

**“THAT’S NOT HOW IT SHOULD END!”: THE EFFECT OF  
READER/PLAYER RESPONSE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF NARRATIVE**

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## Abstract

When the final instalment of the videogame series *Mass Effect* was released in March 2012, many fans used online forums to express displeasure at the game's ending. A surprising number suggested that Victorian writers such as Charles Dickens and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle were far more attentive and responsive to their audience's preferences than modern authors or videogame writers. This thesis, in part, seeks to explore the veracity of this idea through a creative-critical comparison of key examples of Victorian serial fiction and modern episodic videogames, and through the creation of an interactive novella.

The creative-critical element of the thesis is produced in two formats which examine how serial texts may be considered 'interactive' due to the unique opportunity they provide for readers to influence the act of textual production; the extent to which videogames may be considered serial due to their structure, content, and modes of delivery; the controversies surrounding consumption of serials and videogames; and how techniques relating to characterisation, character death and endings operate within serial and interactive forms. Focussing primarily on *Great Expectations*, selected Sherlock Holmes stories, and the *Mass Effect* and *Life is Strange* videogame series, the role of writer and reader as collaborative participants in the creation of narrative content is examined in particular in relation to the tropes of the magic trick, the telepathic exchange and the detective duo.

The creative component of the thesis puts some of these findings into practice by offering a story in which the reader-player gradually comes to realise the effect of their interventions in the narrative. Created using the authoring tool ChoiceScript, *Writers Are Not Strangers* plays with ideas of co-operation and control, and authorship and agency. Using a modular structure and quality-based salience (text dependent on previous user choices) this multi-branching, multiple-ended text attempts to craft a story in response to its reader, while never fully giving over control.

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## How to use this thesis

As you may have guessed, this is not a conventional thesis. There are both offline and online versions. You are currently reading the offline version. While its non-linear structure is maintained, the ‘invisotext’ used in the online version cannot be replicated, so instead, pale grey text is used for these sections. (Like this). You may wish to trace over these sections with a pen, or read the PDF version on an electronic device so you can highlight the text colour to make it easier to read. Although this version could be read from beginning to end, in order to maintain a little of the feel of a hypertext, some sections may seem disordered if approached in this way. The preferred order of reading is given on the contents page, and directions are also given at the end of each section. Words that appear in **bold** may be found in the Glossary. For the full experience, however, please visit the online version, available at <https://thatsnohowitshouldend.wordpress.com/>. When accessing the website for the first time, Wordpress will require the creation of a Wordpress account and an access request (instructions will be provided on the login page). Please complete these steps in order to access all content.

This text is only half of the thesis. The accompanying creative work (*Writers Are Not Strangers*) which makes up the rest of the thesis can be read before or after this text. An offline version is available in Appendix C, but this is provided for reference only and contains some shortened and simplified sequences for clarity. You can find the online version at: <https://dashingdon.com/play/lclark10000/writers-are-not-strangers-alpha/mygame/> . For best results, use Firefox web browser and a desk top or lap top device.

A USB with links to both components is also included at the end of this thesis. Appendices are provided for reference only and are not required reading!

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## List of Characters

CHARLES DICKENS, *or an approximation thereof. Great writer, or lowest common denominator hack, depending on who you ask.*

COMMANDER SHEPARD, *commander of the SS Normandy and protagonist of the videogame trilogy Mass Effect. Shepard's gender is determined by the player, and therefore the pronoun 'they' is used in reference to them throughout this thesis.*

I, *me, the writer of this text. Magician, detective, telepath. Lynda Clark, but also a fictionalisation of Lynda Clark, and of the stereotypical academic writer. With a little bit of you thrown in, of course. Whatever that means.*

SHERLOCK HOLMES, *the great detective. Surely he needs no further introduction?*

VOICES IN THE DARK, *the vocal representation of the conflicting opinions of several leading scholars on the subject of narrative and games.*

YOU, *you, the person reading this, but also an avatar of the author. Telepath, detective, detective's side kick, magic trick participant. All will become clear. Or, perhaps, just even more complicated.*

# 1.0 Untroduction

## 1.1 That's Not How It Should Begin

In the late 90s and early 2000s, I became obsessed with the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. This was before streaming subscriptions arrived and offered a chance to subvert the serial structure through binge watching, and so as each episode aired, I had no option but to wait until the following week for the continuation of the story, my desperation growing. Region-specific releases were far more common and rigid than they are now, meaning that American-made shows generally aired in the US at least a few months before they were screened in the UK and vice versa. However, the arrival of the internet increasingly offered ways to circumvent these serial and regional restrictions.

The popular culture entertainment website *Ain't It Cool News* provided weekly reviews of all the latest television, thereby offering me a portal to the future of my favourite series. I was able to disrupt the temporal flow of serialised information by reading what was going to happen (and had already happened) to my favourite characters. Reviewers were aware that some readers might not want the endings of episodes 'spoiled' and so the juiciest pieces of information were provided in 'invisotext' – white text on a white background which had to be highlighted (by holding down the left mouse button and dragging the cursor) in order to be read.<sup>1</sup> Like this. These invisotext sections introduced me to a new kind of enjoyment. Not only was I breaking the constraints of the serial, of linearity, of time, I was undertaking a magical, tactile, archaeological participation in that constraint-breaking. Making words appear with a

---

<sup>1</sup> Hercules the Strong, 'Herc's Seen New Buffy', *Ain't It Cool News*, 24 March 2003, <<http://www.aintitcool.com/node/14799>> [accessed 12 June 2018].

movement of my hand, I was cast in the role of magician, of detective uncovering invisible ink, of the telepath receiving another's words.

You are about to undertake a journey in which you will do the same, both through uncovering invisible words and hidden footnotes, and discovering the ways in which the serial form invites the reader-player (and the writer) to take on these various roles. You will meet Charles Dickens, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's best-known creation, Sherlock Holmes, chosen for their familiarity, but also because of their many connections to the themes and ideas of seriality, detective work, magic and telepathy. You will also meet Commander Shepard, protagonist of the *Mass Effect* videogame series and the cause of controversy which offers insight into the audience-character relationship.

Section 1.0 provides a brief background to the study of videogames and literature against the backdrop of the 'ludology vs narratology debate', going on to use *Tetris* to illustrate how criticism might move on from this schism. This section also demonstrates the multidisciplinary and multimodal approach used throughout the thesis, highlighting the blurring between fiction and reality, and creative and critical writing, thereby indicating the arbitrary nature of these distinctions. Section 2.0 considers the similarities between the creation, distribution, consumption and reception of Victorian serials and videogames, and what these similarities might suggest about the relationships between reader-players, writer-creators and **texts**. Section 3.0 examines the roles undertaken by readers, writers and characters throughout the reading and writing process, using the analogies of the detective, the magician, and the telepath to frame some of the possible modes of engagement. Section 4.0 explores the paradoxical nature of endings in serial texts and how character death is handled by both audiences and creators. Section 5.0 reflects on the creation of the interactive novella, *Writers Are*

*Not Strangers*, in relation to the difficulties surrounding the blurring of genre, reader-writer roles and digital and physical media.<sup>2</sup>

By your journey's end, you will find that serials such as *Great Expectations* and the Sherlock Holmes stories are **interactive**, and that videogames such as *Mass Effect* and *Life is Strange* are serials. The central argument of this thesis is that seriality provides a useful framework for comparing works created with different media. The thesis' contribution to knowledge is the leveraging of this framework to suggest approaches for writers wishing to embark upon works of **interactive fiction** regardless of technical expertise.

No instructions for how to continue? Perhaps you should investigate?

You will have to get the hang of this if you want to ([continue](#).)

---

<sup>2</sup> Please note: numbering of sections is somewhat arbitrary, since many sections are interlinked and interconnected, and may be read in various orders.

## 1.2 Begin Again

‘You awake to find yourself in a dark room’.<sup>3</sup> To the North, South, East and West, you can see ... nothing. It is dark. You cannot tell if there is ceiling above and can only presume that there is floor below, since you seem to be standing on it. I am here too, in the dark, somewhere. Though we cannot see each other, we sense each other’s presence. I suppose it falls to us to find a way out of this darkness.

There are voices in the dark. ‘Games are always stories’, says one.<sup>4</sup> ‘Storytelling [...] seems eminently suited to sequential formats’, says another.<sup>5</sup> ‘[T]here are sequences of events that do not become or form stories’, pipes up a third and on and on until the room rings with them.<sup>6</sup>

‘What are they arguing about?’ you ask, accepting surprisingly quickly that you are trapped in a dark room with countless disembodied voices.

‘Videogames’, I say, feeling ridiculous. ‘They’re arguing about –’

But you don’t hear the rest, because something bright yellow and spherical flies out of the darkness, hits you squarely in the forehead and bounces to the presumed floor. You crouch down and feel around on the ground (which is, incidentally, smooth and featureless), until your hand closes around the offending object. A ball. You can barely see it in the dark, but it’s fuzzy in the palm of your hand and your fingertips trace rubberised curves across its surface. A tennis ball, then.

‘Oh’, says one of the voices. ‘That wasn’t what I expected you to do’.

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<sup>3</sup> This is the opening line from John Robertson’s *The Dark Room* (2012), a comedic live action videogame which incorporates and subverts many of the tropes and clichés of text adventures (such as the **amnesiac protagonist**), using audience participation. A version can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hvkjP6dqpfY> [accessed 27 November 2015].

<sup>4</sup> Janet Murray, ‘From Game-Story to Cyberdrama’ in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 2-11, (p. 3).

<sup>5</sup> Espen Aarseth, ‘From Espen Aarseth’s Online Response’ in *First Person*, ed. by Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Markku Eskelinen, ‘Towards Computer Game Studies’, in Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan, pp. 36-44 (p. 37) Eskelinen is referring to *Tetris*.

You rub your forehead.

‘Why didn’t you catch it?’ the voice persists. Then, hesitantly: ‘... You weren’t expecting it to tell you a story were you?’<sup>7</sup>

‘Of course not’, you say. ‘But it came at me out of the dark. How could I be expected to catch it without any warning at all?’

Yes. From the player’s perspective, context is always necessary, however minimal. And I am inclined to call that context ‘story’, no matter what the voices may say. There must be a shared understanding between the thrower and the catcher, or the thrower and the dodger, that we are going to play catch, or kerby or dodgeball, even if that understanding is not arrived at verbally. Alistair Brown refers to this understanding of a potential beginning, middle and end as ‘narrative-as-process’.<sup>8</sup> Narrative-as-process covers the ‘sense of an ending’, the idea that ‘a gap between [...] possibility and [...] actuality, [creates] a spatial and visual’ awareness of both what is happening and what could be.<sup>9</sup> While this is something experienced solely by the reader, I would suggest there is another process at work here too which involves both the writer *and* the reader, one which I will call *inferred story*. *Inferred story* relates to the associations made due to intertextual (or **interludic**) references apparent in the game or book. These associations may be widespread (experienced by many people), due to recognisable cultural or societal themes, or more idiosyncratic (experienced by a single person), due to individual experiences, preferences and prejudices. Although, it is important to note, as Marie Laure Ryan stresses, that ‘we can never be sure that sender and receiver have the same story in mind’.<sup>10</sup> Both writer and reader are involved in the creation of inferred

---

<sup>7</sup> Eskelinen, in Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan, p. 36. This is paraphrased, but essentially Eskelinen’s argument is that people do not expect story elements when playing a game and instinctively separate the narratological from the ludic.

<sup>8</sup> Alistair Brown, ‘The Sense of An Ending: The Computer Game *Fallout 3* as a Serial Fiction’ in *Serialization in Popular Culture*, ed by. Rob Allen, and Thijs Van den Berg (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014) pp. 157-169, (p. 166).

