Dean Pope

Never had a girl get a girlfriend no more using your hands

Frank

Traditional sports reflect the skills necessary for an industrial world. eSports reflect the skills necessary for a technology world.

All the same mental skills are needed. The physical moves from large movements like running and jumping to small movements like moving fingers.

I have been involved with eSports for more than 20 years. The bodies look different, but the competitors are very much the same.

Alan McMoney

Get out of your moms basement and become a productive member of society

Stephen

My son's grade's, he's a senior in high school, are dismal this semester and I attribute this largely to his preoccupation with League of Legends. It gives me reason to question how much money we should put into a college education for a guy who is clearly addicted to this game. To call it a sport is to overlook the fact that hours on end are spent sitting on one's butt with eyes glued to a screen learning basically nothing.

Mark

This does happen many times, it's all about moderation. If you are spending your whole life in one of these games then it's not good. However it is no different than a 16 year old kid who plays football year round, gives up doing homework to go to the gym and then fails to make it to the next level in college. His future prospects for jobs are about as bleak as someone who does the same thing with video games.

In moderation however League of legends has actually been shown to help with memory retention, help with team work and future work social skills.

It's all about moderation. I would estimate that less than 1% of all players can/will make a living off of playing the game. However if you take high school football, basketball, or baseball players... the same can be said for them as well.

Jonas E

How unfortunate to have university administrators delude otherwise talented students that this pastime (or, more accurately, waste of time) is a sport or leads to a future other than becoming a high-tech couch (or chair) potato. You can kiss this generation goodbye...these athletic directors should be fired.

Allen Marcus

Really Fox Sports? Smh...

Edward Lawrence

Well now...isn't that impressive ! That'll be a shining star on his resume ! These kids should be a shoe-in for that job at McDonalds...if they ever get real jobs...

Mike Briggen

To anyone who is using this article to try and comment on the US education system as a whole, you should be aware that South Korea has both the best education system in the world and millions of people who watch and play e-sports.

John Miles

The end of the world as we know it...

Randall Kidd

eSports finally accepted by mainstream media! So awesome!

Thomas Bennet

Wow call of duty? How bout doing it in real life? I know... I know.... Your afraid you'll die. Mommys afraid you'll die, too. Won't get married,get real job, have a future that ya can take for granted, vacation in Bahamas, etc. if you join and volunteer to serve our country. Let someone else like me (2xs) the 100s of wounded men & women,amputee burned up boys with PTSD do it. You can do whatever ya want kid. Free country.... But I'd feel guilty bragging about a war game and was too pussy to join in real life.

Jimmie Durfay

The pinnacle of having no life whatsoever. Losers. How sad and pathetic, seriously, this is just.....smdh, embarrassing as a human

Dan Acosta

If only he put this much effort into his life by getting one....

Ruby Phillips

Gameing destroys lives....

BLU42

So much testosterone in these comments lmao

Amanda

I'm guessing there's lots more males than females participating?

Dmitri

Probably. Men tend to play video games more than women do, and women also statistically tend to view video games as a sign of immaturity. But don't worry, there will be an article in the NYTimes 5 years from now talking about how the whole collegiate video game culture is misogynistic and that women were pushed out from the beginning.

Zoodoggie

Fun? Yes. Skill involved? Sure. Popular pass-time? Yes.

But a Sport? No way. I know there's a "e-" in front of it, but I wish a better name was coined for this activity. The proximity to "sport" is demeaning to students who have actually made the commitment (often years) to a real sport.

Charles Sweeney

Somewhere in the world there is a tree working really hard to provide oxygen for these kids to breathe. They owe that tree an apology.

EJ Randall

I will not judge others for the time they wish to spend on activities that they enjoy doing, whether it be to play football, basketball, tennis, fencing, or any other physical sport. But the gaming industry is insidious in its nature in terms of the addictive quality of the games being played. Each burst of gunfire or whatever your weapon of choice, and the ensuing takedown of an opponent creates an emotional rush that appears to be quite addictive. With effectively 24 hour access to the game, this can be societally dangerous. The only ones who will be laughing will be the gaming corporations. Not a very positive future for these students who will find themselves with a skill set that has little to do with living a human life.

Jim Mc

All the comments about the time being wasted playing video games got me thinking about my college days in Boston in the 60s I remember countless days sitting around our apartment drinking beer waiting for April and the start of baseball season. We would then repair to Fenway Park and..... you guessed it drink more beer.

If Western Civilization can survive the Sex, Drugs, Rock 'n Roll sixties I think it can survive video games.

Civil Media

God forbid these folks composed, sculpted, danced, wrote - instead of continuing the American downward spiral of infantilism. But then again when corporations are uninspiring monuments to greed and won't pay a living wage - what else are they to do but play kid games for grownups?

Michael

It was pretty much a waste of time back in 1984, was a good thing to grow out of. What's different about it today? It's still just dots on a screen, you move up, down, left, right, try to shoot things, try not to get shot. Go through mazes, collect items for points. But it's all just dots on a screen, and your butt's just sitting in a chair, and your brain isn't doing much more than if you were hitting buttons on a video poker machine.

Reed

You're just so entirely wrong. Like most unknowing people on here. What do you base this "[...]your brain isn't doing much more than if you were hitting buttons on a video poker machine." on? Do you have any proof? Any knowledge? Anything?

Gaming is a pretty new phenomenon and is still being researched and I'm no neuroscientist, but studies like these

<http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0070350>
<http://www.mpg.de/7588840/video-games-brain>

clearly show, that there is a lot more to gaming, than what you describe.

I wish everyone here had exerted some activity in a competitive manner. It would've taught you things like how to objectively evaluate, acknowledging to not knowing everything and being respectful. The public image of gamers in America seems to be so insanely biased.

A local club owner, who hosts events for gamers/nerds regularly says when asked about why he hosts said events:

"Nerds are the most peaceful and considerate people. Not a single pint will break during one of those events."

I'll leave you with that.

G

From page 88

October 26, 2016

Kitty finally arrived at the gaming house last night and now everyone's here. \o/
The non-digital versions of their voices are much clearer. I never realized how much VoIP and VoDs and mics compressed audio into bytes and stuff. :p . It's a nice change of pace to actually hear the clarity of their voices :3

Although I've spent very little time with everyone I think I've learned quite a bit about them already. I guess this will be my initial analysis of each player's style and personality. :p

Since Kitty and I will be laning together, I'll start off with him. From what I've seen from his past streams (and a game he played here) all I have to say is holy shit. He's REALLY fucking good.

And I mean *REALLY* fucking good. It's a completely different experience when I can only see his champ moving and when I can see his champ, his cursor, his mouse and keyboard and so many other things. I can't quite describe exactly what it is he does since I've only seen one game in-person, so I'll have to take more notes on him to learn what skills he brings to team, and where his weaknesses lie, or if he even has any weaknesses to begin with. >, >

Outside of the game he's pretty much an average eighteen year old kid. And that includes him kinda really lacking in social skills. :P But maybe he just needs to get comfortable and get to know everyone before he breaks out of his shell.

Rexy would be the next player to have influence and sway the flow of on bot lane. He's definitely got an interesting personality and he's a really cool guy to talk to. He also has a lot of game knowledge and does little things to gain the advantage over opponents. I know that Rexy, Toky, and Kitty have experience in competitive play, and it definitely shows. I can say with complete certainty and with complete confidence that they're the three best players on the team.

There's something in Rexy that we can harness, there's something he's really, really amazing at that no other player in the world can do for their team. Unfortunately I don't know what it is yet, so I need to keep my eye on him and learn from him some more.

Panda would be the player next likely to contribute to bot lane. There are at least two things I need to get him to work on: consistency and champion pool. Thinking back to the team's first Skype thingy I remember Kitty saying Panda manipulates his lanes really well, and it's absolutely true. He does little tricks to limit his opponent's options and then goes in for blood. I definitely wouldn't want to lane against him if we end up on opposite teams in solo queue. ~_~

Personality-wise he's almost the exact opposite of Kitty. Not only is he willing to talk to anyone about anything, but he gets easily excited. It's almost like he's a child. In a good way. C:

Lastly, Toky would have the least impact on bot lane unless he has TP. He has a very vast champion pool and can play pretty much every role really well. He also has really strong chemistry with Rexy and I don't think I really need to focus on them

since they're already good players on their own. He hardly commits to any flashy or risky plays like Panda does and he's generally really consistent. Even if he loses lane or loses the game he tends to do well on an individual basis. There's nothing particularly outstanding or amazing about his play, but he also doesn't play things out badly. If things go wrong I think I can trust Toky, Rexy, and Kitty to play well no matter what circumstances we find ourselves in.

For the most part he keeps to himself. And he reads a lot. A whole lot. A scary amount of a lot. lol But he's an English major so I guess that's to be expected. :p He's always scrolling through pages and pages of text and news articles and he's always got a bunch of books on his desk. I don't know what he does with all that knowledge, though. I feel like he could debate anyone on any topic and he would be able to win the debate. Unless he and I were to debate on music, then I would win. C:< Maybe. I don't know if he reads a lot about music. ><

And of course all that's left is Shelly. He's been dealing a lot with management and stuff so he hasn't had too big an impact on how training and practice goes. But he *does* want us to have a great deal of autonomy. He says he'll have a more active role in coaching and helping us think through strategies and map movement and map control when things calm down on his end, which I hope is soon. I don't know anything about how to get a team to work together on things or how to practice to improve on little or big things. :X

Unfortunately there aren't many surviving videos and interviews of his time on coL, so I can't find much about his playstyle in *Counter Strike* or how he and the team functioned. If eSports and technology were more advanced back then I'm sure I'd have a lot of information, but I guess I'll have to make use of the rare articles and highlights that exist scattered around the internet.

