

FREE PREVIEW • BOOK ONE

# Overlayered Echoes

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A group of friends has been playing tabletop RPGs together for a long time. When mandatory neural chips become the new normal, they see a chance to make dice-and-paper roleplaying *real* — not just imagined. Something goes wrong.

This sample contains the first two chapters. The complete novel is available on Amazon.

# Chapter One: The Setup

**H**ere we were—finally chasing our lifelong dream: building an actual tabletop RPG simulator, no more scribbling on tattered character sheets or tossing dice across a rickety table.

I remember the first night we ever played together. We were fourteen, hunched around Theo's grandmother's kitchen table, eating pizza off paper plates and arguing about whether a holy warrior could lie to a demon if the demon technically deserved it. Theo's dice were chipped on three corners because he'd thrown one against a wall in second grade. Angela's character sheet had grease stains in the shape of a thumbprint. Marcus had drawn his trickster in the margins, complete with anatomically improbable proportions. Lena—Lena hadn't been there yet. Lena came later. But the rest of us, we'd sat there until two in the morning, until Theo's grandmother had finally come downstairs in her robe and told us, in the gentlest possible voice, to either go home or shut the hell up.

We'd been doing it ever since. Through high school. Through college. Through the years where Marcus disappeared for stretches and came back thinner, and the years where Angela worked night shifts and slept on weekends, and the year my dad got sick and I forgot what week it was for a while. Every Saturday we could swing it, we'd find a table somewhere—a dorm room, a

basement, a coffee shop with a back room that didn't mind the noise—and we'd roll dice.

Now we were going to build the table itself.

For years, we had pored over rulebooks, argued over close rolls, and laughed till dawn. Now, in 2045, with our own gaming company, we were ready to reinvent the game. Everyone has a neural chip for “convenience” and “safety”—not corporate control, of course. Our sim taps that chip to project a vivid fantasy world into your brain. No goggles, no suits—sit, sync, and *live* the quest. You see torchlit caverns, smell damp stone, and feel a blade's weight through haptic gloves. Your phone handles stats, inventory, virtual dice—because nothing says epic adventure like a low battery alert mid-fight.

The chips had been mandatory for almost a decade now. Public schools required them by sixth grade, and you couldn't get a driver's license, a job, or a prescription filled without one. The official line was that the chips made everything safer. Streamlined. They cut emergency response times by sixty percent. They helped find missing kids. They flagged cardiac events before the person knew anything was wrong. Nobody talked, in public anyway, about the other things they could do. The ad targeting that knew you were thinking about a hamburger before you said the word. The mood data that somehow ended up in employer dashboards. The little gray spaces in the user agreement where the words *aggregated* and *anonymized* did a lot of work.

We didn't think about it much. Nobody did. You stopped thinking about a thing once it was in your head.

What we *did* think about was this: if a chip could push a notification straight into your auditory cortex, it could push a torch flame, a tavern song, the smell of stew. If it could vibrate your phone, it could rattle a sword against a shield. If the bandwidth held—and our tests said it held—we could give people the one thing tabletop had never managed in fifty years of trying: immersion that didn't require any imagination at all.

Paper's gone. Phones rule. Swipe to view your hero's stats, flick to roll the dice. Haptic gloves make it real—feel the bowstring snap, the ground quake from a blast, the breeze of a missed arrow. We were about to change gaming forever.

That was the pitch deck, anyway. That was what I'd told the three angel investors who'd cut us our first check, and what I'd told the licensing officer at the chip consortium, and what I'd told my parents when they asked why I wasn't doing something stable like Angela. The pitch was good because the pitch was true. The sim worked. We'd tested it in pieces for over a year—combat modules, dialogue trees, environment renders—and every test had come back clean. The neural interface was the cleanest part of it. The chip did the heavy lifting. Our code just told the chip what to imagine.

But a hundred clean module tests is not the same as a campaign. A campaign is the whole thing strung together, the rules talking to each other, the dice talking

to the world, the world talking to your nervous system, and all of it had to hold for hours without a single thread fraying. Tonight was the first time anyone had tried that. The first time anyone had run a full session inside a fully integrated sim.

And the people stupid enough to volunteer were, of course, the four people I trusted most on earth.

I'm the Game Master, all power, no glory. This was my campaign—my world, my rules, my surprises. I'd poured my heart into it, narrating to an imaginary camera for a "film" I'd show later. No camera—just me, grinning at nothing, committed to the bit like a deranged director. Soon, my players would flesh out their heroes, and I'd unveil my NPC—a mystery even they couldn't crack.

The bit started, I think, in college. I'd been running a game one Sunday afternoon, and I'd cracked a joke nobody laughed at, and I'd looked into the middle distance and said something like *and so, dear viewers, the heroes ignore the GM's finest work*, and Marcus had laughed so hard he choked on a pretzel. After that, I just kept doing it. It became a tic. A nervous habit. The way some people clear their throats before they talk. I narrated dungeons, I narrated dinners, I narrated trips to the grocery store. Angela had asked me once, dead serious, whether I knew I was doing it. I'd said yes. I'd said it was a comfort. The way some people hum.

What I hadn't told her—what I hadn't told anyone—was that the narration was the only time my voice felt steady. I am, on a good day, the second-quietest person

in any room I am in. On a bad day, I am the quietest. The director's voice was a costume. It let me say things I couldn't otherwise say. It let me set the scene for people I loved without having to admit, in plain words, that I loved them.