<sup>9</sup> Brown, in Allen and Van den Berg, p.166.

<sup>10</sup> Marie Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 11.

story but their relationship to the act of textual production is not identical. This thesis is an exploration of those relationships, and the serial structures that particularly encourage them to develop.

‘What you’re talking about isn’t the same as actual story, though, is it?’ you interrupt. ‘Everything can’t be narrative-as-process or inferred story, surely?’

‘Why can’t –’ My retort is cut short with the realisation that there’s now a light source at the opposite end of the room. The voices have subsided to a muttering, and they are saying the same word, each using it to reinforce their own argument, even though those arguments seem diametrically opposed. A tinny, repetitive tune swells until the voices are lost in it. The light source is something running down the wall. At first you think it’s water, a trickling cataract in an underground cave, light intruding through its entry-point. As you draw closer, you realise the cascade is not liquid but shapes sliding down the wall. As you concentrate, you realise they can be tessellated and begin stacking them neatly at the bottom of the wall with some strange telekinetic power you did not know you possessed and do not question.

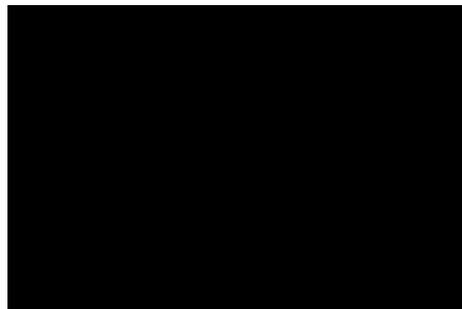
[\(Continue\)](#)

### 1.3 Just a Series of Interlocking Shapes

Those shapes, sliding down the screen, little square ducks and sticks and backwards  
esses, it is often taken for granted that they support the ‘**ludologist**’ argument, and that  
their very existence precludes approaching games from a narrative perspective. *Tetris*.  
There it is, that word you heard echoing over and over.<sup>11</sup> The ludological view of *Tetris*,  
if such a thing truly exists, would be of a game divorced from story, existing purely as  
an abstract interface between player and play experience. Or, as Pruetz posits, a ‘game  
that operates on strictly mechanical terms’.<sup>12</sup> Yet it seems this is not how audiences tend  
to interpret the abstract movement of shapes.

In 1944, Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel presented their test subjects with an  
animation (*Figure 1*) and requested a brief description of what the animation depicted.

13



*Figure 1: Experimental Study of Apparent Behaviour*<sup>12</sup>

It seems the moving shapes ‘tell a story’ that even Heider and Simmel themselves were  
forced to describe using “‘anthropomorphic” words, since a description in purely  
geometrical terms would be too complicated and too difficult to understand’.<sup>14</sup> Story

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<sup>11</sup> See p. 15 of this thesis.

<sup>12</sup> Chris Pruetz, ‘No Status Quo For Nintendo’, *Interface*, 7 (2007)  
<<http://commons.pacificu.edu/inter07/13/>> [accessed 2 January 2016].

<sup>13</sup> Yann Leroux, *Experimental study of apparent behavior. Fritz Heider & Marianne Simmel. 1944*,  
YouTube, 26 December 2010, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9TWwG4SFWQ>> [accessed 8  
January 2016].

<sup>14</sup> Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel, ‘An Experimental Study of Apparent Behavior’, *American Journal  
of Psychology*, 57 (1944), 243-259 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1416950>> (p. 244).

helped the experiment's subjects (and researchers) make sense of the abstraction, moving it out of the realm of complex geometry and into the relatable everyday. Many participants construed this little dance of geometric figures as a fight, with '[t]he personality of [the large triangle] [...] judged with great uniformity'.<sup>15</sup> Most were in agreement that Big Triangle was a big bully. That the triangle had a personality was never in question. This thesis is concerned with character and characterisation, then, not because of a slavish adherence to narratological principles, but because the reader-player is likely to be concerned with character and characterisation, even where there appears to be none.

As the 'apparent behaviour' experiment shows, contrary to Eskelinen and his ball-throwing ('Yes, Eskelinen, we know it was you!' I yell into the dark) those operating 'outside theory' *do* struggle to 'distinguish between narrative situations and gaming situations', or, at times, actively seek to merge the two.<sup>16</sup> Players tell the story of their gaming experiences as if these virtual gameworld experiences are as meaningful as those in the real world. Although, as Astrid Ensslin observes, such a distinction is somewhat arbitrary, since the 'real' may cover 'both what we consider to be our "actual" world(s) of work and everyday life as well as our "second lives" in virtual game worlds and communities'.<sup>17</sup> Sometimes these player-described narrative-as-process stories of high scores or against-the-odds reversals of fortunes are insufficient, and players seek to further narrativise their experience through the creation of **paratexts** such as fan fictions, fan theories, **Let's Plays**, blogs and so on, thereby prolonging and deepening their engagement with the gameworld. In the case of *Tetris*, those purely mechanical blocks are given an existence outside of their **mechanics** by players eager to

---

<sup>15</sup> Heider and Simmel, p. 248.

<sup>16</sup> Eskelinen, in Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan, p. 36.

<sup>17</sup> Astrid Ensslin, *The Language of Gaming* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 25.

develop yet more story from their own inferred story experiences.<sup>18</sup> The blocks’ interlocking movement, one of the aspects Pruett was doubtless referring to as ‘strictly mechanical’ is frequently ascribed a sexual motive, or a militaristic one.<sup>19</sup> The blocks themselves are given personalities and backstories. Murray and those players writing ‘about the adventures and feelings of *Tetris* blocks’ are merely tapping into that same desire for personification seen in Heider and Simmel’s test subjects.<sup>20</sup>

Murray’s much-maligned reading of *Tetris* as the ‘perfect enactment of the overtasked lives of Americans,’ then, is mistaken not because it seeks to give narrativised meaning to an abstract game, but because of its limited focus.<sup>21</sup> Not only does Murray’s comment assume *Tetris* is by, for, and representative of, Americans, ironically it is primarily concerned with the game’s mechanics. In focussing on those falling blocks, Murray allows the other inferred story in *Tetris* to slide down her screen unnoticed, just like a ‘ludologist’. This thesis takes the post-structuralist stance that such categories as ‘ludologist’ and ‘**narratologist**’, or ‘reader’ and ‘writer’, or ‘creative’ and ‘critical’, or even ‘Victorian serial’ and ‘videogame’ can only ever be starting points. Before long, these seemingly distinct categories begin to merge and bleed into one another, and while of course, each **text** contains various distinctive elements, the points of similarity and crossover are more numerous than might initially be supposed.

For an example analysis of *Tetris* which takes inferred story and common player reactions into account, ([continue](#))

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<sup>18</sup> Jana Rambusch, Tarja Susi, Stefan Ekman and Ulf Wilhelmsson, ‘A Literary Excursion Into the Hidden (Fan) Fictional Worlds of Tetris, Starcraft, and Dreamfall’ in *Proceedings of the 2009 DIGRA International Conference* (2009) <<http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/a-literary-excursion-into-the-hidden-fan-fictional-worlds-of-tetris-starcraft-and-dreamfall/>> [accessed 6 June 2018].

<sup>19</sup> CF Mikoshi, ‘Temptation of the Maiden’, FanFiction.net (2009), <<https://www.fanfiction.net/s/2111243/1/Temptation-of-the-Maiden>> [accessed 2 January 2016]; Iamaprophetofthelord, ‘Tetris release’, FanFiction.net (2012) <<https://www.fanfiction.net/s/7908370/1/Tetris-release>> [accessed 2 January 2016]; Fieryterminator, ‘Tetris: a life, a love, a tragedy’ [sic], FanFiction.net, (2013), <<https://www.fanfiction.net/s/9022878/1/tetris-a-life-a-love-a-tragedy>> [accessed 02 January 2016].

<sup>20</sup> Rambusch, Susi, Ekman and Wilhelmsson, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2017), p. 178.

To skip to concluding remarks on the Ludology vs Narratology debate and its legacy,

[\(go to p. 25\)](#)

### 1.3.1 Eastern Blocks

Released at the tail-end of the Cold War, *Tetris* was first introduced to me via that start-up screen, embedded in the GameBoy's sturdy beige blockiness. The handheld console

Image Redacted

Figure 2: *Tetris* Start-up Screen<sup>21</sup>

itself evinced the sturdy concrete Eastern-blociness shown frequently on *Newsround* to my uncomprehending child eyes. The onion domes of Saint Basil's Cathedral beneath (what we understand from the accompanying stars to be) the moon.<sup>22</sup> Non-threatening but cold. Cold and distant as Russia itself. The music, a tinny, chiptune rendering of Russian folk tune Korobeiniki, not the only musical option, but the default and most strongly associated with those falling blocks.<sup>23</sup> 'Rather than presenting Russian culture as universally negative, the game's music, in-game visuals, and marketing all play into presenting Soviet culture as exotic yet positive', de Oliveira and Bisoffi explain, making their case for *Tetris*'s innate Russianness.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps this goes some way towards explaining why Murray neglected to associate *Tetris* with Russia. The music is cheerful, friendly even, proposing an alternative view to those towering cold onion domes, a view of the people cossack dancing in the square beneath. Arms folded across their chests, noses red with the Soviet cold and maybe a little Russian vodka, legs kicking to folk music. Cold and

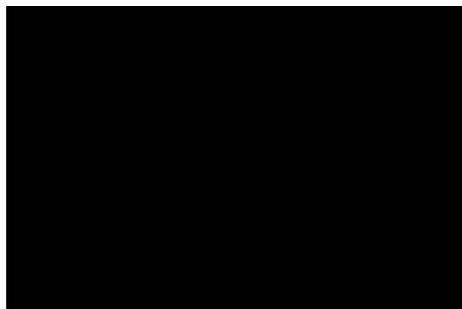
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<sup>22</sup> QualityChiptune, *Tetris Title Screen (Game Boy)*, YouTube, January 29 2012, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iddH98L4TAQ>> [accessed 16 January 2016].

<sup>23</sup> Raul P. de Oliveira and Rafael Augusto Bonin Bisoffi, 'Nationalism in an abstract game: How the Tetris soundtrack determines its cultural markedness' in *Proceedings of SBGames 2013* (2013), 386-394 <<http://www.sbgames.org/sbgames2013/proceedings/artedesign/46-dt-paper.pdf>>, (p. 392); Alexey Pajitnov and Vladimir Pothilko, *Tetris* (1989), Nintendo Game Boy.

<sup>24</sup> de Oliveira and Bisoffi, p. 392, footnote.

distant, but folk. People. And just as Heider and Simmel's participants were not alone in the view that Big Triangle was a belligerent devil, de Oliveira and Bisoffi, and I, are not alone in our interpretation of *Tetris* as synonymous with concepts of Russianness.<sup>25</sup>



*Figure 3: Complete History of the Soviet Union, Arranged to the Melody of Tetris*<sup>25</sup>

Pig with the Face of a Boy's song and music video *Complete History of the Soviet Union Arranged to the Melody of Tetris* describes *Tetris* both as a gaming experience and a metaphor for the early Soviet State, albeit in rather a tongue-in-cheek manner.<sup>26</sup> The grainy imagery evokes both footage from the era depicted and the original game screen in its earliest iteration. The singer-narrator describes both the player experience of working hard to configure the right combination of blocks and the experience of a Soviet worker attempting to earn a living through repetitive work. The song also draws similarities between the need for uniformity in both *Tetris* and the Soviet collective state. The increasing speed of the music reflects a marker of progression in the game and also aligns the unravelling of the player's systematic deployment of blocks due to the increased descent speed, with the unravelling of Russia's economy and infrastructure under Stalin. The initial grainy images give way to full colour and greater clarity, much like *Tetris*' own graphical journey across different platforms. Finally, the video compares the cyclical nature of losing a game of *Tetris* and beginning a new game with the cyclical nature of Russian foreign and economic policy.