I still don't even know if I'm capable of playing at the level everyone else is playing. I think I might even be a burden to the team, and I might not even be bringing anything to the table. :c I don't know if I belong here, honestly. But I'm going to have to work at this captain thing. I have people relying on me now and I can't let them down.

THIS SHIT'S GONNA WORK! >:D

Blue

18x Feast

From page 92

Six sat comfortably in their seats amid the chatter and murmur of the busy restaurant. The clinks and tinks of silverware on dishware filled the floor from one corner of the restaurant to the other.

The waiters and waitresses, the vital lifeblood of the restaurant, constantly coursed through the narrow veins in order to fulfill their need for tips. These vassals worked to compete, outclass, and outperform their coworkers, each with the desire to secure as much in tips as possible. These few would always try to be busy to see who could best martyr themselves for the company, and yet the starving waiters would still struggle to make ends meet that month.¹

“I like this place, Shelly,” Panda said looking around, “it’s nice.”

“Yeah, it’s alright,” he replied.

“You come ‘ere often?” Rex asked.

“No. Not really.”

“Aww. You think you’ll get some sort of discount, though?”

Bewildered, Shellshock wondered “How do you mean, George?”

“Well, I was thinking,” Rex said, “maybe you could get a percentage discount, you know, for being a senior citizen.”

Snickering spread around the table and Shellshock eyed the team while a tiny smirk rested on his face. “Seriously, George,” Shellshock said, “I oughta give you a good paddlin’ one of these days. Where’d this joke even come from? I’m not *that* old.”

“You are in esports years,” Rex said.

“Oh, is that like dog years?” WildCat asked.

“I guess so. At least that’s what I think George is saying,” Shellshock assumed.

“So then, what’s the math? Like, is there a conversion formula?” WildCat continued.

A giggling Panda joined in “How would that work? If you’re, like, eighteen then you’re really young, but thirty would be really old? I don’t think there’s a formula for that. And if there is, I’m pretty sure it’s hella sketch.”

“It’s easy,” an excited WildCat said, straightening his back, “you just need to set some information first. It’s kind of like, you have to set it up so that you can, like, expand the answer by a big enough margin. So I think you have to, like, set up a formula so it can change the value by a lot depending on your starting value.”

“Ugh, I’m so bad at math,” Panda scoffed, “pliss just stop. My brain hurts already.”

Crescendo tapped WildCat on the shoulder and handed her tablet over. “Yeah, kinda like that!” he exclaimed.

“What’d she say?” Shellshock asked.

1 a clear indication of poor work ethic, and a clear example of one who does not deserve to succeed

“Oh, she wrote: ‘A’ equals age, ‘E’ equals esports age, ‘C’ equals change...I think that can be ‘M,’ actually for, like, multiplier. And then formula is A times M equals E.”

“Oh god, no, please stop,” Panda groaned, holding his arms to his ears, his head down on the table.

“Poor Panda,” Rex said dryly. “Keep reading the formula, though.”

“Kappa,” WildCat said and then proceeded with, “so then the given formula is: if age is less than or equal to twenty-five, multiplier equals fifty percent. And if age is greater than or equal to twenty-six, multiplier equals two hundred fifty percent,” he ended and returned Crescendo’s tablet.

“Now I am dead,” pouting Panda whined, “please no more.”

“So you’re...twenty-nine, right, Simon?” Rex asked.

“Hmm? Oh, me?” Shellshock asked as if woken from a daze, “Umm...no. Me? No. I’m twenty-five.”

“Okay,” Rex continued, “so thirty times two hun—”

“Seventy-five,” WildCat declared. “And following this formula I’m like nine.”

“Yup. The baby of the team,” Rex said.

“Umm...shut up,” WildCat retorted.

Panda slowly lifted his head, began carefully uncovering his ears in fear of the mathematical fallout and asked “Is it over?”

“I think so,” Shellshock said. His wandering eyes then found Tokyo, who had been sitting still and silent since they arrived at the restaurant. Occasionally Tokyo flicked upward on his phone, and except for his slightly shifting eyes he remained silent and still. In times like these his full arched lips were compressed into a thin, bitter line.

The eager waitress who had handed them menus returned and asked for orders. One by one they spoke and the waitress rapidly wrote down her commands. Her attention then turned to Tokyo who briefly looked at the team judiciously before saying “I’ll have what he’s having,” pointing at Rex. And he quickly retreated to his stillness and his silence and his phone.

“Oh shit,” Panda muttered, “I forgot you were here, Tokerino. So quiet.”

“Mhm,” Tokyo agreed.

Once the waitress took the team’s orders she sprung toward another of the many objectives she had to juggle. She merged into the stream of waiters and waitresses marching in all directions.

Shellshock asked curiously across the table, “What’re you reading, Geoff?”

After a few seconds he droned “*Grapes of Wrath* again.”

“Is this your fourth time reading through it?”

He shut his eyes, clamped them a bit, and recalled “Sixth, I think.”

“Holy shit!” Panda wailed, “You’ve read that book six times?”

“I believe so,” Tokyo said, reluctantly turning his phone off and slipping it into his pocket. “But my mathematical skills are on par with Panda’s. If Kitty had access to my memory he could deduce the exact number.”

“Oh, you were listening?” WildCat asked.

“Mhm.”

“For real,” Panda said, “I almost forgot you were here. I was like ‘What the fuck? Where’d you come from?’”

“Yeah. Tch, Geoff tends to do that,” Rex commented, “he can be a real ninja sometimes. I swear sometimes he just sits reading a book for an entire day and he could forget to eat.”

“Meh,” Tokyo dismissed the notion, “we’ve also spent entire days playing *Melee* without eating.”

“And *Civ*,” Rex returned.

“And *Command and Conquer*.”

“And *League*.”

“And *Age of Empires*.”

“Wololo.”

“Crescendo says: ‘Cutest bromance NA,’” WildCat read.

“*Dude*, totes!” Panda declared. “Oh, and yo, Shelly, you used to play *CS*, right?”

“I still do. But yeah I used to play for Collateral.”

“You got any...*cool* stories?”

Shellshock groaned scratching his head, “Unfortunately I don’t think so.”

“Aww,” Panda and WildCat cried.

“Esports wasn’t as great back...actually, come to think of it...let’s just say I’m *extremely* glad cameras on cellphones weren’t very good back then.”

“Oh shit, son. I like where this is going,” Rex said.

Shellshock covered his face with his hand, “Oh, no. Just thinking about it...haunted with regret,” he chuckled.

“Now you *have* to tell us,” Panda asserted.

“C’mon, Simon,” Rex lightly banged the table with his hand, “it’s story time.”

Crescendo showed WildCat the text on her tablet and began rhythmically banging clenched hands against table as she mouthed some words. WildCat joined in, chanting her words “Sto—ry—time! Sto—ry—time!”

“No. I’m not sharing this story.”

Panda and Rex joined the ensemble “Sto—ry—time! Sto—ry—time.”

“There isn’t gonna be a story time, guys.”

Tokyo continued reading his phone in stillness and silence as the eyes of the restaurant looked toward the commotion.

“Sto—ry—time! Sto—ry—time!”

“You’re gonna to get us kicked out. You can bang all you want, I’m not telling this story.”

They stopped and frowned at Shellshock for a bit, then Crescendo typed something else on her tablet and resumed the banging. WildCat translated and lea the vocals of “Pu—nish—ment! Pu—nish—ment! Pu—nish—ment!”

“Alright, y’know what?” Shellshock broke out. Immediately the banging and battle cries ceased, “I’ll just say one thing, *just one* thing about the story. It’s not much, but I hope it’s something. It involved way too much alcohol and poor decisions. And those two things are a horrible combination. And that’s all I’ll say.”

“Boo!” Panda jeered, “That story sucked! I want my money back.”

“You,” Shellshock pointed at Panda, “have earned yourself a paddlin’.”

“Boo!” Panda continued while trying to contain his laughter, “Story still sucks.”

The waitress brought some of their orders and notified them the rest would arrive shortly.

“But yeah, that’s what I’ll tell of the story. And...I guess this is as good a time as any: I want you guys to remember in the time we have together that I’m going to push you. I’m going to push you really hard because I want you to succeed.” He thought through his words and pressed on “I can’t play anymore, but I did for a while, and it was awesome. And I want you guys to have that opportunity as well. But it’s not gonna be easy and you five will eventually have to fight for your jobs. But until that very moment I’ll be here with you guys all the way, so let’s make the best use of our time.”

After a few seconds Panda said “Boo! That stor—nah, I’m kidding,” he snickered, “I liked it. It was p-cool.”

Crescendo showed WildCat her tablet and he read: “So no punishment?”

“Tch. Nah, let’s go easy on the old man. I’m sure his brittle bones couldn’t handle it.”

The team snickered and giggled and Shellshock again noticed the quiet Tokyo. “Hey, Geoff, how about you read a short bit. I’m sure it’ll be fun.”