The notebook came out of that, too. I had been carrying one around since college. A black hardback with an elastic band, replaced about every eighteen months when the previous one ran out of pages. I wrote in it at game tables, at coffee shops, on the couch when the TV was on and nobody was watching the TV. I told the others, when they noticed, that it was *director's notes*—a draft of a novel I was going to write someday, based on the campaign, dressed up enough that nobody would recognize themselves. The cover story was good because the cover story was almost true. I *was* writing a novel. I had been writing it for years. The novel was the same notebook I'd been talking the director-voice into for a decade. Every line I narrated at a table, I'd later transcribe at home. Every flourish the director threw out into the air, the notebook caught.

The friends were used to it now. Theo had stopped asking what I was scribbling about a year ago. Marcus liked to lean over and read upside down, on principle, and complain loudly about how I described him. Angela had asked, once, whether the character she suspected was based on her was sympathetic, and I'd said *yes, more than the real one deserves*, and she'd snorted and let it go. Lena was the only one who knew the notebook was load-bearing. She'd caught me writing in it once,

late at night, the year my dad died. She hadn't said anything. She'd put a blanket over my shoulders and gone to bed.

So tonight the notebook was in my jacket pocket, by my left thigh, the elastic stretched over a pen, ready. I wouldn't be able to write in it during the sim—my real hands were in the gloves, the gloves were holding the GM interface—but I would write in it after. I would write in it tomorrow. I would write down what tonight was, because *what tonight was* was the kind of thing the notebook had been waiting for.

That was what the director-voice was, when you stripped the costume off it. It was a man writing his life down as it happened, because writing it down was the only way he had ever figured out how to be in it.

So I kept the bit. And tonight, with the chip humming faint and warm behind my left ear, with my hands tingling inside the haptic gloves, with my four favorite people in the world arrayed around the table like a band tuning up before a show—tonight the bit felt earned. Tonight I was actually directing something. I had spent eleven months writing this campaign. I had drawn the maps myself. I had voice-acted forty-three NPCs into a phone recorder at two in the morning. I had a binder full of notes thicker than my forearm, and a second binder for the contingencies the first binder couldn't predict.

I had also, somewhere in the last few weeks, started to feel like I was being watched while I worked. Just a prickle at the back of my neck while I coded. The cursor

blinking in places I hadn't put it. A line of code I was sure I'd written that wasn't there in the morning, and another line in its place that was almost—almost—the same. I'd written it off as exhaustion. I'd been up too late too many nights. The sim was a big thing. Big things make you nervous. That was all.

Meet our party:

Theo, our holy warrior. At 6'9", 350 pounds of gym-forged muscle, he's the guy you call to fix your car, fridge, or yank your cat from a tree. A softie, though, crying at sappy group-hug ads.

He's also the guy who carried me out of a frat party in junior year when I drank a bottle of something blue someone had handed me, and he'd carried me a full mile back to the dorm without complaint, and the next morning he'd brought me a bagel and said, with absolute seriousness, *we're going to talk about why you trust strangers with blue bottles, but not today*. Theo had a face like a cliff and a heart like a wet sponge. He had cried, on separate occasions, at: a commercial about a dog finding its owner, the end of a video game where the side character dies, his own wedding rehearsal even though there was no wedding because he wasn't getting married, he was just helping his cousin practice. He pretended to be embarrassed by the crying. He was not actually embarrassed. He thought crying was honest.

Angela, Theo's sister, is our healer. At 6'5", she's kind but sharp, like a friend who'd bring you soup then roast you for catching a cold. She's been my best friend since

childhood. Their parents always treated me like another son. Her phone showed her healer's abilities, ready to mend wounds.

I'd met Angela in a hallway in third grade. She was the new kid. I was the kid who got picked on for being small, and a sixth grader had me by the collar against a row of lockers when Angela—already tall, already unimpressed—walked up and said, in the most bored voice I have ever heard a child produce, *put him down or I'll tell your mom*. The sixth grader had blinked at her. *I don't know your mom*, he'd said. Angela had shrugged. *Your mom doesn't know that*, she'd said. He had put me down.

We had been inseparable since. Her parents had taken one look at me, decided I was a stray, and started feeding me. By high school I had a key. By college I had a chair at the Thanksgiving table that was understood, by everyone, to be mine. When my own parents finally adopted Lena, Angela's mother had cried and brought a casserole and told me, in the kitchen, that she was proud of me. That she'd always known I'd make a good brother. That I'd had practice.

Angela was a nurse now, which surprised exactly nobody. She was the kind of nurse who could hold a hand and run an IV at the same time, and the kind who would tell a doctor he was wrong in front of the patient if he was wrong in front of the patient, and the kind who came home some nights and just stood in the kitchen with the lights off for ten minutes before she could move again. She didn't talk about those nights. She talked

about everything else. She talked, in fact, almost without stopping. But not about those nights.

Marcus, our trickster. Chaos personified. If energy drinks were human, it'd be him. Never arrested—technically—but “asked to leave” enough bars to write a saga. Loud, reckless, hilarious. He got us banned from our game shop after a “dice-tossing mishap.” His phone flashed high agility stats.

The dice-tossing mishap had involved a fluorescent light fixture, a twelve-sided die, and a physics outcome that the shop owner had described, on the spot, as *deeply impressive and forever unwelcome*. Marcus had laughed about it for a week. Marcus laughed about most things for a week. Marcus laughed because Marcus had figured out, at fifteen, that if you laughed loud enough and long enough nobody ever asked you the next question.