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<sup>25</sup> See pp. 16-17 of this thesis.

<sup>26</sup> Pig with the Face of a Boy, *Complete History of the Soviet Union, Arranged to the Melody of Tetris*, YouTube, 12 July 2010, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hWTFG3J1CP8>> [accessed 5 January 2016].

A similar reading arises in one of the fan fictions: ‘[...] the oppressors marched ever onward, bringing their heavy loads to bear on the already-burdened [...] when the tower could reach no higher, when society collapsed under its own weight [...] a new world came to be, a blank slate, waiting once again to be filled! [...] And behold; all found a place [...] every protrusion was levelled, and every gap was filled’.<sup>27</sup> In both these re-imaginings, many of these comparisons are deployed for laughs, but the complex interweaving of the experience of *Tetris* with concepts of Russianness is obvious throughout.

## Image Redacted

However, the storification of *Tetris* is not limited solely to imaginings surrounding its abstract shapes, or its inherent

Russianness. The process of playing *Tetris*, the desire for life to be as easily

Figure 4: *Tetris in the home*<sup>29</sup>

manipulated as those falling blocks, is

implicitly present in these various readings and fan fictions, but it is also apparent in our everyday lives.<sup>28</sup> Kristine Jorgensen describes the ‘**bleed effect**’ in terms of role-playing games, as the process whereby ‘real world thoughts and emotions [...]

increasingly bleed into the role identity, and vice versa’.<sup>29</sup> If we are capable of

## Image Redacted

ascribing a personality to a Big Triangle

Figure 5: *Tetris at the supermarket*<sup>29</sup>

and to L-Shaped Blocks, then we are just as capable of letting those shapes, and our associations with manoeuvring and tessellating them bleed into our real lives too.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Laszlo Korossy, ‘High Score: 1917’, FanFiction.net, <<https://www.fanfiction.net/s/4074480/1/High-Score-1917>> [accessed 2 January 2016].

<sup>28</sup> Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, p. 178.

<sup>29</sup> Kristine Jorgensen, ‘Game Characters as Narrative Devices. A Comparative Analysis of *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Mass Effect 2*’, *Eludamos*, 4 (2010), 315-331 (p. 319).

<sup>30</sup> For more on the Big Triangle, see pp. 16-17 of this thesis. For a story about the L-shaped block, see: ichivictus, ‘Message to You, the Player’, FanFiction.net (2013),

<<https://www.fanfiction.net/s/9023052/1/Message-to-You-the-Player>> [accessed 8 January 2016]. *Figure*

And, it seems, as Waskul and Lust observe, we

*Figure 6: Tetris on the building site*<sup>29</sup>

have. Just as the tetrominoes interlock and then

disappear, '[t]he neat distinctions between person, player, and persona erode into utterly permeable and interlocking moments of experience'.<sup>31</sup> Innovative storage solutions,

## Image Redacted

*Figure 7: Tetris housing*<sup>29</sup>

efficiently ordered supermarket conveyor belts, construction sites and ill-advised experiments in architecture all draw comparisons to the orderliness (and disruption) experienced in the game.

Olli Tapio Leino's discussion of *Tetris* combines personification, the multi-directional bleed between 'real' world and game world, and the unprompted expansion of the fictional world all within this short quote:

*Tetris* seems to be able to take on a much more substantial authorial leadership position: it not only tells me what to do, but also judges my performance and responds accordingly. There is no need to benevolently read the use-context as 'implying' instructions, as there is no shortage of things one must do in order to survive [...] It is as if Kaprow was hiding

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4: DZine Trip Publication Team, 'Explore Swedish Designer Michael Johansson's Real Life Tetris', DZine Trip, 31 January 2013, <<http://dzinetrip.com/explore-swedish-designer-michael-johansson-real-life-tetris/>> [accessed 23 October 2018]; *Figure 5*: Anonymous, 'Tetris', What's Meme?, 11 July 2013, <<http://www.whatsmeme.com/2013/07/tetris.html>> [accessed 23 October 2018]; *Figure 6*: Sophie Gadd, '19 Ridiculously Satisfying Times Tetris Happened in Real Life', BuzzFeed, 19 July 2016, <<https://www.buzzfeed.com/sophiegadd/times-tetris-actually-happened-in-real-life>>, [accessed 23 October 2018]; *Figure 7*: OFIS Architects, 'Tetris Apartments', Arch Daily, 12 July 2008, <<https://www.archdaily.com/3547/tetris-apartments-ofis-arhitekti>> [accessed 23 October 2018].

<sup>31</sup> Dennis Waskul and Matt Lust, 'Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing', *Symbolic Interaction*, 27 (2004), 333-356, (p. 349).

behind the St. Basil's Cathedral depicted in the backdrop, directing his amateur actor.<sup>32</sup>

Here Leino demonstrates the logical continuation of Heider and Simmel's unavoidable personification in placing *Tetris* (rather than its creators) as an author; the 'bleed' of Russianness via St. Basil's Cathedral as a quasi-real setting; and the introduction of a real-life director into this quasi-real setting to help make sense of *Tetris*' directorial qualities.

*Tetris*, then, not only relies on 'our awareness that the potential ending is one in which blocks line up in the most efficient tessellation', but infers a story, conveyed via its start-up screen, gameplay and music, of an experience of relentlessness, combined with a vague, almost comic sense of Russianness.<sup>33</sup> It is a story that many of us, (players of *Tetris*, not people in general), incorporate unthinkingly into our daily lives and our concepts of Russia. On the other hand, to paraphrase Eskelinen, ludology is not completely useless.<sup>34</sup> No interpretation of a game would be possible without seriously considering its ludic dimensions, as shown during this analysis of *Tetris*, and even in Murray's reading. However, as this reading has demonstrated, there are many other elements to be analysed, most of which do not fall neatly into the ludic or narratological categories: effects of and variances between different versions on different hardware and software; audio and art; commercial, social and historical influences; and popular discourse and audience response.<sup>35</sup>

'Which', I say, an unseen voice close to your ear,<sup>36</sup> 'brings me rather nicely to where I'm going with all this'.

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<sup>32</sup> Olli T. Leino, 'Playability and its Absence—A post-ludological critique', in: *Proceedings of the 2013 DiGRA International Conference: DeFragging Game Studies* (2014), 1-16 <<http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/playability-and-its-absence-a-post-ludological-critique/>> [accessed 9 June 2018] (p. 5).

<sup>33</sup> Brown, in Allen and Van den Berg, p. 166.

<sup>34</sup> Eskelinen, in Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan, p. 37. (Eskelinen actually suggests that 'narratology is not completely useless').

<sup>35</sup> Ensslin's **ludostylistic toolkit** was instructive in this regard - *Literary Gaming* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2014), pp. 53-54.

<sup>36</sup> Perhaps even inside it.

(Continue)

## 1.4 A False Separation

The ludology versus narratology debate is much like the ‘console wars’ of the 1990s in that it is misnamed and oversimplified.<sup>37</sup> The Sega Mega Drive (Genesis in the US) and Super Nintendo Entertainment System were pitted against each other in their Western marketing campaigns, presented as a binary choice.<sup>38</sup> In every battle, there has to be a loser, and at first glance, it seems as if that loser was Sega. After a gradual decline in profits and unit sales, apparently due to pricing and advertising strategies (or lack thereof), Sega faded into near obscurity, while Nintendo remain widely known.<sup>39</sup> For now.<sup>40</sup>

Scratch the surface, though, and the situation looks somewhat different. The idea of a ‘battle’ and of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ are rendered meaningless. Firstly, these two apparently distinct developers possess numerous similarities. Each has a company mascot, Mario for Nintendo and Sonic for Sega. Each relied on their in-house development teams to produce the vast majority of their flagship titles. Each grossly underestimated Sony’s potential in the console market.<sup>41</sup> Secondly, these ‘declining’ giants are still hugely visible. Sega’s role has changed – it now exists solely as a software publisher, but its titles continue to achieve critical acclaim, even if sales are not as strong as the company desires.<sup>42</sup> Thirdly, Sega’s games are now appearing on

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<sup>37</sup> Venkatesh Shankar and Barry L. Bayus, 'Network Effects and Competition: An Empirical Analysis of the Home Video Game Industry', *Strategic Management Journal*, 24 (2003), 375-384 (p. 377).

<sup>38</sup> Gavin Greene, 'The art and legacy of the 90's console war', *Venture Beat* (2015), <<http://venturebeat.com/2015/11/28/the-art-and-legacy-of-the-90s-console-war/>> [accessed 2 February 2016]

<sup>39</sup> Shankar and Bayus, p. 382.

<sup>40</sup> Latest sales figures suggest Nintendo has gone into decline, while an overall analysis shows PlayStation now dominates the console market. CF: Matt Matthews, 'Hardware Revisions Not Stopping Nintendo's Decline', *Gamasutra* (2015), <[http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/MattMatthews/20150130/235357/Hardware\\_Revisions\\_Not\\_Stopping\\_Nintendos\\_Decline.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/MattMatthews/20150130/235357/Hardware_Revisions_Not_Stopping_Nintendos_Decline.php)> [accessed 19 January 2016]; Alberto Alvisi, Alessandro Narduzzo and Marco Zamarian, 'PlayStation and the Power of Unexpected Consequences', *Information, Communication and Society*, 6 (2003), 608-627 (p. 609).

<sup>41</sup> Alvisi, Narduzzo and Zamarian, pp. 613-616.

<sup>42</sup> CF: PC Gamer Staff, 'Game of the Year 2014: Alien Isolation', *PC Gamer*, 18 December 2014, <<http://www.pcgamer.com/game-of-the-year-2014-alien-isolation/>> [accessed 2 February 2016]; Samit

Nintendo's consoles. The former rivals are not only reconciled, they are working together. Nintendo versus Sega was pushed forward as a marketing campaign because '[a] multifront offensive is much harder to package [...] than a binary duel between two, distinct foes'.<sup>43</sup> However, the likelihood is that people 'will choose the system on the basis of the kind of games they enjoy the most'.<sup>44</sup> The 'console war', therefore, offers a suitable analogy for the 'narratology versus ludology' conflict. The two seemingly polarised approaches actually contain various similarities (both approaches also include at least passing references to the alternative approach), and the positioning of one against the other ignores the many other aspects of videogames relevant to critique.

The idea that ludological and narratological concerns can be separated from one another should therefore be regarded as unsustainable, and this applies to a far wider array of games than traditional '**ludologists**' might have us believe. As James Newman argues, 'ludic approaches that harbour sensitivity to the player and his/her activity are perhaps not so opposed to narrative analysis as they protest' since centralising the 'reader' in this way has its roots in narrative criticism.<sup>45</sup> Espen Aarseth, often labelled a ludologist despite drawing heavily on literary criticism in his analysis, on the one hand warns against 'colonising attempts' from other fields of study, a phrase which many have interpreted as isolationist, but closes with 'You are all invited!'<sup>46</sup> This second comment suggests a willingness to embrace a multi-disciplinary hotchpotch of academics into games studies, in much the same way that Ian Bogost's more recent

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Sarkar, '2015 BAFTA Awards nominations topped by: Alien Isolation, Monument Valley', *Polygon*, 2 February 2015, <<http://www.polygon.com/2015/2/10/8013043/2015-bafta-games-awards-nominations-nominees>> [accessed 2 February 2016]; Matthew Handrahan, 'Sega laments "weak" game sales even as hard numbers rise', *Gamesindustry.biz*, 11 May 2015, <<http://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2015-05-11-sega-laments-weak-game-sales-even-as-hard-numbers-rise>> [accessed 15 February 2016].