“Mmm,” Tokyo grumbled, “I think neither the subject matter nor the tone are particularly...fun.”

“Okay. Then let’s just hear what Steinbeck had to say. Read a page or two.”

Tokyo kept his gaze on Shellshock’s eyes a while before asking “Are you sure?”

Crescendo and WildCat once more began banging and chanting, and the rest joined in after: “To—ky—o! To—ky—o! To—ky—o!”

His gaze shifted to the other side of the table and he said, “Alright. If you say so. But don’t blame me if you have nightmares.”

He flicked his thumb down against the screen, took a short breath, introduced the section, “*The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. Chapter five,” and began reading:

The owners of the land came onto the land, or more often a spokesman for the owners came. They came in closed cars, and they felt the dry earth with their fingers, and sometimes they drove big earth augers into the ground for soil tests. The tenants, from their sun-beaten dooryards, watched uneasily when the closed cars drove along the fields. And at last the owner men drove into the dooryards and sat in their cars to talk out of the windows. The tenant men stood beside the cars for awhile, and then squatted on their hams and found sticks with which to mark the dust.

In the open doors the women stood looking out, and behind them the children—corn-

headed children, with wide eyes, one bare foot on top of the other bare foot, and the toes working. The women and the children watched their men talking to the owner men. They were silent.

Some of the owner men were kind because they hated what they had to do, and some of them were angry because they hated to be cruel, and some of them were cold because they had long ago found that one could not be an owner unless one were cold. And all of them were caught in something larger than themselves. Some of them hated the mathematics that drove them, and some were afraid, and some worshiped the mathematics because it provided a refuge from thought and from feeling. If a bank or a finance company owned the land, the owner man said, The Bank—or the Company—needs—wants—insists—must have—as though the Bank or the Company were a monster, with thought and feeling, which had ensnared them. These last would take no responsibility for the banks or the companies because they were men and slaves, while the banks were machines and masters all at the same time. Some of the owner men were a little proud to be slaves to such cold and powerful masters. The owner men sat in the cars and explained. You know the land is poor. You've scabbled at it long enough, God knows.

The squatting tenant men nodded and wondered and drew figures in the dust, and yes, they knew, God knows. If the dust only wouldn't fly. If the top would only stay on the soil, it might not be so bad.

The owner men went on leading to their point: You know the land's getting poorer. You know what cotton does to the land; robs it, sucks all the blood out of it.

The squatters nodded—they knew, God knew. If they could only rotate the crops they might pump blood back into the land.

Well, it's too late. And the owner men explained the workings and the thinkings of the monster that was stronger than they were. A man can hold land if he can just eat and pay taxes; he can do that.

Yes, he can do that until his crops fail one day and he has to borrow money from the bank.

But—you see, a bank or a company can't do that, because those creatures don't breathe air, don't eat side-meat. They breathe profits; they eat the interest on money. If they don't get it, they die the way you die without air, without side-meat. It is a sad thing, but it is so. It is just so.

The squatting men raised their eyes to understand. Can't we just hang on? Maybe the next year will be a good year. God knows how much cotton next year. And with all the wars—God knows what price cotton will bring. Don't they make explosives out of cotton? And uniforms? Get enough wars and cotton'll hit the ceiling. Next year, maybe. They looked up questioningly.

We can't depend on it. The bank—the monster has to have profits all the time. It can't wait. It'll die. No, taxes go on. When the monster stops growing, it dies. It can't stay one size.

Soft fingers began to tap the sill of the car window, and hard fingers tightened on the restless drawing sticks. In the doorways of the sun-beaten tenant houses, women sighed and then shifted feet so that the one that had been down was now on top, and the toes working. Dogs came sniffing near the owner cars and wetted on all four tires one after another. And chickens lay in the sunny dust and fluffed their feathers to get the cleansing dust down to the skin. In the little sties the pigs grunted inquiringly over the muddy remnants of the slops.

The squatting men looked down again. What do you want us to do? We can't take less share of the crop—we're half starved now. The kids are hungry all the time. We got no clothes, torn

an' ragged. If all the neighbors weren't the same, we'd be ashamed to go to meeting.

And at last the owner men came to the point. The tenant system won't work any more. One man on a tractor can take the place of twelve or fourteen families. Pay him a wage and take all the crop. We have to do it. We don't like to do it. But the monster's sick. Something's happened to the monster.

The waitress who had been standing nearby delivered the remaining food.

WildCat, Panda, and Crescendo clapped lightly, if only to counter balance all the table banging they had done.

"Isn't history awesome?" Rex asked.

"Enjoy your nightmares," Tokyo said.

"It was a good reading, Geoff. You should read aloud more often," Shellshock suggested. "Maybe even become a teacher. Or...say...a coach?"

"Heh. Unlikely."

"Well regardless, dig in guys," Shellshock urged the team and "before the monster gets it," he joked.

Six sat and ate comfortably in their seats amid the chatter and murmur of the busy restaurant, and the clinks and tinks of silverware on dishware filled the floor from one corner of the restaurant to the other.

H

From page 112

Shellshock led Tokyo to the office, as the team had dubbed it. He rolled a spare chair toward Tokyo, and with no emphasis in his voice commanded “Have a seat.”

In his slow and intentional manner Tokyo inched toward the seat, pulling it to a spot between the two desks cluttered into the small room. They then sat in silence a few seconds, Shellshock carefully inhaling and exhaling a big breath.

“So, what’s on your mind, Geoff?”

Aside from some occasional blinking Tokyo sat in silence staring at nothing in particular with, his face resting with no expression in particular.¹ After some time he squinted for half a second before finally replying, “A lot of things.” He turned his face toward Shellshock and met his eyes, “What did you hear?”

“I think I heard the majority of it. Well, everyone did. It was pretty loud,” Shellshock paused, his eyes peering at the wall for the right words, “...and pretty loaded. I...think I know what you’re going through...but I can’t be completely certain.”

He continued at a slower pace, “If you...if you want to vent, or...” he slightly grimaced and gestured with his hands to let the words flow, “whatever you want to say, just tell me. Tell me anything...something, give me...give me something I can use to understand how I can approach this so that we can truck through it.”

This time Tokyo responded quickly, “Um...it’s simple, really. I just got the shit end of the stick during ‘the best years of my life.’ And in case you can’t tell,” he continued in his usual tone, “they were a real fucking blast. It’s just,” he sighed long and loudly, leaning his head as far back as it could reach against the chair while his hand massaged his forehead, “it’s just so fucking frustrating,” without a tone of anger in his voice, “doing my hardest and even that’s not enough.”

“Do you and George discuss this at all?”

“Um...not really, no. But he’s in a similar spot,” Tokyo returned to a normal sitting position, “different institution but same basic problem.” He again let out a loud sigh, this one more forced than the last. “Fuckin’ baby boomers, dude. They had jobs, cars, houses, education...and to top it all off their dollar was stronger than ours is,” he rambled it all with no shift in his voice, “and now...now they’ve just left us for dead.”

“I don’t even know what anyone could possibly do. Working forty hours a day and twelve days a week would be insufficient compared to what they had. And...and it’s all completely infuriating.” He took a pen out of his pocket, placed it between his lips and held it there as he let out a long breath.

“Now people are angry at me because I did ‘what I was supposed to do’ to be successful and to open doors for myself and get opportunities. But none of that happened. Not to anyone who’s graduated in the past couple of years. And we’re in hella debt with no real way out.”

1 Tokyo noticed the titles of several books on the desk, books on coding and leadership and mental health and business, dozens of slips of paper sticking out from various pages.

Tokyo leaned back on the chair, slightly chewing on the pen, “I don’t know what you can do with that, Simon. I mean, you’re not a baby boomer are you? What year were you born?”

“Eighty-s—”

“Seventeen seventy-six, right?”

Shellshock chuckled at the ruse “Yeah, I launched esports at the same time America was born, *way* before the Koreans.”

They sat in silence, eyes fixed on one particular spot as they waited for thoughts to complete and words to articulate. Tokyo concluded, “But yeah, I dunno. I just...I just got dealt a shitty hand. And it depreciates in value every second. Even if the exact same hand was golden a few decades ago...So yeah, I guess that’s partially what’s on my mind.”

Shellshock took it in and planned his words for a moment. “Well, you certainly have very valid reasons to be frustrated, Geoff. This is...y’know, this is a generational problem. I mean, you obviously know your history and you know how to connect the dots between the past and how they affect the present. And yeah, it definitely sucks, I completely see eye to eye with you on that.”

Shellshock leaned forward in his chair and as he fished his thoughts he held the knuckle of his index finger against his lips. When he finally reeled in his words his hands again gestured, “When things have gotten tough, I endured and pushed through, and I suspect you’re the same way, Geoff. Sometimes it’s hard. Sometimes...life is *relentless*...and it never lets you catch your breath. Sometimes, y’know, it’s like the universe lines up perfectly just to be a pain in the ass to you specifically, and it’s rough.”

“And then...eventually comes the time to fight. You hold your chin up, face the problem and say ‘No, nuh-uh, it’s not this easy to hold me down.’ At this point, you fight it, no matter how hard it is, no matter hard it’s *going* to get, Geoff. You partner with the people around you...and we *do not* lose. And we keep going...until we *win*. There is no quitting from this, there is no stopping, there’s no resting from this, Geoff, because the *moment* you *think* of giving up is when the other side wins. You took some time to think through the problem, and now it’s go-time.”