There was a stretch in our early twenties when Marcus went quiet. He didn't disappear, exactly—he still texted, he still showed up to game night sometimes—but the laugh got thin and his eyes started looking at things just past your shoulder. He lost weight. He lost a job. He lost the lease on his apartment and stayed on Theo's couch for two months without ever quite explaining why. Then, one Sunday, he showed up to a session with his hair cut and a chip on his shoulder and said, *I'm done with that*, and that was the only sentence any of us ever got. He has not been quiet since. The laugh came back. The energy came back. And I have never, in the years that followed, asked him to fill in the blanks, because

Marcus needs his blanks. Marcus is held together with blanks.

Lena, our mage, my sister—legally and in spirit. Her parents died when she was ten, leaving her in a foster home that treated her like a number. We met in middle school; she was small, quiet, her stutter born from pain. My parents adopted her after I spilled her story. Now she's all about explosive magic—flames, lightning, chaos.

We met because she sat next to me in seventh-grade homeroom on her first day at the school. She didn't talk for three weeks. I didn't either, much, but I had the excuse of habit. She had the excuse of grief. On the third week I dropped my pencil and she picked it up and handed it back to me, and when our fingers brushed she flinched like I'd burned her, and I said *thanks* and she said *y-y-you're welcome* and turned bright red. The next day I brought two pencils. I put one on her desk before homeroom started. She looked at it like it was a small animal. Then she looked at me. Then she nodded once, very seriously, and the next day she had a sharpener and she sharpened both pencils at the start of class and put one back on my desk.

That was the friendship. That was all the words we needed for the first month.

I started telling her stories at lunch because she didn't have anyone to sit with, and because I had read somewhere that stutters got better when the speaker wasn't trying to talk, just listening. I made the stories

ridiculous on purpose. I made her laugh on purpose. I gave her dice—my old dice, the chipped ones, the ones I'd outgrown—and taught her how a holy warrior worked, and a spellcaster, and a trickster. By eighth grade she was rolling characters faster than I could explain the rules.

I went home one night and told my parents about the foster home. The bruises she pretended not to have. The fact that her foster brothers stole the lunch money my parents had quietly started giving me extra of so I could quietly give it to her. My mother had sat very still and very quiet for about thirty seconds. Then she had gotten up, called my dad in from the garage, and said the words *we need to talk about adoption*. I was twelve. Lena was twelve. By the time we were thirteen we shared a last name.

She still stuttered sometimes. Tired, mostly. Or scared. The stutter was a tell, the way Theo's eyes got soft was a tell, the way Marcus's laugh got loud was a tell, the way Angela's hands started cleaning whatever was nearest was a tell. I had spent the better part of two decades learning my friends' tells. I had built a campaign around them.

And me? Loving parents, little cash, big dreams. I'd always wanted a sibling, and I got one in Lena. As a player, I prefer arcane spellcasters—precise, cunning, brains over brawn. Even though I was running this campaign, I wasn't about to give up playing a character as well. It was right about then that my friends realized

I'd been narrating every single word into an invisible camera.

The neural sim chair I was sitting in was the cheapest one in the office. We had four nice ones, ergonomic and padded, and one beat-up rolling chair with a broken armrest, and you can guess which one I had taken. Some habits don't break. I had spent a decade running games where everyone else got the couch and I got the floor, and the floor and I had an understanding. My back, at thirty-one, did not have any understandings with anyone.

The chip behind my ear hummed once, a soft test pulse. The gloves on my hands tightened by a thread. On my phone, the GM interface glowed, every dial and slider exactly where I'd left it. To my left, the binder. To my right, the players. In front of me, the empty middle of the table where, in a moment, a tavern would unfold.

I narrated under my breath, low enough that none of them caught it. *And here, dear viewers, the hour the dreamers have waited for.* The bit. The costume. The voice.

It was time to begin.

"Our heroes gather, blind to the doom ahead." Lena raised an eyebrow. "What're you doing?"

"Narrating," I said. "For the fans." "What fans?" Angela asked.

"The ones watching." I grinned at nothing, all-in on the bit.

“There’s no camera,” Marcus groaned, checking his phone’s battery.

“Just air, judgment, and my award-worthy act,” I said. The sim flickered, and my NPC’s voice whispered in my head: “They’ll never leave.”

I almost said something. The voice had not been part of the script. The voice had not been part of anything. I’d written Kael’s lines, all of them, and I had voice-acted them into a recorder, but the voice I’d just heard had not been mine, had not been a playback of mine, had not been anything I could explain.

I looked at the others. None of them had heard it. Marcus was still squinting at his battery. Angela was rubbing her temple where the chip sat. Theo was cracking his neck, a sound like a soft branch breaking. Lena had her head tilted toward me, a little, the way she did when she was about to ask a follow-up question.

I smiled at her. The director’s smile. The one that meant *don’t worry, the scene is going to be great*.

She didn’t smile back. Not quite. She looked at me for a half-second too long, and then she looked at her phone, and the moment passed.

This story was going to be my fourth wall-breaking magnum opus.