<sup>43</sup> Greene, NP.

<sup>44</sup> Alvisi, Narduzzo and Zamarian, p. 612.

<sup>45</sup> James Newman, *Videogames* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005) p. 95.

<sup>46</sup> Espen Aarseth, 'Computer Game Studies, Year One', *Game Studies*, 1 (2001), <<http://gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html>> [accessed 11 June 2018].

‘slutty ontology’ embraces a multi-disciplinary approach to the study of games.<sup>47</sup>

Games can be rule-based, abstract and linear; or free-form, tangible worlds to be explored multi-directionally; they may be visual, textual, or aural in emphasis; their goal may be the accumulation of points, the resolution of a narrative, or pure entertainment. Games are multi-faceted, and our approach should be too.

Ludonarratology, narratoludism: neither suits because one aspect is always championed above the other. In reality these two aspects are frequently in flux, often within a single play experience, and are accompanied by many other elements.

Eskelinen suggests that narratological readings of games should be avoided because games are made up of ‘actions and events, the relations of which are not completely fixed’.<sup>48</sup> For Eskelinen, the fact that no two play sessions of the same game will be exactly the same is problematic, because this means there is no definitive version of the object of study. Yet traditional texts may be edited, amended, adapted, and exist in multiple competing forms at once. Subsequent re-readings may also result in new interpretations, as Wolfgang Iser observes: ‘one text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential’.<sup>49</sup> Texts do not possess this fixity Eskelinen appears to ascribe to them. Therefore a rigid analysis framework is unsuitable for the study of any **text**.

As the thoughts come faster and faster, I stand, transfixed by the hurtling shapes, and they are plummeting now, racing down and down, piling up and up, until it looks like they’ll fill the whole wall. You are looking up at the presumed ceiling, the gap where the shapes are falling in. Words are trickling down now too, slower than the shapes, but forming a shape of their own.

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<sup>47</sup> Ian Bogost, ‘Videogames are a Mess’, *bogost.com*, (2009) <[http://bogost.com/writing/videogames\\_are\\_a\\_mess/](http://bogost.com/writing/videogames_are_a_mess/)> [accessed 27 November 2015].

<sup>48</sup> Eskelinen, in Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan, 2004, p. 43.

<sup>49</sup> Wolfgang Iser, ‘The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach’, in *Reader Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. by Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 9<sup>th</sup> ed., pp. 50-69 (p. 55).

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Another voice rings out through the cave (you're relatively certain now that this is a cave, albeit a rather odd one), joining with mine, making me realise I've been speaking my musings aloud. Or have I?<sup>51</sup>

'As far as I see it, a ludologist is simply a game scholar, whatever [...] his or her position on narrative and games',<sup>52</sup> says the voice, as the letters continue their slow slide to the ground, finding a way between the stacks of interlocked L-shapes and backward esses.

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<sup>50</sup> Gonzalo Frasca, 'Ludologists love stories, too: notes from a debate that never took place', *Ludology.org*, <[http://www.ludology.org/articles/frasca\\_levelUP2003.pdf](http://www.ludology.org/articles/frasca_levelUP2003.pdf)> [accessed 1 December 2015]. This is how the title of this article looked when I attempted to copy it into my reference database. Following my other reading, it reminded me of that most elusive *Tetris* shape...

<sup>51</sup> See pp. 104-106 of this thesis.

<sup>52</sup> Frasca, p. 3.

‘[T]here is a serious misunderstanding [...] that some scholars believe that ludologists hold a radical position that completely discards narrative from videogames [...]’ continues the voice, and the letters and words have found their way straight down the middle, between those blocks and Ts.<sup>53</sup>

‘The real issue here is not if games are narratives or not, but if we can really expand our knowledge on games by taking whatever route we follow’.<sup>54</sup> The letters reach the ground and when they do, there’s a rewarding little tone and the whole wall shimmers and disappears, leaving a way through.

[\(Continue\)](#)

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<sup>53</sup> Frasca, p. 3.

<sup>54</sup> Frasca, p. 7.

## 1.5 Puzzling Parallel Mine Carts

You emerge to find yourself in an underground cavern. It's larger than the last, and dimly lit by small lamps nailed to the wooden braces supporting the rough-hewn ceiling. Two mine carts sit side by side on parallel tracks. Each is covered with a tarpaulin, the contents beneath lumpy, but obscured. There are suggestions of corners poking against the tarpaulin's stretched surface. The room is completely sealed.<sup>55</sup> The tracks lead to a recently bricked-in wall, disappearing underneath.

(To turn back the tarpaulin, [go to p.32](#))

(To investigate the wall, [go to p. 33](#))

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<sup>55</sup> Not claustrophobic, are you?

### 1.5.1 (a) Beneath the Tarpaulin

After a brief struggle, you pull back the tarpaulin on one cart. It's full of old books, slim volumes bound in green leather.<sup>56</sup> You rifle through the crinkling yellow pages but nothing seems to be of particular relevance. The shapes beneath the other mine cart's tarp look much the same, but as this place is already proving strange and unexpected, you tug back the corner of that one too. This cart is piled high with videogame consoles. Boxy black Atari 2600s mixed in with the sleek white casings of re-issued PlayStations, chunky old Game Boys on top of sleek new Nintendo DSs, Sega Game Gears and Master Systems and Mega Drives and Dreamcasts, all piled up together. A very odd thing to find in an abandoned mine, but then this whole scenario is odd.

All that remains is to examine the wall, ([go to p. 35](#))

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<sup>56</sup> Dickens' signature colour for his monthly serial instalments. Rob Allen, "'Boz Versus Dickens': Paratext, Pseudonyms and Serialization in the Victorian Literary Marketplace', in *From Compositors to Collectors: Essays on the Book-Trade 1660-2010.*, ed. by John Hinks and Matthew Day (Delaware and London: Oak Knoll Press and the British Library, 2012), pp. 155-179 (p. 174).

### 1.5.1 (b) The Wall

The wall is covered with engravings, all unattributed quotations, some words and phrases scratched out to the point of illegibility, as if an overzealous stonemason got carried away with the movement of their chisel.

Perhaps you should examine the mine carts before attempting to discern their meaning.

Examine the mine carts by [going to p. 34](#)

### 1.5.1.1 Inside the Mine Carts

After a brief struggle, you pull back the tarpaulin on one cart. It's full of old books, slim volumes bound in green leather.<sup>57</sup> You rifle through the crinkling yellow pages but nothing seems to be of particular relevance. The shapes beneath the other mine cart's tarp look much the same, but as this place is already proving strange and unexpected, you tug back the corner of that one too. This cart is piled high with videogame consoles. Boxy black Atari 2600s, mixed in with the sleek white casings of re-issued PlayStations, chunky old Game Boys, sleek new Nintendo DS, Sega Game Gears and Master Systems and Mega Drives and Dreamcasts, all piled up together. A very odd thing to find in an abandoned mine, but then this whole scenario is odd.

All that remains is to examine the wall ([go to p. 35](#))

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<sup>57</sup> Dickens' signature colour for his monthly serial instalments. Rob Allen, "Boz Versus Dickens": Paratext, Pseudonyms and Serialization in the Victorian Literary Marketplace', in *From Compositors to Collectors: Essays on the Book-Trade 1660-2010.*, ed. by John Hinks and Matthew Day (Delaware and London: Oak Knoll Press and the British Library, 2012), pp. 155-179 (p. 174).

## 1.6 The Writing on the Wall

The wall is covered with engravings, all unattributed quotations, some words and phrases scratched out to the point of illegibility, as if an overzealous stonemason got carried away with the movement of their chisel. Perhaps you experienced déjà vu there? A repetition, like a little glitch in the Matrix? Don't worry, that's normal here.

The first reads:

*NOT BEING ~~PUBLISHED~~ PERIODICALLY, DID NOT OCCUPY THE MIND FOR SO LONG A TIME, NOR KEEP ALIVE SO CONSTANT AN EXPECTATION; NOR, BY THIS DWELLING UPON THE MIND, AND DISTILLING THEMSELVES INTO IT, AS IT WERE DROP BY DROP, DID THEY POSSESS IT SO LARGELY [...] THEY ARE NOT THE MORE WICKED FOR BEING ~~PUBLISHED~~ SO CHEAP, AND AT REGULAR INTERVALS; BUT YET THESE TWO CIRCUMSTANCES MAKE THEM SO PECULIARLY INJURIOUS.*

Alongside that:

*THE ADDICTION PROCESS BEGINS WITH A PREOCCUPATION WITH ~~WANTING~~. ~~WANTERS~~ WILL THINK ABOUT ~~WANTING~~ [...] AND OFTEN FANTASIZE ABOUT ~~WANTING~~ WHEN THEY SHOULD BE CONCENTRATING ON OTHER THINGS. INSTEAD OF THINKING ABOUT THE PAPER THAT NEEDS TO BE COMPLETED FOR SCHOOL, OR GOING TO CLASS, OR STUDYING AT THE LIBRARY, THE ~~WANTER~~ BECOMES COMPLETELY FOCUSED ON ~~WANTING~~. ~~WANTERS~~ START TO MISS DEADLINES, NEGLECT*

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<sup>58</sup> Thomas Arnold, quoted in Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund, *The Victorian Serial* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), p. 2. The word obscured in both cases is 'published'. My capitalisation.

*WORK OR SOCIAL ACTIVITIES AS ~~GAMING~~ BECOMES THEIR MAIN PRIORITY.*<sup>59</sup>

And so on, from ceiling to floor. Are they both describing the same thing? Whatever it is sounds dangerous, and yet, you don't sense any immediate threat. You look back at the mine carts and wonder.

[\(Continue\)](#)

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<sup>59</sup> Kimberley Young, 'Understanding Online Gaming Addiction and Treatment Issues for Adolescents', *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 37 (2009), 355-372 (p. 360). The obscured words are 'gamer' or 'gaming'. My capitalisation.

# 2.0 Videogames and the Victorian Serial

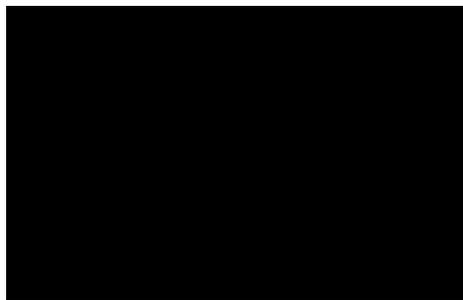
## 2.1 Strange and Dangerous

‘Let’s start with that wall’, you say, running your fingers over the ‘addiction’ quote, before striding back to the cart. ‘We can probably assume whoever said this was describing videogames’.

‘But –’ I begin.<sup>1</sup>

‘The track that ends in the “drop by drop” quote’, you continue, ignoring me, ‘the one that implies poison dripping into an unsuspecting ear,<sup>2</sup> or drops of water against a cavern wall, slowly wearing it away, that’s the one with the book-filled mine cart. Therefore, we can safely assume this quote refers to Victorian serials’.

I’m faintly surprised, both by you suddenly becoming an amateur sleuth, and the idea that Victorian serials were once seen to be as unsavoury as videogames.