“It’s now time for you to step up. And I *know* you can do it, Geoff. I know you’re not a loser. I know you’ve solved plenty of problems in the past, and this is just another one you have to solve. I *get* that this one sucks, and I *get* that it’s hard. But you’re no kid, Geoff, so you know that sometimes life throws problems at you that suck, and that are hard, and it’s *your job* to solve them anyway.”

“It is your job to say ‘Yeah, this sucks, and it’s hard, but I’m gonna march through it and I’m going to get this done.’ And that’s your motto now. So...what’re you gonna do? What’re you—are you going to step it up? I think you *are*. I think you’re gonna say ‘Yeah, yeah it’s hard, but you know what? *Fuck* losing,’ because that’s not what we do. We win. And we keep going *until* we win. You’re a competitor, Geoff, and you’ve got

plenty of reason and you've got plenty of know-how and I know for a *fact* that you've got plenty of fight in you to beat this thing."

Shellshock paused a bit and went on "So yeah, it sucks. So what? That hasn't stopped you in the past. And that's not gonna stop you now. Here's adversity. You got more than your share, Geoff. But not more than you can handle."

"No, dude," Tokyo muttered, "I don't really have much reason or know-how or fight for this. I'm just some dumb kid who was educated in a country that would rather cut education funds and give it all to defense. But hey, I guess that just means America knows the best defense is a good offense."

"You're not dumb at all, Geoff. I know you spend a great deal of time reading everything you can get your hands on. You're not dumb at all. As a matter of fact, if you think you're dumb, let me tell you this: you're a lot better than most people who'd rather not acknowledge these problems exist. And you're in a *far* better position than people who couldn't begin to *comprehend* the problem."

"And I know you'd really rather not talk, and I'm fine with that so long as it gets the job done. But that game you just played; you probably talked more with the team in those couple of minutes than you have the past month we've been together. I *know* you can lead, Geoff. I know you can think through problems. It's like you said: gotta keep your eye on the big picture. I really wish you came out of your shell more."

"So here's what I'm gonna want you to do: take a blank piece of paper, count up *everything* you owe, write that number down in huge numbers, and hang it up on the wall above your monitors. And you *look* at that number. And you *memorize* it. And you *work you ass off* to bring it down to zero. You want in on the LCS, right, Geoff? You *stare* at the number every day and do *everything* in your power to get there. You've got four teammates. You've got a coaching staff. So let's make it."

Tokyo groaned, "I think I'm just too pessimistic. And maybe just a tad too cynical. But I don't think the number thing's gonna work."

Shellshock's face lit up. "Alright then. I know we were joking when I had you carry up Jason's bags and you said you didn't like unannounced job description changes. So here's an announced change to your job description: You're not allowed to be pessimistic. And you're going to work every day, every hour, every second if you have to, to make it to the LCS. Do you agree to these terms?"

Tokyo thought through the words, let out a sigh and "Okay. Sure thing, Coach."

"Alright. So...let's just relax the rest of the day. No more League today. And no League tomorrow. Tomorrow we'll have a walk around the city and just chill for a bit."

"Mhm."

"What are you planning on doing the rest of the night?"

"Um. I dunno. There's some anime I've been meaning to watch. And some games on Steam I still need to play through. Might just do that."

"Good. I'm paying you to relax. Have fun, Geoff. And good job out there today. Keep up the good work."

22x

Firestorm Eyes

From page 112

November 1, 2016

He looks out onto the world with firestorm eyes.

Earlier today we scrimmed for the first time against a professional team. And we got messed up. In both of our first games against col. we lost everywhere. Every lane lost, we lost jungle control, vision control, we lost pretty much every dragon, and we couldn't really do anything.

But then Tokyo finally answered his phone. And he yelled at whoever it was. And then we played the third game. And even though it was a best of three and col. already won, they were willing to give us more practice time.

And col. didn't stand a FUCKING CHANCE that game. Tokyo went full tryhard and became shotcaller for a game. He and Rexy *dictated* that game. They made the right calls and we won by a landslide. It wasn't even a fair game.

Something about Tokyo tells me he's been through a lot of pain, if that phone call revealed anything to me. And not only is he hiding it, but he's damn good at hiding it. I'd ask him about this but I imagine he would just brush it off and say whatever boring thing he can think of to prevent me from asking further questions.

Of everyone on the team he's the most serious. He may be joking around with everyone all the time but no matter how laid back he acts he's still always thinking about the game, he's still always thinking about ways to improve and ways to win.

And though he usually wears that stoic, apathetic look on his face, and although he always acts bored and lousy and has a very nonchalant tone, he was pissed after that phone call. And he NEVER gets pissed. He never even LOOKS pissed. But something about that call triggered some fire in him.

I think I've gotten a better understanding of who he is as a person and why he plays the way he does and why he does the things he does. He just sort of wants to be able to do everything, and he also wants to know everything. Of everything I know about him he doesn't seem to "specialize" in any one thing. He plays a lot of different kinds of games, listens to a lot of different kind of music, reads a lot of different things, and so on.

Hell, even thinking back to when I first got here, he was very good at damn near every character in *Smash Bros*. And that's no different in *League*. He can play every champion really well. Maybe he wouldn't be able to play every champion at a professional level, but I'm certain he could hold his own against top players in every position. He's always able to play whatever the team needs in Solo Queue, and he generally does well. I think he might even be a far better Support player than I could ever be. Although I haven't seen him play Support much, I know for a fact that he's better than I am at Jungle and Mid.

I'm thinking he's a natural born leader. He's a leader and he looks out onto the world with firestorm eyes. There's something inside him that gives him this insatiable hunger for LCS. I think that although he may not show his enthusiasm or excitement for many things, he's sure as fucking hell going to work his ass off and

make the necessary sacrifices and do everything he can to achieve his goal.

Something about how he plays till the end and how he's always looking for solutions tells me he wants to keep playing. When I watch him play I see someone who doesn't want to go back to where he came from, and I see someone who wants so hard to go somewhere new with League. I don't even think I have anything like that to push ME, and to drive ME, and to keep me from falling behind on practice and everything.

I need to see what makes his fire burn, what it is that makes him a competitor, and I need to make sure we can use it to get to LCS.

He looks out onto the world with firestorm eyes.

Crescendo

29x

Beyond Earth

From page 149

Scattered sparks shone in the dark, distant sky.

For miles and miles and miles in every direction and toward every horizon, clusters and clumps of tiny lights sparkled far from reach in the dead silent night.

“Are any of these lights planets?” the young boy asked, his eyes still fixed above.

“I don’t know. Maybe,” a voice replied from the darkness.

“How can people tell which ones are planets?”

“Well, scientists use telescopes to look very far away.”

“And are there people on other planets?”

“We don’t know, son. We can’t tell.”

Together they gazed skyward at the vast, black canvas in awe and silence as a cool breeze crept along.

“Why can’t we see this many stars from home?”

“There are too many lights in the city to see this many stars, son. All of the lights in the city get in the way, they keep us from clearly seeing far away things. If we only pay attention to what’s directly in front of us we might forget the distant things.”

Fireworks flew in all directions within the young boy’s mind, and after more moments of silence he asked “How come we don’t know a lot of about space, dad?”

“We only recently made the technology that allowed us to explore space. I was your age when people first landed on the moon.”

“Was that a long time ago?” the young boy’s curiosity continued.

The voice in the darkness laughed warmly. “About twenty years ago.”

The boy munched on that number a while. He thought and thought and thought, but could not comprehend the idea of twenty years. He continued on with his curiosity “Why don’t people go to other planets?”

“It takes a lot of time to do that. And a lot of energy. Going to the moon was a big deal.” He paused to think a bit and said “It’s like the astronaut said when he landed: ‘That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.’”

“What if I want to go to space, dad? Can I jump really, really hard and go explore?”

“No, it doesn’t work that way, Simon. Earth’s gravity will just pull and keep you on the ground. It’ll keep you locked in the earth.”

“Oh,” he said disappointed. “Then how do astronauts do it?”

“They use rockets. Huge rockets with powerful engines and thrusters and all kinds of things. They fill the rockets with raw energy that roars and shakes the ground, they resist gravity and fight against it and finally go to space. Does that make sense?”

“Yes,” he said quietly. But he didn’t understand.

He cried silently in the darkness.

“Can I go to space when I grow up, dad?”

“Of course. You can do anything you want if you work for it. If you want to go to space you can. But it’s going to be a lot of work to explore the final frontier.”

He chewed on the idea silently. “What if they already find everything before I grow up? What if there’s nothing left for me to explore?”

“The world’s a big place, Simon. I’m sure there’ll be something for you to explore.”

“Are you sure?”

“One hundred percent sure.”

“Okay.”

They returned their attention to the dark unknown in silence. He imagined the shaking ground and the raw energy. But what did a shaking ground *feel* like? What did raw energy *look* like?

He thought about how much time it took for twenty years to pass. But he had only just turned five. It would take forever to reach twenty. But what did it *feel* like?

In darkness they gazed at the stars.

In silence the rays of starlight gazed back.

30x

No More Heroes

From page 154

A silent classroom faced forward, eyes on the instructor. Timid, shimmering eyes were glued forward with attention awaiting direction and guidance.