\* \* \*

***Notebook Entry — ~7:32 PM, before the others arrive***

*The chairs are in their pentagonal cluster. The chips are powered. The coffee maker has fresh coffee in it for the first time in two days. The four of them will be here in twenty minutes and the campaign will begin in thirty.*

*I have not, in fifteen years of running tables for them, ever been more ready for a session. I will note that here, for the record, so that the eventual viewers can compare this entry against whatever the rest of the notebook becomes. Tonight is the night I have been building toward since the company started.*

*A note on the camera: the camera is, of course, not there. I do not say this to undercut the bit. I say it because the camera being absent is the working condition of the bit. If the camera were real, the act would be a performance. With no camera, the act is something else. The act is the work. The work is what makes the night work.*

*Curtain up. The fellowship arrives.*

## Chapter Two: Rolling the Heroes

The sim roared to life, the neural chip flooding our senses with the sights and sounds of the Gilded Mug tavern. Splintered tables stank of sour ale, firelight danced on damp stone, and NPC chatter buzzed, more real than our office's grimy carpet. My haptic gloves hummed as I "held" my GM notes, but in the sim, I was my NPC: a cloaked figure skulking in a corner.

The first sensation was the smell. That was the thing the demo reels never quite captured—you could show people the visuals, you could rattle their hands with the gloves, but the smell was the part that broke the brain. The chip didn't pipe scent the way it piped sound; it suggested scent directly to the olfactory bulb, and the suggestion was so confident that your nose accepted it as truth before your conscious mind could weigh in. Sour ale. Old smoke. Wet wool from someone's drying cloak. The faint, sweet-rotten edge of something that had spilled under a table and never been mopped up. The kind of smell that pulled you forward by the back of the head and said *yes, you are here*.

Then the heat. Then the weight of the cloak on my own shoulders—except it wasn't my own shoulders, it was Kael's, narrow and stooped, and the cloak was heavier than it had any right to be because I'd written it heavy on purpose. Little touches like that were the part I was proudest of. The cloak knew what it was made of.

The boots knew what the floor was. The chip filled in the rest.

The tavern unfolded around me in layers. The floorboards first—aged oak, scarred where a hundred chairs had been dragged across them. Then the walls, daub-and-wattle, the plaster grayed by smoke. The bar, long and pitted, ringed with the pale ghosts of mug bottoms. The fireplace at the far end, banked low, throwing a stuttering orange light. The NPCs spawned in last, by design: a barmaid first, then the innkeeper polishing a glass, then the regulars at the back tables, then a drunk grumbler in the corner with the kind of beard that arrived before he did, who would, if anyone bothered to ask, complain at length about the price of barley.

I'd spent six weeks on this room. I had built every chair. I had named every drinker. I knew the barmaid's name and the name of the boy she was sweet on and the name of her dead mother. None of that would ever come up in play. None of it had to. The point was that the room knew its own bones, and the chip would feel that and pass it along to my players as the indefinable sense of *real*.

I was looking at them now—my real friends, in the sim, sitting down at a corner table. Theron in his armor, Althea in her white-and-gold robes, Varkis already leaning back with his feet half on a stool, Elyra perched at the edge of her chair with her hands tucked into her sleeves. The chip had translated them faithfully. Their faces were close enough to their own that you'd know

them across a room, but the bodies were the bodies they'd written, and watching Theo's actual mannerisms move a seven-foot holy warrior around the room was a quiet, private kind of joy.

In the corner, I—Kael—lifted my hood a little higher. The audience couldn't see my grin. But I knew it was there. The bit was always there.

I narrated to my imaginary camera, "Our heroes storm the Gilded Mug, their saga ignites!"

Marcus groaned. "Quit the Spielberg nonsense, man. No one's watching."

"Yet," I shot back, winking at nothing.

Lena smirked, swiping her phone to open the sim's app. Theo's giant hands fumbled his phone, jabbing the screen. Angela's profile glowed, but she muttered, "This app better not crap out when you idiots start bleeding."

"It won't," I said, with more confidence than I had. The truth was, we'd patched the app at four in the morning two days earlier because the inventory tab kept rendering items as black squares. The fix had stuck, but I had not slept much since, and I had a working theory that the app was held together by hope and the cheaper kind of duct tape. Still: it wasn't going to crap out tonight. Tonight was the night I had spent eleven months making sure of.

Theo's avatar leaned over the table, and the leather of his gauntlets creaked—an audio cue I had personally hand-tuned, three different leather samples layered

together until it sounded the way I remembered leather sounding from the renaissance fair we'd all gone to in college. Tiny details. The gauntlet creak was a detail nobody would ever name and everybody would feel.

"First," I said, "build your heroes. Describe 'em, then roll stats — Might, Agility, Intellect, Will, Charm, Perception. Six dice, now." I tapped my phone, and the virtual dice glowed. "Make 'em epic for the audience."

Theo cleared his throat, like he was selling a movie. "Sir Theron, holy warrior. Towering, silver armor shining like justice. Wields a greatsword blessed by light. Sworn to protect, but his eyes hide a broken vow." His voice dipped, heavy with old regret. He swiped, rolling: Might 16, Agility 10, Intellect 8, Will 14, Charm 12, Perception 10. "Built like a tank," he said, flexing, "but no brainiac." His Might 16 meant +3 to melee rolls. The sim rendered Theron, armor glinting, gloves vibrating as he gripped the sword.

There was a thing Theo did when he was nervous about a session that I recognized but had never called out: he leaned harder into the bit. Threw himself at the character. Voice-acted with extra mustard. The first time he'd played a holy warrior, six years ago, he'd spent the whole session in a voice that landed somewhere between Liam Neeson and his own grandfather, and Marcus had teased him about it for a month before he'd settled into something more natural. The grandfather voice was back tonight. I caught the edge of it in *eyes hide a broken vow*, and I let myself enjoy it, because that

voice meant Theo was all the way in, and a Theo all the way in was a Theo a campaign could be built on.