*Figure 8: Glenn Beck on hacking heuristics in Watchdogs (from 00:05:00)<sup>3</sup>*

The moral panic surrounding videogames is well documented. As Newman observes, rants such as Glenn Beck’s (*Figure 8*), are part of a long history of mistrust and denigration surrounding ‘popular forms’, which ‘are frequently presented as uncouth, dangerous and harmful by those lacking the knowledge and strategies to make

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<sup>1</sup> Victorian serials were also often referred to as addictive, primarily in terms of gluttony and greed, but also in relation to alcoholism and dependence. Deborah Wynne, *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Why are you looking at me?

sense of them'.<sup>3</sup> However, certain real-world incidents and behaviours may make such reactions seem less like 'moral panic' and more like 'sensible moral concern'. For example, following a mass shooting, perpetrator Anders Breivik spoke of *Call of Duty*'s role in providing him with 'experience,' and members of the videogame pressure group, GamerGate, launched a lengthy campaign of death threats and harassment directed at videogame developers and journalists.<sup>4</sup> Yet, despite these apparently damning events, various psychological studies conclude that links between violent videogames and real-world violence are not only 'unproven' but that 'the wealth of available data simply weighs against any causal relationship', and while players may show a more tolerant attitude towards violent behaviour in others, their own behaviour does not change.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the 'danger' of videogames is often taken for granted even when unfounded.

## Image Redacted

Figure 9: Results of a national poll of 800 US voters<sup>6</sup>

But books? Books are safe, educational, intellectual.

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<sup>3</sup> Figure 8: yazakchattiest, 'Glenn Beck: Violent Video Games', YouTube, 28 May 2014, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olQll0\\_6yZQ&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olQll0_6yZQ&feature=youtu.be)> [accessed 19 April 2016] (0:05:00); Newman, *Videogames*, p. 61.

<sup>4</sup> Helen Pidd, 'Anders Breivik "trained" for shooting attacks by playing Call of Duty', *Guardian*, section 'World', 19 April 2012, <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/19/anders-breivik-call-of-duty>> [accessed 12 June 2018]; Keith Stuart, 'Zoe Quinn: 'All GamerGate has done is ruin people's lives'', *Guardian*, section 'Technology', 3 December 2014, <<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/dec/03/zoe-quinn-gamergate-interview>> [accessed 19 April 2016].

<sup>5</sup> Christopher J. Ferguson, 'The School Shooting/Violent Video Game Link: Causal Relationship or Moral Panic?', *Journal of Investigative Psychology and Offender Profiling*, 5 (2008), 25-37, (p. 34); Ran Wei, 'Effects of Playing Violent Videogames on Chinese Adolescents' Pro-Violence Attitudes, Attitudes Toward Others, and Aggressive Behavior', *CyberPsychology & Behaviour*, 10 (2007), 371-380, (p. 379).

<sup>6</sup> Public Policy Polling, *National Survey Results*, 7 February 2013, <[http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/pdf/2011/PPP\\_Release\\_National\\_207.pdf](http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/pdf/2011/PPP_Release_National_207.pdf)> [accessed 19 April 2016] p. 44.

‘Books never encouraged anyone to kill themselves or others’, I tell you.

‘In 1840, a valet claimed that the murder of his master was inspired by the popular crime novel *Jack Sheppard*’.<sup>7</sup>

‘Well, ok,’ I concede, ‘but no-one will ever hear sniggers from acquaintances who say: “Oh, well I’d love to *read a book* but I just don’t have the time!”’

‘In 1850 emancipated slave William Wells Brown observed, with some pity, a young man at Oxford university “throwing away his time over some trashy novel”’.<sup>8</sup>

I wonder where you’re getting all this.

[\(Continue\)](#)

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<sup>7</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998), pp. 71-72.

<sup>8</sup> Kate Flint, ‘The Victorian Novel and its Readers’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Deirdre David (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 17-36 (p. 17).

## 2.2 Your Cruel Device

As Patrick Brantlinger notes: ‘In reviews of sensation fiction throughout the 1860s, metaphors of moral corruption, disease and poison proliferate’.<sup>9</sup> Unsurprisingly, various comparisons have already been drawn between the moral panic associated with videogames and those occurring in other media.<sup>10</sup> However, there seem to be similarities between the concerns surrounding videogames and Victorian serials that go beyond generalised moral uproar and relate instead to matters of form, consumption and content. Reframing videogames as sensationalist serials and making the case for Victorian serials as an early form of ‘interactive’ fiction, may offer insight into the processes and techniques associated with the production and reception of both forms.

Some Victorian commentators believed the serial text to be ‘a particularly influential form of communication’, and that experiencing an event via a creative medium was tantamount to performing it in real life.<sup>11</sup> This is somewhat akin to Glenn Beck’s assumption that players of *Watchdogs* will become hackers outside of the game. George Eliot claims people are “imitative beings”, suggesting texts “modified” the minds of readers.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in a review of *Great Expectations*, Margaret Oliphant suggests that Dickens ‘impress[es] distinct images of horror, surprise, and pain on the mind of his reader’.<sup>13</sup> As Deborah Wynne notes, Oliphant implies ‘the power of the serial form to intensify Dickens’s “strange and dangerous” story’, as if the reader is largely powerless against the serial’s brainwashing effects.<sup>14</sup> Is this shared attitude

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<sup>9</sup> Brantlinger, p. 143.

<sup>10</sup> CF. Newman, *Videogames*, p. 61; Kate Summerscale, ‘Penny dreadfuls: the Victorian equivalent of video games’, *Guardian*, 30 April 2016, <[http://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/30/penny-dreadfuls-victorian-equivalent-video-games-kate-summerscale-wicked-boy?CMP=twl\\_books\\_b-gdnbooks](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/30/penny-dreadfuls-victorian-equivalent-video-games-kate-summerscale-wicked-boy?CMP=twl_books_b-gdnbooks)> [accessed 5 May 2016].

<sup>11</sup> Flint, p. 18.

<sup>12</sup> Flint, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Oliphant, quoted in Wynne, p. 87.

<sup>14</sup> Wynne, p. 88.

towards videogames and serials simply down to their respective novelty, and sometimes unsavoury content, or is there something more substantial in their structure, themes and consumption that gives rise to these concerns?

For more on the similarities in structure and theme between videogames and

Victorian serials ([go to p. 44 now](#))

For more on cultural attitudes towards videogames and serials ([continue](#))

## 2.3 A Disreputable Society

Whatever the reason, many novelists had apparently internalised contempt for fiction, as Brantlinger observes. He points to Wilkie Collins' imagined abandonment of a 'dull' book club, opting instead for a "Disreputable Society" for reading fiction [...] thereby, albeit ironically, surrender[ing] the field to the "respectable" people by apparently granting their premise that novels are "disreputable".<sup>15</sup> Non-fiction, plays and poetry were the dominant forms of the time, and anything else was considered lesser, and incapable of being 'high art'.

Videogame studies (indeed, videogame 'culture' as a whole) seems to be trapped in a comparable crisis of confidence. Some videogame writers similarly bemoan the artistic bankruptcy of the medium, suggesting games 'tend not to mean very much in themselves – because it's spectacularly, trudgingly hard to make games mean things'.<sup>16</sup> In academic criticism, arguments that seek to align videogames with literary forms, and those seeking to deny their connection to such forms, seem to do so out of a desire to emphasise the respectability of games. Aarseth finds it necessary to stress in the introduction to his inaugural *Game Studies* journal '2001 can be seen as the **Year One** of *Computer Game Studies* as an emerging, viable, international, academic field'.<sup>17</sup> *Viable*. Meaning practicable, but also meaning worthwhile, as if separating itself from previous and parallel attempts lacking sufficient worth. Similarly, the *Journal of Games Criticism* stresses videogames' 'genuine cultural impact' and positions them as 'cultural artifacts'.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, the *Baker Street Journal* emphasises its own position as the 'the leading Sherlockian publication' but not its area of interest, while *The Dickensian*

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<sup>15</sup> Brantlinger, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Helen Lewis, 'Why are we still so bad at talking about videogames?', *New Statesman*, 20 November 2012, <<http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2012/11/why-are-we-still-so-bad-talking-about-video-games>> [accessed 7 March 2016].

<sup>17</sup> Aarseth, original emphasis.

<sup>18</sup> Editors, 'Mission Statement', *Journal of Games Criticism* (2013), <<http://gamescriticism.org/about/>> [accessed 19 April 2016].

shows itself to be even more confident in its own existence and offers no justification for self or subject matter.<sup>19</sup> That Holmes and Dickens are worthy of study and have sufficient cultural relevance is a given.

While initially unintentional, my positioning of videogames alongside Victorian serial fiction, implicitly indicates to myself and others that they are ‘respectable’. I am re-treading paths worn by the likes of Henry Fielding and Jane Austen who, even before the emergence of the ‘addictive’ and ‘poisonous’ Victorian serials, still sought to justify their writing and push back against a literary tradition that undervalued their ‘labour’.<sup>20</sup>

‘Rather than pushing back against literary tradition, couldn’t you push one of these minecarts?’ you ask, putting your shoulder to it. The wheels are old and rusted, the contents heavy. It won’t budge.

‘I was speaking metaphorically’, I say, but I look at the minecarts and realise I need to put my back into it.

To push the minecart ([go to p. 72 now](#))

If you haven’t yet discovered the similarities in theme and structure between videogames and Victorian serials ([continue](#))

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<sup>19</sup> ‘The Baker Street Journal’, *Baker Street Journal*, Sheridan Press, <<http://www.bakerstreetjournal.com>> [accessed 12 June 2018]; ‘The Dickensian’, *The Dickensian*, Dickens Fellowship, <<http://www.dickensfellowship.org/dickensian>> [accessed 19 April 2016].

<sup>20</sup> Brantlinger, p. 3.

## 2.2.1 Consuming Structures and Themes

The manner in which videogames and serial or episodic fiction are received by their audience are, like most forms of entertainment, in no small part dependent on their structure and manner of distribution. In *Serialisation in Popular Culture*, Rob Allen and Thijs van den Berg show the continuum of serialisation from Victorian mass-produced serials to the release patterns of modern videogames. As Mark Turner notes in his contribution: ‘Studying the rich culture of the serial in the nineteenth century flags up methodological and other challenges that we continue to confront, admittedly in different ways, in our own twenty-first-century culture of seriality’.<sup>21</sup> Identifying these challenges and considering how they may specifically affect writers and readers, is a key reason for undertaking this comparative study.

As Turner implies, concepts of serialisation are ingrained in our culture.

Similarly, Umberto Eco notes that the proliferation of serial, episodic and repetitious forms across television, cinema, novels and advertising assumes a **Model Reader** adept at building their own ‘intertextual encyclopaedia’ in order to fully engage with the cross and intra-franchise references to which they are constantly subjected.<sup>22</sup> While not all videogames are distributed or consumed serially, all are subject to the logic of seriality due to their often protracted length which requires subdivision into more accessible chunks via auto and manual saving, and/or via updates, sequels, franchises, additional downloadable content (**DLC**) and patches which are ubiquitous throughout the videogame industry. (Van den Berg covers this and other aspects of ‘serialisation

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<sup>21</sup> Mark W. Turner, ‘The Unruliness of Serials in the Nineteenth Century (and in the Digital Age)’ in *Serialization in Popular Culture*, ed. by Allen and van den Berg, pp. 11-32 (p. 12).

<sup>22</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994) p. 89.

culture' such as mobile phone operating systems and Windows software updates).<sup>23</sup> As a result, even more is asked of the Model Reader.

All long-form modern videogames may be considered as examples of seriality, even when these games are not explicitly intended as episodic entities. Games scholars Shane Denson and Andreas Jahn-Sudmann make precisely this argument when they suggest: 'games themselves constitute their own internal structures of seriality [...] through their familiar segmentation into distinct levels' and due to their composition from 'iterative and modularized scraps of code'.<sup>24</sup> Van den Berg et al have already shown the benefits of structural comparisons as a means of identifying and understanding the continuation of historic serial culture in modern cultural artefacts, but there seems to be little consideration of thematic carry-overs, or parallels between dissemination and reception. Therefore these concerns are addressed in sections 2.3, 2.4 and 2.4.1.