"Anyone have any ideas?" the teachers asked loudly and clearly. He surveyed the classroom, looking students in the eyes hoping one would readily reply with an answer, or an educated guess, anything that would assure him that his students were learning and retaining information.

His eyes reached the back of the room, two students' faces were hidden by books, their elbows perched upon the desk, books held in their hands.

The teacher's face turned stern and he began walking to the back. All eyes locked onto and followed the teacher. "George, Geoffrey," he said sharply, "please don't do work for other classes while I'm lecturing."

He held out his hand and "Give me the books," he demanded.

Both students continued reading and ignored the man standing before them. One student spoke up in a monotonous, lazy tone, eyes still on the book, "This isn't for another class." Their desks were bare and empty, while all other students had notebooks and handouts spread across the limited desk space.

"C'mon, guys. Hand 'em over. Don't make me ask you again," the teacher persisted.

"*Done*," said the other student with an ounce of victory in his voice. He closed his book and turned to face the first student, a smug smile resting on his face.

The first student groaned, "You're not even reading it, dude," he accused, "you're lying so hard."

"I'm *teaching* a class here, guys," the teacher insisted, the patience in his voice gone, "now *give me* the books."

"Damn. Teachers takin' books away from us," the second student told the class as he handed his book over, "only in America, right?"

The first student half-mumbled bitterly as he handed his book to the teacher. "*Thank you*," the teacher said authoritatively and took one good look in their eyes before going to the front of the classroom again.

"*Now*," the teacher resumed, "George, Geoffrey, would one of you like to enlighten the class: What did the Roosevelt Corollary do for the United States?"

"Tch, that's easy, Teach," the second student replied, "Roosevelt essentially put into practice a system where he could brandish his big stick at Europe," soft snickers echoed throughout the class, "and at the same time he could improve American imperialism in South America, which would in turn provide further growth for American corporations who were...*competing* with the local companies."

"Yes, exactly," the wide-eyed, ecstatic teacher agreed. "So the point of it is," he went on, "at this point in time the US was in a pretty perfect position to apply its

international policing power in the West. Whether or not for good or ill intention depends on who you ask, however.”

A loud bell rang and instantly the students began shuffling their pens and papers and closing their books and placing everything in their bags. The teacher spoke quickly and loudly before losing his chance to do so “For next week read the next two chapters. Other than that have a good weekend.”

A stream of students rushed toward the door, and the clamor of weekend activities and laughter rang from the group. They congested the doorway, too many trying to pass through simultaneously. In the back of the class the two students sat in the same position as before, this time a new book in their hands.

As the class emptied the teacher gazed silently at the two students in the back. After staring a while he gathered his books and his papers as well as the two books he had confiscated from the students. He neared the door and called out “George, Geoffrey, come to my office.”

Without a word and without moving their eyes from the page they stood up, slung their bags onto their shoulders, and with eyes still stuck to the pages followed the teacher.

He led them down a hallway, through some doorways, up some stairs, all while walking through crowded hallways of students yelling loudly, some speaking softly, most grouped in circles of friends. Eventually he arrived the office, both students entering after. At the edges of the room were shelves filled with books and papers and coffee mugs. In two corners of the rooms were desks and each had a computer, and a clattering of papers and folders.

The teacher sat at his table and told the students to pull up one of the chairs leaning against the wall.

“Okay, guys, you can stop pretending you’re reading now,” he told them. They continued nonetheless. He sat in his chair looking at both students, wondering many things. Then he picked up the books he had taken from them and read aloud “Plato, *The Republic*.”

He peeked in their direction looking for signs of life, but the students continued reading silently. He looked at their new books and read aloud “*Nineteen Eight-Four*,” and yet again they did not react.

“So,” he spoke up, “you’re not reading *The Republic* for a class. Why are you reading then?”

“Tch. why not?” one of them asked.

“*Why not?*” the teacher repeated. “No one reads stuff without a reason, George. And no high school student reads *The Republic* for fun. So what are *you two* reading it for?”

The other student looked at the teacher a second, then both students looked at each other a second, and they finally closed their books.

“Why are we reading *The Republic*, George?”

“Well, it can’t be for fun, Geoff. Teach just said so. You heard ‘im, ‘No high school student reads this for fun.”

“*Really?* So then it’s impossible for such a thing to occur, George?”

“I *do* think that was the implication, Geoff.”

“You know what I meant, guys,” the teacher broke in. “You two should be focusing on the class when I’m lecturing. You’re here to learn and Plato has nothing to do with US History.”

“*Fantastic* claim, Teach.”

“Philosophy has *nothing* to do with US History, says the man.”

“Would you mind, Teach, tellin’ us what value History provides?”

The teacher held a hand to his forehead “Guys, you can’t just read *The Republic*, try to apply the Socratic Method, and immediately afterwards gain a new perspective on things.”

“And why not?” Rex asked extending his arms outward.

The teacher let out an irritated sigh and went on “You can’t just read a dialogue and automatically think you can replicate what they’re doing. It takes many, many years of philosophical thinking to do what they’re doing.”

“So if we’re *not* practicin’ our philosophy right now,” Rex asked, “then what *are* we doing? School ain’t gonna teach it to us.”

“Maybe he hasn’t read *Self-Reliance* either,” Tokyo thought.

“*Look*, guys,” the teacher said with some concern in his voice, “you two should stay in school no matter what. You’re both really smart and your papers definitely show it. Don’t go thinking that just because you can read books on your own time means other people will care. No one will listen if you don’t have a degree to back it up.”

He persisted in his speech, “You two should really focus more on your school work. You’ll get better grades than you’re already getting and it’ll help you get into better colleges.”

“Dude,” Tokyo broke in with a lazy, bored voice, “we don’t even have to try and we already get the highest grades in the class. Honestly, we don’t have any competition. What’s the point of having an Advanced History course when everyone’s a moron who can’t answer a simple question?”

“Geoffrey, don’t call your classmates morons,” the teacher said.

Rex snickered between the two.

“But they *are*. They’re fucking idiots whose primary concerns are sex and alcohol. The two *most abundant* things on the planet.”

The door opened and closed, and in walked in another teacher who quickly greeted them “Hey guys, how’s it going?”

“Yo, what up, Teach?” Rex asked.

“I never figured you two would come in for extra help.”

“Nah, son,” Rex replied, “Gren’s just mad we were readin’ *The Republic* in class.”

“He’s also kind of mad I called the rest of the class morons,” Tokyo added.

“Seriously, Geoff, don’t call them morons,” Gren insisted. He turned to the other teacher “And don’t encourage them, Paul. They’re just trouble makers.”

“*Trouble makers?*” the second teacher asked surprised. “*These two?*”

“You heard ‘im, Winters. We’re trouble makers,” Rex said.

Gren continued with his point “They’ll say the opposite thing and argue just for the sake of arguing.”

“Tch. Man, we’re just practicin’ our philosophy,” Rex said.

“Not in my class, guys. You’re there to learn. So just listen to the material and contribute to class without turning everything into philosophy and without referring to other esoteric essays that have nothing to do with the curriculum. And next time hand over the books when I ask you. Don’t make me have to ask you more than once.”

“Why?” Tokyo asked.

“I’m the teacher and you’re supposed to listen to me,” Gren said.

“What a shitty reason,” Tokyo droned. “Because I said so’ is something you tell a child. Or if you’re a high school teacher that’s something you tell an obedient moron.”

Winters sat in his corner watching the interaction and attempting to withhold and suppress laughter.

“Okay, fine, I get it,” Gren relented “you’re not morons like everyone else. But trust me, everyone thinks they’re smarter than everyone else. You two are no different.”

“Ha!” Rex burst out, “*Way* off, Gren. Like Socrates, Geoff and I a’ready accept that the only thing we know is that we know nothing.”

“Okay, fine, but either way please take this into consideration: college is going to open a lot of doors for you guys. You are both bound by *nothing* and you’ve got the potential to do *anything*. All the world is at your fingertips but you’ve got to do all the steps to get there first.”

“Why should we?” Tokyo asked.

“Because it’s what you’re *supposed* to do, guys! That’s just the way the real world works. It’s non-negotiable. Life is meritocracy.”

“Hang on...we’re currently *not* in the real world?” Tokyo asked, slightly tilting his head. “Are you saying that school is fake and useless and it’s not until after one finishes school that the ‘real world’ begins? Are students’ hardships therefore ‘invalid’ because they’re not in this ‘real world’ of yours?”

“No, Geoffrey, you’re misconstruing my words,” Gren said.

“*Intentionally*,” Rex giggled.

Gren shook his head, then turned to Winters and with impatience in his voice said “You can jump in anytime, Paul.”

“No, it’s fine,” Winters said with a wide smirk on his face, “everything looks under control, Sean.”

“Yo, Gren, can we have our *Republic* back?” Tokyo asked in the process of standing up. He stretched his arms and back to loosen the tightness and rigidity of his muscles and bones. “I wanna go home and play some video games.”

Gren reached for the books and began to hand them back, “Only if you promise to read the next two chapters of the textbook first.”

“We already read up to the assassination of Franz Ferdinand,” Tokyo said lazily.

“Class is too slow, Gren,” Rex added, “you’re holdin’ us back, man.”

“We should finish up to World War II this weekend,” Tokyo said holding his hand out for his book.