Angela rolled her eyes. “Sister Althea, healer. Tall, stern, white robes with gold trim. Her staff was topped with a crystal humming with the power to mend. Saves lives, doesn’t babysit idiots.” She glared at Marcus. “No fixes for your wyrm-chasing stunts.” She rolled: Might 10, Agility 12, Intellect 14, Will 16, Charm 10, Perception 12. “Wise and tough,” she smirked, her Will 16 giving +3 to resist mind tricks. Althea appeared, staff glowing, phone flashing stats.

The staff was a thing I had spent an embarrassing amount of time on. The crystal at the top was supposed to hum—not just glow, but *hum*, a soft alto note pitched just under hearing—and I’d written the audio cue to thread directly into the chip rather than play through the room speakers, so Angela alone would feel it. She’d looked at the staff the moment it rendered, and her shoulders had relaxed by a quarter inch, and I had thought, in the corner of my brain that wasn’t doing anything else: *you’re welcome*. A small gift. The kind of thing you couldn’t say out loud without making it weird.

Marcus grinned. “Varkis, expert trickster. Lean, hooded, black leather, knives everywhere. Moves like a ghost, talks faster than you can blink. Here for gold, but he’d die for his crew — never admitting it.” He winked at Lena. “I’d charm that wyrm, Angie.” He rolled: Might 8, Agility 17, Intellect 12, Will 10, Charm 14, Perception 13. “Slippery as hell,” he crowed, his Agility 17 adding

+3 to sneaky rolls. Varkis materialized, flipping a dagger with a haptic twirl.

The dagger flip was Marcus's own invention. He'd asked me, three weeks back, if I could code in a flourish for his trickster—just a little spinning flip that would trigger when he idled. I'd told him it was a vanity feature and not worth the dev time. He'd brought me coffee every morning for four days until I caved. The flip now triggered automatically whenever Varkis stood still for more than two seconds, and Marcus had grinned exactly the way he was grinning now, because Marcus's love language was making other people put extra work in for him and then enjoying it loudly.

Lena spoke softly but firmly. "Elyra, mage. Slight, storm-gray eyes, cloak sparking with energy. Her magic's wild — fire, lightning, ice — tied to a buried past." Her glance met mine, a shared memory of her foster home days. She rolled: Might 7, Agility 12, Intellect 16, Will 13, Charm 9, Perception 11. "Brains and boom," she said, her Intellect 16 granting +3 to spell rolls. Elyra appeared, an ember in her hand. Her phone's spell list flickered, just for a second.

I caught the flicker. I caught it because I had spent eleven months staring at every render of every spell loadout in this build, and a flicker is not a thing that happens unless something is wrong with the underlying data. I made a note to check the logs later. I made the note in my head. I did not say anything out loud. The session was beginning. The session was not going to be derailed by a one-frame UI hiccup. The session was, as I

had been telling myself for eleven months, going to be perfect.

I leaned in, narrating, “Now, the Game Master unveils his enigma!” The sim shifted, my NPC stepping into the firelight. “Meet Kael, a wanderer in a tattered cloak, face half-hidden. His voice is low, cryptic, a rune-etched staff gripped in his hands, its wood cracked and humming with faint power. Friend or foe? Only I know.” I smirked, the gloves humming as Kael’s presence chilled the air. The app glitched, Kael’s outline stuttering like a busted render. “He watches,” I added, winking at my “camera.”

I’d named the NPC after myself for the same reason I narrated to the air: because the bit asked for it. A fourth-wall-breaking story needs its breaks marked. If the GM and the NPC and the narrator are all called Kael, you’ve made the seam visible. You’ve told the audience there are layers, and you’ve handed them the knife to lift the layers if they want to. That had been my favorite reveal in the campaign plan. The slow recognition. The moment a player figures out that Kael-the-NPC is doing the GM’s bidding, and the GM is also a player in a story, and the story is being told to a camera that isn’t there.

It would have been clever. Past tense, because the sentence was already starting to feel like something I’d written in a journal a long time ago.

“Also, we got to clear that corporate glitch shit out,” I muttered, nodding at the flicker. “Ruins the damn vibe.”

Angela snorted. “Why is there *ever* glitch shit. Why don’t they sell us a product that works.”

“It’s not the chip’s fault,” I said, automatically defensive. “It’s the framework. The platform layer. Half the public API still throws warnings if you look at it sideways. You can patch around it, but you can’t patch *through* it.”

“You sound like a guy who is making excuses for the company that owns his brain.”

“They don’t own my brain.”

“They own the slot in your skull they put their hardware into,” Angela said, mild, not even looking up from her phone. “Same thing.”

This was an old argument. Angela had been suspicious of the chips since the first rollout. She had stories from the hospital that she would tell me sometimes and never tell anyone else—the patient whose chip had pinged an outage and locked her own pacemaker by accident, the kid whose stutter had vanished overnight after a software push and come back a week later, worse. She had let them put one in her own head because her job had required it, but she’d resented every minute of the procedure, and she resented the company that made it, and she resented, faintly but consistently, the fact that I worked at a company that built things on top of theirs.

I usually had a smart answer ready. Tonight I didn’t. Tonight I just shrugged at her and turned back to my

friends, because the session was starting and I wasn't going to let an argument about hardware politics knock the rhythm off the campaign.