Most story-based games subscribe to the narrative structure of a series as described by Eco, operating as 'a fixed situation and a restricted number of fixed pivotal characters, around whom the secondary and changing ones turn [...] giv[ing] the impression that the new story is different from the proceeding ones while in fact the narrative scheme does not change'.<sup>25</sup> This effect is used to varying degrees in videogames. *Life is Strange* offers small optional activities, and larger branching choices which all contribute to the player's overall understanding of the protagonist, supporting characters and gameworld and result in two different endings.<sup>26</sup>

Alternatively, *Mass Effect* employs modular story-telling via multiple small quests and

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<sup>23</sup> Thijs van den Berg, 'The Serialization Game: Computer Hardware and the Serial Production of Video Games' in *Serialization in Popular Culture*, ed. by Allen and van den Berg, pp. 184-198

<sup>24</sup> Shane Denson and Andreas Jahn-Sudmann, 'Digital Seriality: On the Serial Aesthetics and Practice of Digital Games', *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture.*, 7 (2013), 1-32  
<<http://www.eludamos.org/index.php/eludamos/article/view/vol7no1-1/7-1-1-1-pdf>> [accessed 24/03/2018] (pp. 2-3).

<sup>25</sup> Eco, *Limits of Interpretation*, pp. 85-86.

<sup>26</sup> See pp. 64-67 of this thesis.

activities, alongside major choices that have a permanent effect on character development, character relationships and the gameworld, resulting in four different endings.<sup>27</sup>

These possible ‘**personal player stories**’ constructed by players as they navigate the game echo the serial’s sense of what Turner refers to as ‘unruliness [...] its stuttering, uncertain, nonlinear and often unpredictable qualities’.<sup>28</sup> This is a trait that Wynne also notes and elaborates on when she observes that Victorian readers who consumed their serial fiction in magazine format ‘were able to make comparisons between the novel and other related features’ such as adverts, news articles, short stories and essays, often carefully selected by the editor to emphasise the themes and concerns of the serialised novel.<sup>29</sup> This is a form of what George Landow refers to as ‘nonelectronic’ hypertextuality, since it ‘permits one to make explicit, though not necessarily intrusive, the linked materials that an educated reader perceive[s] surrounding it’.<sup>30</sup>

In both videogames and serials, this concept of non-linearity and unruliness is both true and false. True, because the creators of videogames and editors of Victorian periodicals can never truly *know* whether reader-players navigate and interpret their carefully constructed narrative geographies as intended. False, because the possibility for reader-player driven narrative construction is largely illusory, limited by the parameters set by the writer, designer or editor. A reader-player can ultimately only read or play what is there, even if they navigate and interpret what is there in myriad ways. However, participation between reader and writer in terms of the order in which the story is constructed is not the only way in which ‘**interactivity**’ may manifest. The

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<sup>27</sup> See pp. 115-116 of this thesis.

<sup>28</sup> Ensslin, *Language of Gaming*, p. 24; Turner, p. 20.

<sup>29</sup> Wynne, p. 21.

<sup>30</sup> George P. Landow, *Hypertext 3.0, Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization*, 3rd edn (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. 55.

reader-player's input may be shared in a more direct manner through feedback to the creator, or vice versa.

Janice Carlisle suggests that many Victorian novelists, and particularly those working serially, adopted 'a focus on the reader as an essential aesthetic principle'.<sup>31</sup> For these novelists, Carlisle argues, '[n]arration [...] is a mutual activity including both author and reader'.<sup>32</sup> According to Jesper Juul, videogames 'are interactive because the actions of the player play a part in determining the events in the game', or, more accurately, because they give the impression that the actions of the player determine events.<sup>33</sup> Victorian serials may therefore also be considered interactive in this manner, because serial writers often give their readers the impression that readers are the ones determining the events of the fiction.

Ryan argues that interactivity is not a single quality but a layered system in which 'the outer layers [...] [concern] the presentation of the story, [...] the middle layers [...] [concern] the user's personal involvement in the story, but the plot is still predetermined' and 'the inner layers, [where] the story is created dynamically through the interaction between the user and the system'.<sup>34</sup> Within this system, Victorian serials may be considered to reach the 'outer' or even 'middle' layer of interactivity but would not meet the requirements for the 'inner' layer found in videogames and digital interactive fiction.

According to Carlisle, Dickens referred to doing 'his "best" to make the "best" of his reader' indicating he was only partly responsible for the texts he authored.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Janice Carlisle, *The Sense of an Audience: Dickens, Thackeray and George Eliot at Mid-Century* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982) p. 15

<sup>32</sup> Carlisle, p. 15.

<sup>33</sup> Jesper Juul, 'A Clash Between Game and Narrative' (unpublished master's thesis, University of Copenhagen, 1999), p. 17.

<sup>34</sup> Marie Laure Ryan, 'The Interactive Onion', in *New Narratives: Stories and Storytelling in the Digital Age*, ed. by Ruth Page and Bronwyn Thomas, *Frontiers of Narrative* (Nebraska: UNP Nebraska Paperback, 2011), pp. 35-62, <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1df4h49>> [Accessed 18<sup>th</sup> May 2019], (p. 37).

<sup>35</sup> Carlisle, p. 11.

While Carlisle's model of narration as 'mutual activity' could be applied to virtually any narrative medium, videogames and Victorian serials differ from other forms in that this (largely illusory) **interactivity** is two-way.<sup>36</sup> The reader-player not only interprets the **text**, but is also led to believe the text is interpreting and reacting to the reader-player. This deeper participatory element could provide the basis of the moral panics (such as Glenn Beck's hacking concerns) which assume reader-players will model the undesirable behaviours or actions found in interactive works.<sup>37</sup>

Peter Gendolla and Jorgen Schafer suggest that 'the strict and clean division between the acts of production, distribution and reception [...] is now collapsing' due to the internet and digital technology, and with it the boundaries between "author", "reader" and "work".<sup>38</sup> However, Carlisle's observations indicate that perhaps this division and its resulting boundaries were not so 'strict and clean' even for Victorian readers and writers. If Dickens is making the 'best' of his reader, he is aiming to construct them to some degree, at the same time as he constructs his work (thereby blurring the line between reader and text). Conversely, a writer such as Dickens, who was strongly connected to his audience and their likes and dislikes via his extensive public reading tours, 'undertook to create a narrative version of himself which his public would respect'.<sup>39</sup> In this sense, the line between author and text is blurred. To summarise, for writers who are strongly aware of their audience's likely opinion (or at least are in a position where they might guess at it), writing verges on a collaborative, multi-directional process between writer, text, and imagined and real audiences. For readers of such texts, reading carries with it an awareness that the text has the potential to respond to audience suggestions and requests. In a form such as the Victorian serial,

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<sup>36</sup> Carlisle, p. 15.

<sup>37</sup> See *Figure 8*, p. 37 of this thesis.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Gendolla and Jorgen Schafer, 'Playing with Signs: Towards an Aesthetic Theory of Net Literature', in *The Aesthetics of Net Literature: Writing, Reading and Playing in Programmable Media*, ed. by Peter Gendolla and Jorgen Schafer (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2007), pp. 17-42 (p. 24).

<sup>39</sup> Carlisle, p. 26.

this process is uniquely amplified, and therefore, in this limited sense, we may consider the Victorian serial to be interactive.

A key difficulty with comparing Victorian serials and videogames directly, however, is that the Victorian serial writer could expect regular audience contact during the production of the creative artefact, while for many videogame writers, although the player may experience the work over a number of weeks, it is theoretically (excluding episodic releases and assuming the player can overcome any challenges the game may contain) available in its entirety. This is certainly true for many of the blockbuster games released in the previous console generation. However, as games become larger and more complex, or as independent developers struggle to obtain sufficient funds for their projects, it is becoming more common for developers to release their games in ‘**early access**’ or recruit large numbers of beta testers to feedback on the game during development, suggesting a return to a more obviously comparable mode of production.

There are various aspects of production that are comparable regardless, particularly where commercialism is concerned. Revisiting and revising serialised works makes commercial and creative sense for writers as Allen and Van den Berg observe: ‘[...] subsequent editions allowed publishers, and authors such as Dickens who retained a stake in the copyright of their works, to maximize the profit generated by each serialized novel’.<sup>40</sup> In the videogame world, these revisions may be largely superficial, such as the high definition update of *Ico* and *Shadow of the Colossus* which upgraded the visual fidelity and paired two thematically related titles, or more substantial as in the *Resident Evil* update, which included new enemies, an updated control system and new audio alongside the usual graphical improvements, meaning it

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<sup>40</sup> Rob Allen and Thijs van den Berg, *Serialization in Popular Culture*, p. 3.

was essentially ‘recreated from scratch using new technology’.<sup>41</sup> However, both serve the same function – to maximise profit from an existing audience.

Serialisation in the videogame industry is linked to commercialism perhaps even more strongly than in film or TV. While franchises are important across all commercial entertainment forms, in videogames they are inextricably connected to the continuation of the medium, with sales of the latest consoles dependent on the content available for them, often titles that have already shown strong sales performance in previous instalments and can leverage ‘the audience’s familiarity with the series’.<sup>42</sup> Dickens too recognised the power of audience familiarity when he bolstered flagging sales of his magazine *All The Year Round* by releasing *Great Expectations* ahead of schedule.<sup>43</sup> Simply put, Victorian serials were linked to the continuation of the medium as they were used to sell magazines in much the same way videogames are used to sell consoles.

As videogame development booms, the cost of production increases as the audience expects increasingly sophisticated gameplay and visuals. Van den Berg notes how DLC allows developers to ‘spread the cost’ of development and ‘safeguard themselves against some of the risk involved in developing high-production-value video games’.<sup>44</sup> He also draws direct comparisons between this publication scheme and that adopted by serial publishers in the nineteenth century in order to keep down costs when the Stamp Act threatened to push them out of business. What started as a means of democratising content ultimately became an additional method of commercial

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<sup>41</sup> Richard Leadbetter, ‘Ico/Shadow of the Colossus: PS2 vs. PS3’, *Eurogamer*, 8 September 2011, <<http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/digitalfoundry-ico-shadow-of-the-colossus-ps2-ps3-comparison>> [accessed 16 November 2015]; David Jenkins, ‘Resident Evil remaster PS4 review – return to the world of survival horror, again’, *Metro*, 19 January 2015, <<http://metro.co.uk/2015/01/19/resident-evil-remaster-ps4-review-return-to-the-world-of-survival-horror-again-5027605/>> [accessed 16 November 2015].

<sup>42</sup> van den Berg, p. 190.

<sup>43</sup> Wynne, p. 84.

<sup>44</sup> van den Berg, p. 194.

exploitation, with the ‘volume game’ ‘progressively marketed as a compilation medium: a luxurious collector’s item that marks the final completeness of the series’.<sup>45</sup>

Notions of ‘completeness’ are highly pertinent when considering serials, not only in terms of the commercial aspects van den Berg highlights, but also in relation to concepts of temporality and leisure. The *Christian Observer* noted a shift in reading habits in Victorian England towards short form pieces that could ‘occupy scraps of time’ marking the development of ‘the commodification of leisure’.<sup>46</sup> The modern continuation of this commodification of leisure is demonstrated in the shift in common player motivations observed by Keith Stuart, away from perfectionism, or becoming ‘an expert in the small amount of interactive components [...] available’ towards completism, which ‘involves doing all the side-quests, putting in the time’.<sup>47</sup>

Writing in 2012, Ensslin observes that ‘the average game player is 34-years old’, while the latest ESA report suggests the average gamer is 35 years old.<sup>48</sup> As videogame audiences grow older, time becomes a rarer and more precious resource. (In comparison to say, gamers of school age who may have entire summer holidays to devote to their hobby.) Therefore, goals rewarding tenaciousness in the form of meeting a succession of small, short-form requirements become the norm, as opposed to building specific skills via long bouts of play.