Reluctantly Gren returned their books, then asked “Why do you waste your time with video games when you could be doing more important things in school?”

“They’re fun, Teach,” Rex said, “just like philosophy and history and science and math.”

“And literature,” Tokyo threw as he approached the door. “Anyway, see ya, Winters,” he waved.

“Have a good weekend guys,” Winters replied.

“You *could* be more fun in class, y’know, Gren,” Rex said. He walked backwards for the door and continued, “You could take notes from Winters here. Or maybe watch some George Carlin stand up comedy. They’re both fun,” he suggested at last leaving the room.

Gren turned to Winters. “I don’t get it. I try to be fair with them but they’ll disagree with me over everything. How come they like you, Paul?”

“I don’t know,” Winters replied. “Let me ask you, do you treat them like students or like people?”

“I treat them like *both*, of course,” Gren said matter-of-factly.

“Doesn’t look that way, Sean. I tend to entertain their odd discussions, whether in the middle of class or after class. Sometimes they take over the lecture in a completely different direction than I had planned, but I let them have their fun. They seem to respond positively to that, and we seem to have a very mutual respect for one another as a result.”

Gren groaned “You *really* shouldn’t encourage them, Paul. I don’t think you should let students bring upheaval to the classroom, that won’t promote learning.”

A small smirk formed on Winters’ face. “Just the other day the class finished reading *Catcher in the Rye*. Throughout our time reading it everyone seemed to really like Holden and they felt they could connect with him and his sense of identity. But not Geoff, no. He said, and I quote, ‘Holden Caulfield’s a little bitch who neglects his own agency.’ Then he said something along the lines of if he weren’t already cynical he would probably love the book and the character. But he, *and George*, really aren’t like the rest of their classmates.”

“Why would you let them curse in class, Paul? You shouldn’t let those two break the rules so much.”

“That’s another thing, Sean,” Winters continued, “some time afterward we were talking about goals after college, but Geoff said, his words verbatim: ‘We live in a world with no more heroes.’ He argued that everyone seems to be striving for the exact same

goal, and he asked why everyone plays life safe. To me it seems *obvious* that these are the things we *should* strive for. But he certainly wasn't convinced."

"Is there a point to this, Paul?" Gren asked, impatience again leaking from his voice.

"The point is," Winters went on, "I thought about what he could possibly mean about living in a world with no more heroes, and I don't think I get it. Maybe I'm not supposed to. Maybe their world-view is vastly different from my own that I'll never understand. But what I *can* tell is that George and Geoff don't care about rules.

"You and I, Sean, like most people, we just follow through on what we're supposed to do and what's expected of us. We play life safe. We go to college, get a job, come to work every day, and we don't take risks. We, like most people, grab what we can get and *cling* to it with dear life and we run with it, and we hope we never lose what we have.

"But they're not like that at all. They don't care about playing this safely. They aspire for much more than we do, and they are not easily satisfied. On the other hand they *embrace* risks, maybe because they see no one else doing so. They're both capable of so much more than every other student here. And while I agree with you that they *are* a bit rough with their language and a bit arrogant with their ideas, I simply cannot wait to see what they're going to accomplish and who they're going to be in five or ten years' time."

Gren sighed angrily, "You wanna bet on that? Twenty bucks says in ten years they're working a regular job, or worse, high school teachers teaching 'obedient morons.'"

Winters thought on it a bit, then he shook Gren's hand. "This sounds fun. I'll take you on, Sean."

"Just you wait, Paul. In ten years I'll be twenty bucks richer."

Winters smiled. "We'll see."

31x

Lines of Code

From page 170

“Four, five,” a girl counted loudly and clearly. She leaned up close against the wall and held her arm over her eyes. “Six, seven,” she continued, one foot on top of the other, her toes wiggling.

The boy scuttled across the apartment from room to room as quickly and quietly as he could, eyes peeled for dark, unexplored nooks and crannies. A cool breeze snuck in through the tiniest space between the walls and window.

“Eight, nine,” the girl’s voice rang, bouncing off the walls.

In a room furthest away from the girl, the boy frantically eyed around and spotted a closet in the corner of a bedroom.

“Ready or not, here I come!” the girl at the opposite end of the apartment loudly announced.

He squeezed into the cluttered closet as well as he could and eventually managed to shut the door. He waited silently in the warmth and darkness of the closet.

The girl tip-toed through the apartment, sneaking and creeping from one hiding spot to another. As she checked each crevice and cleared the living room she shivered slightly to the cool wind slipping in through the window.

In the closet the boy’s eyes adjusted to the dark before he realized a sliver of light snuck in between the floor and the door. He shuffled his feet for comfortable lodging, toes wiggling, and felt one of his feet tap against a cool surface.

The girl entered the bedroom and carefully inspected every inch. Aloud she warned “I know you’re here, George. Come out, come out wherever you are.” After uttering the words the closet door in the corner of the room opened. The boy stepped out backwards, his eyes focused toward the floor of the closet.

“I found you, I found you!” the girl exclaimed running over to him. She clung to his arm and tugged “You’re it, you’re it. My turn to hide now.”

The boy got down on one knee and more closely inspected what he had felt in the closet. Beneath a dusty blanket he could make out a long, beige box sitting at the foot of the closet. He felt it lightly with his hand and the plastic felt cool, as if it had absorbed the air.

“Close your eyes and start counting, George,” the younger girl insisted still pulling at his arm.

Ignoring her presence he hopped up and dashed out of the room, the girl following directly after. Sunlight hit the blanket draped over the beige box and the sun’s rays the dust rose and glided and slowly shifted downward.

The boy, the girl, and their mother returned to the closet. They stood just outside the door looking in at the discovery. “Oh!” mother quipped pleasantly surprised. “I forgot I had this in here.”

“What is it?” the boy asked.

“It’s a computer, George. A friend gave it to me a few years ago when they didn’t need it anymore.”

The little girl, holding her mother’s hand, looked up curiously and asked “What’s a computer, mama?”

“It’s something people use to do work. And I think this one can play games too.”

The boy lit up with marvel and wonder in his eyes and instantly asked “You mean it can play games like a Gameboy?”

“A little bit like that,” she said, “but this computer is older than Gameboy.”

The excitement in his face died away, his shoulders dropping down as well.

They pulled the machine out of the darkness, and with it a beige, cubical television. In a group effort the three hauled them to the living room and rested it on the floor near some outlets.

They wiped away the dust and dirt that had accumulated and stuck itself onto the bulky boxes. On the back of the machines, black cables connected from one box to the other. But there were more parts, mother said. The little girl ran back to the closet and returned hugging an even smaller part, also the same beige color.

“And this is a keyboard,” she said, “it’s how you use the computer.” The numbers on the top ran from one to nine, then zero at the end. But the letters did not run from A to B to C all the way to Z, instead they were placed in a strange order that made no sense.

Once everything was properly connected they sat around the computer and turned it on, flipping a red switch on the side of the machine. After a short delay and with the screen still black the computer beeped loudly.

The little girl jumped and recoiled to the loud sounds, instinctively retreating to her mother’s side. The boy gazed in amazement.

From within the container came violent sounds of whirring and spinning and sputtering. The boy listened intently for every rough sound emitting from the breathing, living, machine.

Soon a green block began blinking on the top-left corner of the screen. The loud whirring and breathing had quieted, but the green, blinking box remained on the screen.

“Hmm,” mother mused to herself, “I think I remember them writing down how to do things.” She returned to the closet and shuffled around some bags.

Meanwhile the boy held his face up close to the screen, to the green, blinking block. As he paid closer attention he could see the block was made of many, many small green dots. While gazing intently into the cluster of tiny dots in the dark void his hand pressed down on the keyboard, the computer beeped, and the screen instantly displayed what he had done.

KLP

?SYNTAX ERROR

He swiftly pulled away from the keyboard as if he became aware that it was burning his hand, but then just as quickly he was compelled to look back at the screen. Once more he pulled his close to the text and he saw that every word was made up of the exact same kind of dots. No matter what the letter looked like or what the word said, everything was made of the same dots.

Mother returned with a plastic bag, and laughing she pulled him away from the screen, "Don't do that, George. You'll hurt your eyes."

She pulled out a sheet of paper from the plastic bag, and with it some black squares with a circle in the middle of the square. "So I think these are called floppy disks."

He grabbed one and held it in his hands. The large square was as light and flimsy as paper, and just as the dots on the screen looked the same all the disks looked the same.

Mother dug through the bag again and pulled out another disk. "I think this one is a game." She slipped the disk into a small slip on the front panel of the computer as her eyes continued reading from the page.

"And now we turned it off," she said flipping the switch, "and back on again." The screen went black and again the machine began with a loud beep and whirring and sputtering.

Once more the screen took a while to come alive but this time big letters appeared. He slowly read the letters one by one and eventually read the word: Tetris. Press Space to Start.

"I think for this game you have to make everything fall in place," mother said. She pressed the long button on the bottom of the keyboard and the game began. On the top of the screen there was a big "L." It slowly moved down toward the line on the bottom of the screen. She pressed the down arrow on the keyboard and the shape fell faster. When it finally hit the line another piece appeared from the top. This time a box. Eventually after a few more pieces and after flipping and moving them around as they fell she filled up a row and the row disappeared.

"It gets faster the better you play. But if you reach the top you lose. Now you try," she urged.