A grizzled NPC innkeeper leaned over. "Bandits in Blackthorn Cave, robbing and killing travelers. Ten gold to clear 'em out." The word "killing" hit hard — higher stakes than we expected. Theo nodded for honor, Angela for duty, Marcus for coin, Lena for chaos. We accepted.

I'd debated the word *killing*. The session-zero plan had said *attacking*, generic, sanitized. I had changed it in the last edit pass because I wanted the table to know, from the first quest, that this campaign was not a sandbox. There would be consequences. Things would die. I wanted to set the temperature.

The innkeeper, by the way, was named Boren and had a brother named Olen who had been killed by bandits seven years ago in this exact cave. None of that would ever come up unless someone asked. None of it had to. It was in the bones.

The sim whisked us to a forest trail, the neural chip painting every detail — pine needles crunching underfoot, a freezing wind stinging our haptic gloves, distant wolf howls echoing.

The transition was the part I'd been most nervous about. We'd had load-screen artifacting in three of the last five module tests—a flicker of black, a fraction of a second where the chip lost the thread and your brain noticed the gap before the next scene filled in. Tonight, the transition was clean. The tavern faded, the trail rose

up under our feet, and for a fraction of a heartbeat I could have sworn I felt the floor between them—not the tavern floor or the trail floor, but something else, smooth and cold, like polished glass. Then it was gone, and there was only pine duff and the smell of cold wind, and I told myself I had imagined it.

I narrated, “The party marches to peril!”

Angela elbowed me. “Chill, Scorsese.” But her grin said she was hooked.

The trail twisted through gnarled trees, the sim’s sky dimming to a bruised purple. A skeleton, half-buried in mud, clutched a torn satchel — bandit work. “Find the cave,” I said. “Roll Perception.” Phones lit up, dice spinning. Theo rolled a fifteen, spotting a torch flicker ahead. Lena rolled a twelve, catching broken branches — bandit tracks. Marcus rolled a seven, tripping over the skeleton. “Damn bones!” he cursed. Angela rolled a fifteen, finding a hidden path. “Keep up, idiots,” she teased.

We reached Blackthorn Cave, its mouth a jagged scar in the cliff. The sim’s air turned damp, thick with rot and blood. I narrated, “Danger lurks within!”

Marcus groaned, “We get it, Oscar-winner.”

Their eyes sharpened, hands already on their weapons.

The torchlight at the cave mouth flickered, but I saw more than shadows. Etchings crawled across the stone — faint glyphs, pulsing in time with my heartbeat until

my skull throbbed like a struck drum. Blood slicked my upper lip before I even realized it.

The glyphs were not part of the level. The glyphs were not part of *anything* I had built. I had loaded every texture in this cave myself, and there were no markings on the stone, and there were no markings on the stone two seconds ago, and there were markings on the stone now. They were small. Spiraling. They flickered when I looked directly at them and held steady when I looked just to the side. The throbbing in my skull was beat-matched to them, or they to it—I couldn't tell which was leading.

I closed my eyes. The glyphs were still there. I could see them through my eyelids, faintly, the way you can see the bright bar of a window after you look away from it. I opened my eyes. The glyphs faded. The headache stayed.

Glyphsense, constantly scratching at the margins, dragging the footnotes of the world into view whether I asked for them or not. Not power, not command — just cursed sight.

I had not coded this ability. I had not coded it for Kael, and I had not coded it for myself, and I did not understand how it had a name in my head when I had not, on any document I would show anyone, given it one. The word *Glyphsense* sat in my mouth like it had been there all along, like a tooth I'd been carrying without noticing. I tasted iron. I lifted my hand—my real hand, inside the haptic glove—and felt my upper lip. The glove

came away with a dark smear on it. I wiped it on the inside of my cloak before anyone could look down and see it on my actual face.

Marcus noticed, eyebrow raised. “You good, Kael?”

I forced a grin, wiped my sleeve across my nose. “Fine. Eyes playing tricks. Let’s go.”

He held my eye for a half-second longer than I wanted. Marcus was the easiest of us to fool about emotional things and the hardest of us to fool about physical things. He had lived in his own body in a way the rest of us hadn’t. He noticed when a person was lying about feeling sick. He noticed when a person had not eaten in a while. He noticed, now, that something was off, and I watched him notice, and I watched him decide—because Marcus decided these things in real time, and you could see the decision land in his face—not to push it. Not yet. Later. He filed it. He looked back at the cave mouth.

I exhaled, slow. The bit, I reminded myself. Stay in the bit. The bit was a wall and the wall was the only thing keeping the room from seeing what I was actually thinking, which was: *something else just looked through my eyes for a moment, and I do not know what it was, and the night is one hour old.*

Inside, torchlight revealed scattered bones, torn packs, and a fresh corpse, throat slit, staring blankly. “Shit,” Theo muttered, “these bandits mean business.”

A low growl echoed, and five bandits sprang from the shadows, knives gleaming, led by a scarred brute who snarled, "You're dead, trespassers! We'll carve your names into the walls!" The sim amplified their taunts, their eyes glowing unnaturally, as the neural chip cranked up the menace. The brute lunged at Theo, his knife slashing a shallow cut across his arm, blood beading through the haptic sting. Theo grunted, "That hurt!"

The sim froze the brute mid-step, locking into turn-based combat.

I spread my arms like a circus ringmaster. "And our noble knight takes the hit, shielding his friends like a true hero!"