However, the reality of the completist model, as with writer-suggested narrative construction, is that reader-players are able to defy it, as Turner notes: ‘[D]espite the logic of completeness’ there is nothing to stop readers ‘disrupt[ing] the continuity of the organized flow of knowledge’.<sup>49</sup> The fact that games remain large and expansive (and

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<sup>45</sup> van den Berg, p. 194.

<sup>46</sup> Turner, p. 16; Allen & van den Berg, p. 2.

<sup>47</sup> Keith Stuart speaking on ‘Wednesday’, *Guardian GameCity Breakfast*, Twitch Broadcast, 28th October 2015.

<sup>48</sup> Ensslin, *Language of Gaming*, p. 1; Michael D. Gallagher, *Sales, Demographic and Usage Data: Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry*, (Washington, D.C.: Entertainment Software Association, 2015) p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> Turner, p. 22. See also p. 10 of this thesis for my own act of defiance.

are becoming larger), may seem counter-intuitive to the notion of the commodification of time, but when placed alongside Dickens' eight hundred page tomes, the reasoning behind this becomes more apparent. We are the serialisers now, commodifying larger works into smaller, more accessible chunks through the technology available to us. Via auto and manual saving, we serialise our own videogame experiences, but the product is still presented 'in a way guaranteed to maximise sales by extending its powers of suspense through [...] the enforced deferment of narrative satisfaction' which Wynne observes with regard to Victorian serials.<sup>50</sup> Further evidence to support Denson and Jahn-Sudmann's claim that videogames are serials.<sup>51</sup>

"'Enforced deferment of narrative satisfaction'?" you repeat. 'Isn't that precisely what you're doing to me with all these digressions?' I move on so swiftly, you begin to doubt I can hear you.

So, for various modern and Victorian commentators, the problem (or benefit, depending on your position) of serialised fiction is its potential for imitative behaviour, and the risk of addiction engendered by its gradual drip-feed of content (either due to its release structure, or challenge elements). However, imitative behaviour surely only becomes a problem if the content being imitated is problematic? George Eliot's assessment of books as mind modifiers was less a Glenn Beck-esque demonization of the form, and more an observation that novels could be used heuristically to encourage readers to model good behaviour.<sup>52</sup>

Wynne's study of Victorian serial fiction suggests that sensationalism was the dominant genre because it meshed well with serialisation's aesthetic and commercial concerns. In simple terms, shocks and thrills encouraged readers to purchase subsequent instalments.<sup>53</sup> (Although, Wynne also argues that sensationalist texts go beyond cheap

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<sup>50</sup> Wynne, p. 11.

<sup>51</sup> See p. 45 of this thesis.

<sup>52</sup> Flint, p. 18.

<sup>53</sup> Wynne, p. 11.

shocks to demonstrate the chief concerns and fears of the age in which they were written).<sup>54</sup> Sensation fiction generally concerns itself with ‘mysteries and secrets [...] often based on crimes and scandals’.<sup>55</sup> As Ernest Adams observes, this is frequently true of story-based games as well.<sup>56</sup> The texts under consideration in this thesis all contain sensationalist elements, even if they are not strictly sensationalist works.<sup>57</sup>

Is the sensationalist content of Victorian serial fiction (and videogames) really as detrimental to its readers (and players) as Beck and Oliphant assume? Considering how that content is presented and what common themes, ideas or techniques it contains; why these themes, ideas and techniques might be prevalent in the serial or interactive form; and why they were and continue to be viewed as so inherently dangerous may offer further insight into writing for the serial/interactive form.

For more on the relationship between mystery and sensationalism and what this might mean for videogames ([go to p. 68](#))

For a comparison of the sensationalist and mystery elements of *Great Expectations* and *Life is Strange* ([continue](#))

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<sup>54</sup> Wynne, p. 6.

<sup>55</sup> Wynne, p. 4.

<sup>56</sup> Ernest W. Adams, ‘Resolutions to Some Problems in Interactive Storytelling’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Teesside, 2013), p. 49

<sup>57</sup> See sections 2.4.1 and 4.3 of this thesis.

### 2.4.1 *Life is Strange* and *Great Expectations*: Sensationalism as Serial Selling-Point

Wynne outlines the frequently occurring themes of sensation fiction as: ‘crime, female transgression, insanity and violence’, with ‘mysteries [...] which disrupt [...] domestic lives’ and ‘fever pitch suspense’ presented as other key features.<sup>58</sup> These features occur in both *Life is Strange* and *Great Expectations*, but in both cases are combined with a strange temporality. This section seeks to investigate how **paratexts** further disrupt serial temporalities and how writers may make use of this disruption.

Lyn Pykett observes that ‘sensational and fantastic literature [...] problematizes or interrogates perception, language, time, space and conception of unified character,’ that it ‘disrupts linear narrative’.<sup>59</sup> This sounds a lot like Turner’s description of ‘[...] the serial’s unruliness [...] its stuttering, uncertain, nonlinear and often unpredictable qualities’ and Keymer on the temporal aspects of the serial including a ‘manipulation of relations between narrated and narrating time’.<sup>60</sup> Wynne’s hypothesis, then, that sensationalism and serialisation go hand in hand seems to be correct, particularly with regard to issues of narrative time and temporality.<sup>61</sup> Since commercial dependencies, serial structure, and sensationalist fiction seem to be interlinked, it is worth considering some **texts** with these three strands in mind.

Dickens made various creative decisions due to commercial concerns, one of which was to push forward with the release of *Great Expectations* to combat flagging sales of Charles Lever’s unpopular *A Day’s Ride: A Life’s Romance*, which notably lacked any sensationalist plot elements or themes.<sup>62</sup> In 2015, French development studio Dontnod Entertainment embarked on the release of their episodic videogame, *Life is*

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<sup>58</sup> Wynne, p. 2; p. 4; p. 2.

<sup>59</sup> Lyn Pykett, ‘Sensation and the Fantastic in the Victorian Novel’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Deirdre David, pp. 192-211 (p. 194).

<sup>60</sup> Turner, p. 17; Keymer, quoted in Allen, in Allen and van den Berg, p. 38.

<sup>61</sup> p. 52 of this thesis.

<sup>62</sup> Wynne, p. 84. See also pp. 49-50 of this thesis.

*Strange*. The studio's earlier game, *Remember Me* received mixed reviews and poor sales figures, failing to reach publisher Capcom's sales target of one million units, 'the generally accepted standard for a major hit'.<sup>63</sup> However, one aspect of the game, its memory manipulation **mechanic** (where players must wind time backwards and forwards while manipulating objects and making dialogue choices to solve puzzles), was highly praised in the vast majority of reviews. Therefore, opting to further develop this creative element in *Life is Strange* and mitigate against the risk of poor sales by developing episodically made sound commercial sense.

It seems the developers were aware this mechanic was worth pursuing as they filed a patent for 'temporal control of a virtual environment' in the early stages of development back in 2011.<sup>64</sup> However, while in *Remember Me*, temporal manipulation was side-lined to allow for the more usual videogame task of fending off waves of foes, in *Life is Strange* it is foregrounded, not only through the 'time-winding' mechanic, but also thematically.

The game opens with a premonition – protagonist Max Caulfield sees her home town, Arcadia Bay, destroyed by a tornado. Shortly afterwards she discovers she has the power to manipulate time and assumes that she must therefore use her powers to avert the storm. Time, and in particular, notions of nostalgia, regret and temporal displacement are central to the motivations of many of the game's main characters and Max herself. Max says of her friend Warren's obsession with drive-in cinema and her own love of Polaroid cameras: 'You're in the wrong time, Warren, but then so am I'.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> CBS Interactive, 'Metascores for *Remember Me*, PS3 edn', Metacritic, <<http://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-3/remember-me>> [accessed 18 June 2018]; While it is difficult to obtain exact figures, business intelligence site VGChartz suggests *Remember Me* sold around 0.59m copies worldwide across all platforms. <<http://www.vgchartz.com/gamedb/>> [accessed 18 June 2018]; Capcom Investment Relations, 'Platinum Titles', Capcom, March 2018, <<http://www.capcom.co.jp/ir/english/finance/million.html>> [accessed 18 June 2018].

<sup>64</sup> Oskar Guilbert, 'Temporal control of a virtual environment', USA US9009605 B2, Patent Application US 13/069, 117, 22 March 2011.

<sup>65</sup> Dontnod Entertainment, *Life is Strange, Episode 1: Chrysalis* (2015), PS3.

A homeless woman tells Max she has lived in Arcadia Bay for ‘1000 years’, and many characters refer to their desire to have their time again, or, in the words of Officer Berry, have an ‘instant replay’.<sup>66</sup> Time is a slippery concept in Arcadia Bay, and for most, it seems that backwards is the desired direction for temporal flow, unusual in a videogame, which are inherently concerned with a sense of progress, either through levelling systems (e.g. **XP** accumulation), or unlockable content (e.g. beating a **boss** to reach the next level).

*Great Expectations*, on the other hand, is concerned with a sense of progress. The division of the novelised version into ‘stages of Pip’s Expectations’ is oddly gamelike, as is Pip’s desire throughout to leave behind his former life as a blacksmith’s boy and become a ‘gentleman’, as if to do so is somehow to ‘level up’. G. Robert Stange describes *Great Expectations* as belonging to ‘that class of [...] development novels which describe the young man of talents who progresses from the country to the city, ascends in social hierarchy, and moves from innocence to experience’.<sup>67</sup> Even Pip’s name plays into this notion of potential progress – like an apple pip, he is a seed waiting to grow.<sup>68</sup> However, that is not to say that time in *Great Expectations* represents a simple, linear chronology. There are many representations of time slippage here too, from the stuffy stasis of Miss Havisham’s mansion, to Pip’s return to an ‘improved infancy’ with Joe and Biddy following a brain fever, to Pip seeing Estella again for the first time as an adult and feeling ‘as I looked at her, that I slipped hopelessly back into the coarse and common boy again’.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Dontnod Entertainment, *Life is Strange, Episode 2: Out of Time & Episode 3: Chaos Theory* (2015) PS3.

<sup>67</sup> G.R Stange, ‘Expectations Well Lost: Dickens’ Fable for His Time’, in *The Victorian Novel: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. by Ian Watt (Oxford: OUP, 1970), pp. 110-122 (p. 111).

<sup>68</sup> Peter Brooks, ‘Repetition and Return: *Great Expectations* and the Study of Plot’, *New Literary History*, 11 (1980), 503-526 (p. 524).

<sup>69</sup> Harold Bloom, ‘Introduction’ in *Charles Dickens’s Great Expectations*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Bloom’s Literary Criticism, 2010) pp. 1-2, (p. 1); Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, 9th edn (London: Vintage, 2008), p. 222.