The boy carefully touched one of the buttons on the keyboard and it clacked as he pressed down on it. The computer instantly did what he commanded and he repeated the process as more and more pieces fell down. He kept his eyes on the screen and only parted ways when he peered down onto the keyboard.

Day faded into night and the color in the sky died away. He remained in front of the screen unaware of hunger or weariness. And a love was formed that day.

32x

Ward of the State

From page 175

Rain rattled and tapped lightly against the window above the bed. A cacophony of sharp chirps pierced through the air, a high pitched melody that emerged from the treeline. Along the roads, tires slushed against the asphalt accompanied by the vibration of engines. Lightning flashed in the distance and for a second lit the sky; after thunder struck some distant grounds, the clouds groaned and rumbled.

The sing-song chirping, from quiet tones, grew louder, then shrank back into subtlety and the girl laying in her bed awoke to the vibrations in the air. Staring at the window intently she watched each droplet of rain splash against the glass then trickle down. She matched each droplet of rain to the corresponding snap that reached her ears. Together each drop created the restless pelting against the window and the sprinkling against the roads outdoors.

When she grew bored of the window, she then sluggishly shifted toward the edge of the bed and slipped her hand between the mattress and the wooden bedframe. From the nook she procured a clunky, plastic box and a pair of flimsy headphones attached via a black cable. She placed the headphones comfortably on her head so that the soft, foam cushioning rested on her ears.

Little light entered the window and she fumbled with the device in her hands until at last she pressed the correct button. Instantly the two reels inside the box spun and rough sounds within the device traveled through the cables and spilled into her ears.

The gritty sounds of an electronic guitar played, and there too were the beats of a drum and the clashing of cymbals. The voice of a man also rang: "If ya wanna be a star of stage and screen, Look out it's rough and mean, It's a long way to the top if you wanna rock 'n' roll."

Each sound was a pleasant thing on its own, every beat of the drum and strum of the guitar seemed arranged and performed to perfection. But there were also darker, quieter elements hidden beneath the louder, more obvious counterparts. These sounds too, though difficult to listen to, played their part in defining the whole. Together the instruments created an enchanting harmony and melody as seemingly natural and divine as the act of breathing.

She lay in bed listening to music for some time, throughout which a joyous tingling shook within every cell of her body. As if by instinct her fingers tapped along on the mattress. Absent of thought, her fingers danced and her feet felt the need to join in on the movement as well. Whenever in the company of music her thoughts always seemed far brighter and clearer than ever.

After some time the headphones hissed and popped, and the music ceased completely. She brought the music box closer to her eyes and noticed the small light indicating power had turned off. She fumbled with the buttons aimlessly and got it

playing again, but soon after the music continued the headphones yet again hissed and popped dead. In the absence of music the light in the room dimmed as the rattling rain filled the air.

She removed the headphones from place and a sharp pain shot out from the top of her head. She rubbed the spot on her head to alleviate the itch left behind, and noticed that the metallic bits of the headphones had bitten down onto a few strands of hair. It was always a bothersome and unavoidable thing whenever those metallic pieces decided to clamp down and never let go.

The girl lay in bed a while longer and in silence watched drops of rain slither slowly down the window pane. Before long she sluggishly pulled herself up against gravity's will and with arms stretched upward yawned inaudibly.

Without hesitation she began dressing with the clothes that she had neatly laid out on her desk. Once dressed and ready for the day, she returned to the cassette player, removed the batteries from the back and hid the device back in its place.

She opened the door of her room and peeked out in one direction of a long corridor, then looked the other. The doors of all other rooms were shut and no one was in sight, nor was there indication that anyone else was moving about at this early hour.

At one end of the hallway there was a large window, and as in her room only some light managed to successfully fight its way indoors. At the other end were the flight of stairs leading up and down. She left the confines of her room quietly closing the door, and she slowly prowled across the carpeted floor on the tips of her toes. Her pocket swayed to the weight of the cylindrical batteries and from time to time they collided, producing a shallow clunk.

At the foot of the flight of stairs three open doorways spewed light into the narrow corridors of the home. The opening to her left led to the dining hall, ahead was the main entrance, and to her right there was a large room with many worn furnishings. But some days prior she had stumbled across a room where only adults were allowed, a room named the Study Hall buried further inside the house. She had caught a glimpse of something in that room and it had piqued her interest.

"I *knew* it was you, Sonia!" a girl's voice rang from the stairs. Floor boards creaked behind her and the floor shook to a flurry of rapid footsteps. A trio of girls approached Sonia with confident strides. They walked forward shoulder to shoulder, taking up the width of the hallway.

The four girls were of similar height, but three were menacingly facing Sonia. "It's too early to be out of bed, Sonia," the first girl accused, forcefully jabbing Sonia on the shoulder. There was an aggressive inflection in her voice and after speaking she stood straighter, taller, and stepped forward with more confidence packed into each step.

The girls to either side stepped forward after the first girl, their arms crossed, a sneer on each of their faces.

Sonia shrunk toward the wall and her nervous eyes glanced between the three girls standing before her. She took a few steps back, granting them space to continue down the hallway, but the three girls continued to surround her with antagonizing gestures and remarks.

“C’mon, why don’t you say something?” one of the girls asked.

The trio closed in until at last they pushed Sonia back against the wall.

“Just say something, *So-nya*,” the first girl said, “stop pretending to be special.”

Red-hot blood coursed through Sonia’s veins and the cool breeze flowing through the hallway felt tenfold. The first girl put her face close to Sonia’s and again asked “Why aren’t you saying anything?” again jabbing a shoulder, “Too scared?”

With trembling fingers and pulsing veins Sonia clenched a fist and lunged forward, striking the girl in the face. Both companions looked on aghast and slowly inched away from the scene.

The girl who was now on the ground took a second to react, then let out a long, sharp whine and she cried caressing her cheek. The girls to her side retreated up the stairs yelling aloud “Miss Jane! Miss Jane!”

Amid the commotion Sonia fled down the hallway toward the prohibited room. She reached the doorway of the Study Hall and quickly entered without another thought.

She closed the door behind her and once alone in the silent room she took a moment to breathe easily. The pulsing in her blood had ceased and she composed herself, recalling why she had come to the Study Hall.

Lined up against the walls of the room were bookshelves housing huge books. Bookshelves were fit into every spot between the tall windows from which a little gray light spilled into the room while rain rattled still. Tables were lined in straight rows and chairs were set at various intervals, neither of which were the kind used during schooling hours.

Toward one corner of the room there was a large, black piano with a gloss that reflected the weak light that made its way in. A flat surface was held diagonally above the piano looking as if it were a giant wing to a height that towered over Sonia.

Timidly she stepped forward, each step tapping against the wooden flooring, tilting her head trying to see it from all angles. There was a short bench in front of the piano and she noticed some golden levers at the foot of the instrument as she took a seat. She pressed down on one of the levers with her hand but nothing happened. She tried the others as well only to her disappointment.

Sonia pillowed her head on the piano worried of the punishment to come from Miss Jane. And doubly so if she were caught in the Study Hall.

The wooden foundations of the house moaned and the windows echoed to the stress of wind and rain as these thoughts ran through her mind.

She let out a hard sigh and with the added weight she managed to press down on the piano. Surprised, Sonia took another look where her head lay and realized she could pull the keylid up. Hidden underneath the cover were a set of glimmering black

and white keys. But there was also a cassette tape resting atop some of the keys. She turned to the window to better read its inscription: 'Best of Bach.' She slid the tape into her pocket and returned her attention to the treasure she had found.

There were long, white keys and every now and then there were short, black keys. Many of them.

She scooted left on the seat and tapped the far left key. A deep, heavy sound rushed out into the air, loud and vibrant enough to force her to recoil. She waited for the sound to fade and she pressed again and the same sound played louder for a longer duration. The air around her shook, a warm tingle ran down her spine, a comforting blanket enveloping her mind while something inside murmured.

Her fingers worked their way to the right and with each key the sounds became softer, quieter. At the other end a sharp tone jolted into the air. She then worked her way inward into the piano and this time the tune scaled darker and stronger.

The door of the Study Hall slammed open and there stood Miss Jane. She stood judiciously with her hands at her hips and a foot quickly tapped upon the floor.

"Miss Sonia!" Miss Jane shrieked, "You know you're not supposed to be in here." Miss Jane hastily walked toward the piano, pulled Sonia's hands from the keys and closed the keylid.

"This is *not* a toy, Sonia!" Miss Jane insisted. She pulled Sonia off the seat and out of the Study Hall.

"And Miss Cathy tells me you *hit* her? We have rules in this house, young lady. Would you like it if the other girls were allowed to hit *you*?"

Miss Jane walked to her office pulling Sonia in tow, continuing on with her diatribe. When they reached the office, Miss Jane pulled brought Sonia to a chair and ordered her to sit.

Again Miss Jane put her arms at her sides and looked down at Sonia with a firm expression on her face. "We have *rules* in this house, young lady," Miss Jane repeated from earlier. "I don't know why you think it's acceptable to run around in places where you *know* you're not allowed, and I do not know what possessed you to strike Miss Cathy. While you are living in this home you *must* obey the rules or we will simply have to send you to another home."