Theo grimaced, deflecting the next strike. "Cut it out. I'm no hero."

"Roll for action order," I said. Phones glowed, dice spun, numbers flashing above each avatar's head: Theo 18, Lena 13, Angela 9, Marcus 5.

The bandits' rolls stayed hidden, their eyes glinting as they stood frozen. "Why can't we move yet?" Marcus asked.

I spread my hands like a carnival barker. "Here's how it works: initiative first, then one action per turn. Talk is free — unless you start giving out strategy, then it costs you. Roll to move, roll to strike, roll to survive. That's the law of the game."

Theo groaned. "You sound way too smug about this."

“Smug?” I laughed to my invisible audience. “No, no. I’m laying down gospel. This is the order of things.”

Combat began, and shit got wild.

“They must’ve rolled higher than us,” Angela said, frowning.

“Turn-based, idiots,” I said. “Wait your turn.” Combat began, and chaos followed.

Marcus leaned toward Lena. “Hit the big guy first—your spells can torch him.”

“No metagaming, asshole,” I cut in. “That’s an action. You’re skipped. Did you forget how this works? We’ve been doing this for years.”

Marcus threw his hands up. “You didn’t say that rule carried over to the sim!”

Theo growled, “Yeah, a heads-up would’ve been nice!”

Angela laughed. “Sucks to be you, Marcus. But seriously, warn us next time.”

Lena crossed her arms. “That’s some bullshit. Years of gaming, and you spring it on us now?”

I narrated, “The party flaps their gums while danger closes in!” They all glared, Marcus flipping me off.

It was the right kind of glare. The familiar one. The one that meant the table was working—the rhythm was right, the bickering was sharp instead of hot, the energy was running where it was supposed to run. For one

beautiful second I let myself just enjoy it. My friends, in armor, in a cave, mad at me about the rules. Eleven months. Eleven months for this exact second. I tucked it away in the part of my brain that kept the best moments.

A bandit moved first, rolling a hidden nineteen, blade flashing at Lena. It hit with a sixteen. The haptic sting made her flinch. “Ow! That’s too real!”

The pain calibration had been Angela’s idea, actually, from way back in the design phase. *If they don’t feel it, they won’t take it seriously, she’d said, and if they take it too seriously they won’t have any fun.* We had settled on a sliding scale: a one-out-of-ten sting for a glancing hit, a four for solid damage, never above a six no matter what. Six was a kicked shin. Six was a stubbed toe. Six was enough to make you yelp and not enough to ruin your week. I had personally calibrated the sting. I had tested it on my own arm forty-three times until I was sure.

Lena’s ow was a four. The chip was holding to spec. The settings were working. The settings, I was sure, were working.

Theo, action order eighteen, swung his greatsword at the brute. Natural twenty, plus his +3 Might — 23 total. The sim roared, cave walls shaking as his blade split the brute’s shoulder. Blood sprayed like a horror flick. “Hell yeah!” Theo bellowed. “I’m a war god!”

He turned to Angela. “Heal me quick—this cut stings!”

“No metagaming, dumbass,” I said. “That’s your action. Skipped.”

Lena adjusted her glasses, dice trembling. “S-sorry. I’ll roll.”

Marcus groaned. “You don’t have to apologize to dice, Lena.”

She whispered, “I wasn’t.”

I caught it. I caught it because I always caught it. Lena apologized to people when she was scared. The dice, the wall, the air. It was a tic from the foster home and it came back when her body remembered being small. I made a mental note to check on her at the next break, the way I always made a mental note. I would not, when the moment came, actually check. I would not check because checking would embarrass her, and I had spent twenty years not embarrassing her, and the kindness she needed from me had always been the kindness of *not naming the thing*. The tic was hers. She would handle it. She always had.

Angela, action order nine, snapped at Marcus. “Stop screwing us—focus!”

“No metagaming,” I said. “That’s your action. Skipped.”

I narrated, “The party bickers while bandits close in!” Their shouts echoed off the cave walls.

Another bandit rolled a hidden fifteen, dealing twelve damage to Theo. The sting made him curse.

Marcus, action order five, rolled a one. With his +3 Agility, it totaled 4 — still a disaster. He lunged with his dagger but tripped, slicing Theo’s leg instead.

“Son of a bitch!” Theo roared, clutching his shin. “Marcus, you idiot!”

“Sorry, big guy!” Marcus yelped, barely dodging a bandit’s frozen blade mid-swing.

“Why’s he just standing there?” Theo asked, limping.

“They rolled higher,” Angela said, smirking. “It’s your go, gimp.”

“It’s creepy,” Lena murmured, “like he’s waiting to stab us.”

I narrated, “The bandit pauses, bound by the rules, while the trickster stabs his own team!” Everyone cracked up, even Theo through his curses.

Next round, Theo swung again — rolled sixteen, plus +3 Might, total nineteen. His greatsword carved through the last three bandits in a brutal arc. Their bodies collapsed in sprays of too-real blood.

The cave went silent. Too silent.

It was the wrong kind of silent. There was supposed to be ambient. Drip echoes, distant wind threading through the cave mouth, the low boom of the chip’s bass channel marking the end of combat. There were none of those things. There was no ambient layer at all. The chip had stopped suggesting any of the small sounds that made a place a place, and the silence it left was not the

silence of a quiet room but the silence of a room that had been *muted*—the difference your ear can tell instantly without ever being able to explain.

For about a second, the silence held. I felt my own breath in my throat. I felt the gloves vibrate, very faintly, against the pulse in my wrists. I felt, somewhere I could not point to, the soft warm spot behind my left ear where the chip lived, and I felt it pulse once—a single pulse, like a heartbeat that wasn't mine.

Then a burst of golden light exploded from our avatars. Holographic confetti rained down like a cheap party popper. A glitchy, robotic voice boomed: “Level Up, Heroes! Your essence... ess-ess-essence... has ascended! Ding-dong, bitches!”

The confetti transformed into googly-eyed rubber chickens that clucked and pecked before popping with fart noises and a stench reminiscent of rotten eggs.

Everyone's phones buzzed, stats ticking up by one:

Theo: Might 17 (+3), Agility 11 (+0), Intellect 9 (-1), Will 15 (+2), Charm 13 (+1), Perception 11 (+0)

Angela: Might 11 (+0), Agility 13 (+1), Intellect 15 (+2), Will 17 (+3), Charm 11 (+0), Perception 13 (+1)

Marcus: Might 9 (-1), Agility 18 (+4), Intellect 13 (+1), Will 11 (+0), Charm 15 (+2), Perception 14 (+2)

Lena: Might 8 (-1), Agility 13 (+1), Intellect 17 (+3), Will 14 (+2), Charm 10 (+0), Perception 12 (+1)

“What the hell was that?!” Marcus yelled, batting a chicken that honked in his face. “Chickens and fart smells?!”

Angela stared at her phone. “You never said level-ups came with circus crap!”

Theo rubbed his head. “Felt like a bad trip. Explain, GM!”

Lena dodged a clucking hologram. “These chickens are mocking us! What twisted shit is this?”

I grinned at my “camera,” narrating, “And lo, the heroes ascend — in the most batshit way possible.”

To them I said, “Okay, fine. This part’s on me. Every epic needs a little slapstick. The jokes? Mine. The stat bump? That’s the system.”

This was a lie. The chickens were not mine. I had coded the level-up fanfare. I had coded the gold spray, the confetti, the dorky voice line. I had absolutely not coded the chickens, the fart noises, or the smell. The smell, in particular, was nothing I would have approved —the chip’s olfactory system was not a thing you used for jokes, because it was the system most likely to break people out of immersion if you messed with it, and rotten egg in particular was on the internal banned list because it triggered nausea responses in about one tester in eight. I had banned it personally. I had typed the line of code that banned it. And the chickens had just *farted it*.

I kept grinning. The grin was a load-bearing wall.

Theo groaned. “Never letting you near code again.”

I winked at nothing. “Heroes grow stronger; I just made it louder. Sue me.”

The party glared. But the sim didn’t fade.

Just a red message: Complete the quest.

This campaign was going to be wild.

My vision blurred. Glyphs crawled across the cave wall, flickering between stone and static, edges jagged like broken glass. They pulsed warnings I couldn’t read, each throb digging needles behind my eyes.

I wiped the blood from my nose before anyone noticed. Glyphsense never gave answers — only static in the margins.

The word *Glyphsense* sat in my mouth again, and this time I noticed something I hadn’t noticed the first time: it sat there with the comfortable familiarity of a word I had been using for years. Not a word I was learning. A word I was *remembering*. As if the campaign had always had this in it, and I had simply forgotten where I’d put it, and the cave wall was reminding me. The wall was, in fact, helpful. The wall was being kind.

I shook the thought off. The wall was a texture, twelve megabytes of stone and lichen, and I had loaded it personally, and it was not being anything. I was tired. I was tired and I was excited and I was probably running a low-grade fever from sleeping four hours a night for two weeks, and tired people see things. I would sleep when the session was over. I would sleep for a week. I

would write a postmortem on the chicken incident and a postmortem on the inventory flicker and a postmortem on the wall textures and I would tighten every screw in this thing until it sang.

But first: complete the quest.

I looked up. My friends were brushing holographic rubber chickens off their shoulders. The red message pulsed gently in the center of the cave like the cursor of something patient. Theo's blood was beading on his arm in a way that had not faded in the seconds since the combat ended—it should have faded; the chip pulled back haptic damage cues after combat as a baseline. It was not pulling back.

I narrated, low, just to myself: *And so, dear viewers, the heroes step deeper. The cave is no longer a cave. The cave is something waiting.*

I did not say it out loud.

I was not sure, anymore, who was listening.

\* \* \*

***Notebook Entry — ~8:47 PM, between the cave and the first kill***

*And so, dear viewers, the heroes are in motion. The Gilded Mug is behind us. The cave is ahead. The four of them have their character sheets, their first inside-joke about the chickens, and the kind of nervous, pleased energy a party always has on the way to the inaugural fight.*

*They do not know yet that they have started the campaign. I think that is the part the camera will love — the moment the players are inside the story before they understand they are inside one.*

*A note for the production assistant flipping through this notebook in some future season: every line Marcus said in the tavern tonight was a line he has said before. He recycles. He recycles because his energy budget is short and the recycled lines are pre-tested for laughs. The reason I find this charming, in case it is not obvious from the chapter, is that the recycling is itself an act of love. Marcus is making sure the room laughs. He has been making sure the room laughs since he was nineteen years old.*

*I will be including a production assistant in the credits for legal reasons, even though there is, of course, no production assistant. The bit requires it.*

*Curtain rises on Act One.*

## **Want to know what happens next?**

The sample ends here. The rest of the night — and everything the Shadow does with it — is in the full book.

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