Miss Jane's enforcement went on further, "I don't know what's gotten into you, Miss Sonia, but around here we treat others with respect. And that means following the rules we've set up and behaving like a civilized young lady. You are to write Miss Jane an apology," Miss Jane commanded, "and you are to remain in your room after breakfast to think about what you've done."

No amount of will power could manifest within Sonia to form words. No matter her efforts she could not rise up in revolt to vocalize a single word nor utter a single sound in her defense. Unable to find her voice she slouched in her seat and locked eyes with the ground in defeat.

“Now, you wait here until you are called out for breakfast,” Miss Jane said. With that she strutted out the room and disappeared around a corner.

It was a murky room, and dim unlike the Study Hall. Even the lamp on the desk could not illuminate the room as the Study Hall had been. A small poster faced outward from the desk listing the highly valued rules of the house.

The Eloise Estate: Orphanage for Girls

- Treat others as you wish to be treated.
- Schooling is vital for a proper and virtuous lady.
- Always listen to and respect elders and guardians.
- Electronics are prohibited.

Her eyes darted from one rule to the next, but then they crossed the room and noticed a small television set on the opposite wall. She peeked out the door careful to avoid making a sound, and when she was certain no one was near she made way for that corner of the room.

On the counter-top adjacent to the television was a remote control. Her nimble fingers quickly removed the cap and replaced the batteries with those in her pocket.

She placed everything as she had found it and continued waiting for breakfast in the dull, stuffy office room where the lamp failed to properly radiate.

33x

Supercomputer

From page 179

Heads bowed down and the rustling sounds of scribbling pencils ran on endlessly. Students in their assigned seats kept their eyes on the sheets of paper laying on their desk, sheets of paper showing shapes and graphs, sheets of paper asking for solutions, asking for variables to be defined.

Questions on the pages ranged from “A line segment has endpoints $A(7,-1)$ and $B(-3,3)$. What are the coordinates of the midpoint of \overline{AB} ?” and “What is the volume, in cubic centimeters, of a cylinder that has a height of 15 cm and a diameter of 12 cm?” and “Find the slope of a line perpendicular to the line whose equation is $2y - 6x = 4$ ”

In absolute silence students rapidly worked out their computations and worked out the logic behind the numbers. Students seated in their pews concentrated, some by biting a lip, others by rhythmically tapping their pencils upon the desk, and yet others by doodling impulsive lines and shapes and pictures on the page, but all remained bowing to the arithmetic.

Students worked out the equations beneath the watchful gaze of the instructor who surveyed the room and walked up and down the aisles every few minutes. During these opportune moments some students shot furtive glances across desks, and shortly afterward a ball of paper flew from one student to the other. All this beneath the supposed watchful gaze of the instructor.

The clock in the front of the classroom continued on in its binary tick and tock, and as the hour came to a close the teacher updated the blackboard.

There are ten minutes remaining in the exam he would say, and double check your answers if you finish early he would suggest.

The pace of scribbling increased and the sound of pages shuffling and flipping grew louder. When once more the instructor walked between the aisles to inspect the students and to attempt to uphold academic integrity, balls of paper were again launched from table to table behind his back.

And behind the teacher's back a student unfolded one of the balls of paper. In sloppy writing and sloppy numbers, with crudely drawn shapes and diagrams, the slip of paper read “28) C, 29) A, 30) $m\angle STR = 67^\circ$ ” all among other computations.

The receiving student fired a silent glance of gratitude toward the student who had launched the answers. When the teacher approached the front of the classroom and turned round, he witnessed only the hard working pupils whose focus remained entirely on their own work.

One minute left, the teacher announced as the clock ticked on, and several students quickened their pace even more in working out the logic to the final questions. Quick handwriting begot sloppy letters and numbers with no chance to reflect as students wrote down the last variables and digits.

And pencils down, the instructor demanded.

In spite of the command some students continued writing at a greatly increased pace. Those who had completed the work had marched to the front of the classroom to deliver their exams, and they left the room immediately afterward. Once outside the doors, the chatter began and students roamed the hallways toward their next destination.

A handful of students remained outside the doors of the classroom, a group of three students cluttered together on one side of the door. A lone student waited on the wall opposite the door. He leaned against the wall and pulled out a small booklet, the pages already flipped to a specific page, from his bag. Instantly he went to work dissecting and breaking down the logic of the puzzle on the page.

The puzzle was contained within a large square which was partitioned into nine medium squares, arranged in three rows and three columns. In turn, those medium boxes were also broken down into nine smaller boxes of their own in the same arrangement. Single numbers were already written into some of the small boxes, numbers running only from one to nine, and the student was quick to fill in the matrix.

His brain processed the problems and churned through the puzzle. Instantaneous signals ran laps between the wiring from his mind to his hands. Each time he filled in one piece of the puzzle, the remainder of the board became simpler and easier to solve. Ultra rapid fire electrical jolts ran through the circuits within, allowing him to deduce the correct value. The logic flowed out through his fingers and in less than a minute the Sudoku grid was filled to completion.

Immediately afterward the student flipped the page and rapidly began filling in the numbers of the following grid. Without much thought he jotted down the numbers in the logically correct solution. Halfway through that puzzle another student emerged from the classroom. He laid eyes upon the student with the booklet and began walking over saying "Thanks for the help, man, I owe you one."

"Yeah, no worries," the student with the puzzle replied.

"I'm kind of surprised we didn't get caught."

"Oh, that was never really a problem. He pretty much walks the same patterns through the class whenever we have tests and stuff."

"Huh," the second student mused, "I never really noticed. You're...Jordan, right?" the student asked with some hesitation.

"Uh, Jason, actually," he corrected the error.

"Damn," he snapped his fingers, "I was close, though."

"Yeah, pretty close," Jason chuckled. "By the way," he continued, "if you, like, need any help with any math stuff I could, like, help you out if you want."

"Oh, I don't know, man," the student scratched the back of his head. "I was never really a math person. I never really got that kind of stuff."

"But I can help you so next time you can, like, work through it on your own," Jason insisted.

“Nah, man, I’ve tried, but I’ve just never been good with numbers. To me it’s all just a bunch of numbers and things that don’t make sense to me.”

Jason laughed at the comment, “It’s really not as complicated as you’re making it sound.

“But you just *get* it. You’re Asian, so you’re just automatically good with math. You’re like a...a supercomputer or something,” he announced proudly.

Jason snorted nervously before continuing “You really just need to know, like, the basics and fundamentals of some things and then everything else is much easier. All you really have to do is, like, remember the formulas and plug in the missing numbers. Everything belongs and fits in somewhere.”

“I guess. But there are always too many formulas and rules to remember so even if I know the formula it just doesn’t make any sense to me like I said,” he insisted. “But anyway, I gotta get going,” he said as he walked backward to the group of students waiting near the classroom door.

“Okay, but if you need help with math stuff you can always ask me,” Jason said.

“Maybe I will, Jordan,” he replied as the group of four headed down the hallway.

The group took their leave and their friendly chattering and laughter echoed in all directions down the hall. The supercomputer was left on his own with his puzzle book in his hands, still unsure where he fit in, and still unsure what it would take to get to a place where he felt he truly belonged.

For someone who everyone praised for his problem-solving skills, this was one he had always failed to solve.

Great Expectations

From page 190

Grades are the single most important thing that determines the value of a human being.

I've heard it all: "You should be good at this. You ought to be good at this. It's in your genes."

I'm not allowed to struggle. I'm not allowed to be average. I'm not allowed to score anything less than perfect. It's as if I am expected to be a robotic natural, as if I was built only to succeed in school.

Everyone around me worships school and the only things that matter about me are my grades. All anyone ever sees of me are my results but they ignore the effort and the stress that tags along. Everyone must think I can do this in my sleep. After all Asians are supposed to be gifted at school by default right?

I don't feel that I'm living up to expectations, and it doesn't feel like I ever will. All that I encounter in schooling is turmoil and torment. I can't concentrate or study without thoughts of my parents or teachers or our classmates scraping away at my mind, pressuring me to be smart and get the best grades in the school.

I think about the academic awards I've earned and I hate them all. I hate the fact that I have them. And what kills me most is that my parents always got all the praise from teachers. And they got all the praise from family because I was well on my way to become a doctor or a lawyer.

But for you it's always been easy. You've never looked stressed out about any of this. I was too inadequate for this. It has been too stressful to bear every single day and it's become too much to endure any longer, to constantly be paralyzed by these great expectations. I can't stand it anymore.

Don't follow in my footsteps.

Sorry Jorge.

Library Cultura

Credit where credit is due. Always.

Following is a list of all the cultural artifacts and parts of cultural works (characters, locations, lyrics, quotations, et cetera) that are mentioned or used in *Mistakes Were Made*. All works are listed in order of use, mention, reference, allusion, or appearance. All years AD. Website URLs provided if available.

Arachniography – Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) of online content formatted as Content Creator (if any). Title (if any) <Direct URL>. Website Name <Website URL>. Website Owner. Year (if any).

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Discography – Music formatted as Composer or Musician or Band or Performer. “Title.” *Album*. Label, Year. <Website URL>.

Filmography – Film, Cinema, Animation, other Broadcast or Televised program, et cetera. Online Film, Animation, et cetera also listed under Arachniography. Formatted as “Episode Title (if any).” *Title*. Credited Names. Name of Network and Associated Organizations. Year Released or Years Broadcasted. <Website URL>.

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Thanks for reading.

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