The unstable nature of time is not an experience confined to the book's characters, either. Dickens ensures his readers are made to feel time's effects by slowing down and speeding up narrative pacing to heighten suspense or instil a sense of panic. Pip's initial encounters with the convict, and their consequences, are drawn out over several chapters (several weeks in the original instalments), yet the reader is hurried from February to Christmas in the space of a page as Pip waits anxiously for news of Magwitch's passage downriver.<sup>70</sup> Characters frequently recap events to one another, which not only serves as an alternative way of delaying the delivery of key information and therefore heightening suspense, but also provides an opportunity for Dickens to ensure his readers remember everything necessary about events that may have happened many weeks ago, or at least several hundred pages ago. For example, before Mr Wopsle drops the bombshell that he has seen and recognised the criminal Provis/Magwitch, he recounts every previous important interaction Pip has had with Provis, forcing Pip to respond after each memory to further defer the delivery of the conversation's denouement.<sup>71</sup>

By the end of the story Pip realises his ““expectations” [...] his self-selected victory conditions [...] and ultimately the rules he's playing by [...] are incorrect’.<sup>72</sup> This is true of Max as well. Max assumes she must use her powers, because she discovers them when preventing the death of her best friend, Chloe. However, as the game progresses, it becomes clear that the storm would not exist without Max's time tampering. Her constant re-winding is having a dire ecological effect evidenced by the beached whales present in both her original timeline and the alternate timeline created

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<sup>70</sup> Dickens, *Great Expectations*, pp. 362-3.

<sup>71</sup> Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p. 365.

<sup>72</sup> Paul Wake, *Gamifying the Bildungsroman by Astrid Ensslin*, online discussion, Academia.edu, discussion ended 17 May 2016, <<https://www.academia.edu/s/0def8b7492?source=news>> [accessed 18 June 2018].

when she goes back to her childhood to prevent the death of Chloe's father.<sup>73</sup> In the final episode, Max (and consequently, the player) is presented with a difficult choice: undo her very first rewind, thereby undoing all subsequent ones and thus diverting the storm but sacrificing Chloe, or stand by her decisions, refuse to give up Chloe and sacrifice Arcadia Bay (and potentially all the rest of her friends and family) to the storm.<sup>74</sup> The far longer sequence that follows choosing the former option suggests that, for Dontnod this was 'the correct end'.<sup>75</sup> Ultimately both Dontnod and Dickens offer their audiences two downbeat endings.<sup>76</sup>

Prior to making this choice, time breaks down, and Max (and therefore the player) is forced to walk through scenes of her key memories. As Kermode observes, '[s]chism is meaningless without reference to some prior condition'.<sup>77</sup> It is the positioning of the tranquil past alongside this new chaotic present which emphasises Max's unsettling position. Just as Pip says of his life flashing before his eyes while he waits to die at Orlick's hand: 'I could not think a place without seeing it, or of persons without seeing them', Max walks around frozen, three-dimensional tableaux of significant moments with Chloe and hears again the conversations that were spoken during them.<sup>78</sup> She is forced to literally confront her previous actions. As well as providing a recap of events from months (or hours) previous, and encouraging the player to engage with these experiences from a slightly different, more removed perspective, this scene may also have had an economic driver. Creating static models of

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<sup>73</sup> Dontnod Entertainment, *Life is Strange, Episode 4: The Dark Room*, (2015) PS3, and Dontnod, *Life is Strange, Episode 3*.

<sup>74</sup> Dontnod, *Life is Strange, Episode 5: Polarized*, (2015) PS3.

<sup>75</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 103; see also pp. 116, 129 & 135 of this thesis.

<sup>76</sup> The endings of *Great Expectations* and *Life is Strange* are discussed on pp. 108-112 & pp. 127-131 of this thesis.

<sup>77</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 116.

<sup>78</sup> Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p. 405.

specific moments allows reuse of previous character and scenery assets. No animation is required, and vocal recordings can also be reused thereby reducing production costs.

While the sensationalist elements in *Great Expectations* and *Life is Strange* described thus far may arise from commercial or temporal concerns, there are other significant sensationalist elements in both texts. Dickens played a part in ‘rebranding’ sensationalist tropes for a middle-class audience, making the murders and scandals of the penny press less objectionable; perhaps *Life is Strange* offers similar possibilities for videogames.<sup>79</sup> Rather than shying away from common videogame themes of murder and death, *Life is Strange* presents them (and other dark elements) under a veneer of respectability. There is virtually no bloodshed in *Life is Strange*, no swathes of faceless enemies for Max to cut through, little weaponry save for the gun that chief antagonist Nathan pulls to set off the game’s entire chain of events, and the one Chloe steals from her step-father. There are some routes through the story which can result in drug dealer Frank Carson being shot and killed, or injured with a knife, but these are reversible. It is also possible for Max’s classmate Kate to commit suicide. This is irreversible, but her death is not shown on screen.

The main subplot in *Life is Strange* is the story of a young woman, Rachel Amber, who is kidnapped, drugged, possibly sexually abused and eventually killed. Iser suggests that ‘the reader must work it out for himself if he is to make the experience his own’, and this is how Rachel’s death is presented.<sup>80</sup> The circumstances of Rachel’s murder transpire so gradually, and in such veiled terms that the true sense of horror occurs not when her body is discovered, but afterwards, when the game is over and the reader-player is given time to reflect on what actually happened.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> See p. 68 of this thesis.

<sup>80</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, 7th edn (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 48.

<sup>81</sup> This occurs in Episode 4, although we never see Rachel’s body, only Chloe and Max’s reaction to it.

References to teen sexuality, particularly the exploitation of teenage girls, abound in *Life is Strange*, and yet aside from Kate Marsh's 'sex tape', they are rarely commented on directly. Dana's pregnancy scare, Mr Jefferson's choice of photography subjects (see *Figure 10*), Chloe being drugged by Nathan, even the terms of Chloe and Max's potential relationship (they only share a mutual kiss if Max opts to sacrifice Chloe) hint at the precariousness and inherent danger associated with young women's sexuality.

Similarly Dickens does not 'overtly stress' links between Pip and Estella's relationship in *Great Expectations* and contemporary concerns surrounding 'biological inheritance' brought about by Darwin's *Origins of the Species*, instead using the positioning of 'anxiety stories' and articles on evolution in *All the Year Round*, to convey some of the novel's darker themes 'outside the text', as it were.<sup>82</sup> For example, Eliza L. Linton's short story 'The Family at Fenhouse' centres on hereditary mental illness and deformity, while the essay 'Earliest Man' notes the scientific community's alarm at the prospect of evidence of the human race's ancestors.<sup>83</sup> As the issue of parentage becomes more pressing in *Great Expectations* the frequency of such stories increases in *All the Year Round*. In the instalment where Wemmick encourages Pip to 'look at [Mr. Jaggers'] housekeeper' because she is Estella's mother, the accompanying stories express concerns of becoming a werewolf, and a rather confused review of a book called *Discoveries of an Indian Philosopher with a French Missionary* that describes the metamorphosis of flying fish into birds, the veiled implication being that traditional boundaries have broken down, leaving open the door to biological degeneracy.<sup>84</sup> While *Life is Strange*'s **paratexts** do not serve the story in the same way,

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<sup>82</sup> Wynne, pp. 96-97.

<sup>83</sup> Eliza L. Linton, 'The Family at Fenhouse', *All the Year Round*, IV (1860), 260-264; Anonymous, 'Earliest Man', *All the Year Round*, IV (1861), 366-369.

<sup>84</sup> Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p. 190; Anonymous, 'My Father's Secret', *All the Year Round*, IV (1861), 514-519; Wynne, pp. 85-87; p. 91; & pp. 96-97.

the optional texts available to the player outside of the main story serve a similar purpose to Dickens' other magazine entries.

Flyers warning of ecological disaster serve as early indicators that Max's actions will have an environmental impact, while Blackwell Academy's walls are papered with 'Missing' posters for Rachel Amber, leaflets discouraging bullying, and black and white reproductions of Mr Jefferson's sexualized portraits of young women. Together, these optional texts present the player with a sense of ever-present threat lurking in Arcadia Bay well

before any reason to suspect Rachel Amber is

the victim of foul play. The 'solution' to

Rachel's disappearance 'lies in some idea of

reconciliation which is not formulated by the

text' until the final instalment.<sup>85</sup> (It is initially heavily implied that Rachel has simply taken a modelling job in LA without telling anyone).

Image Redacted

Figure 10: An example of Mr Jefferson's photography as seen in *Life is Strange*

However, the sensationalist aspects of *Great Expectations* and *Life is Strange* are not confined to female transgression, crime, incest and sexual abuse, both also contain multiple mystery elements. In *Great Expectations* this is the attack on Mrs Joe, and the origin of Pip's benefactor, although unusually for a mystery plot, the reader is discouraged from attempting to solve either. Pip initially presents three possible suspects: himself, 'the convict' and Orlick.<sup>86</sup> However, despite observing that the authorities 'took up several obviously wrong people, and [...] ran their heads very hard against wrong ideas', Pip makes no effort to put forward an alternative suspect or undertake his own investigation.<sup>87</sup> His later allusions towards Orlick's villainy are slight, so subtle as to pass unnoticed. For example, when Orlick assures him "I ain't

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<sup>85</sup> Iser, *Act of Reading*, p. 47.

<sup>86</sup> Dickens, *Great Expectations*, pp. 113-4.

<sup>87</sup> Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p. 115.

here for harm, young master””, Pip responds ‘I was not so sure of that’ and claims ‘I had leisure to entertain the retort’, yet the only action he takes is to express his doubts regarding ‘Orlick’s being the right sort of man to fill a post of trust at Miss Havisham’s’.<sup>88</sup>

Similarly, Pip is reasonably certain from the beginning that Miss Havisham is his benefactor, since he knows no other wealthy individuals. When Pip tells her: “‘I’ve come into such good fortune since I saw you last [...] And I’m so grateful for it Miss Havisham!’”, she responds by saying “‘I have seen Mr Jaggers. *I* have heard about it””, later confirming with Pip that Mr Jaggers is his guardian, inferring Jaggers as the link between herself and Pip.<sup>89</sup> Pip draws a line under the matter, assuming he is correct about the source of his wealth and thereby encouraging the reader to do the same. Even if in both cases the reader disagrees with Pip and believes him to be wrong, they are presented with no further clues, even in the form of red herrings or tangential information such as *Life is Strange*’s posters. Therefore, *Great Expectations*’ readers are denied the opportunity to play detective. Any alternative theorems they develop must occur entirely outside of the text.

In contrast, Max (and by default, the player), is quickly cast in the role of amateur sleuth. Firstly, she must discover more about her own powers, and secondly she must help Chloe find Rachel Amber. Her nosiness is frequently remarked on by other characters and Dana, Chloe and Max herself all use the nickname ‘Sherlock’ when referring to Max.<sup>90</sup>

‘Perhaps that’s what we should call you,’ I interject, ‘after all your snooping around those mine carts’.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p. 220 & p. 231.

<sup>89</sup> Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p. 149 (original emphasis).

<sup>90</sup> Dontnod, *Life is Strange: Episode 3*.

<sup>91</sup> Who is interrupting who now?

There are a host of other optional mini-mysteries, usually based around rewinding and replaying conversations with Max's friends to discover more about them and their lives. Further mysteries abound 'outside' of the game. That is, mysteries that are alluded to, but that the player is not required to solve in order to complete the game. In some cases, solutions are not provided by game's end, thereby resulting in 'fan theories' and speculation. For example, the extent of the Prescott family's influence over Arcadia Bay and what this means to its residents, or detail regarding Rachel Amber's life prior to her disappearance and her relationships with Chloe and Frank.

However, while the pursuit or exclusion of these extra-textual mysteries has no effect on the main plot, both *Great Expectations* and *Life is Strange* contain paratexts which could be considered not merely additional 'clues', but actual instances of plot-spoiling. For *Great Expectations*, obviously this can only occur in the final collected volume. Examples include the List of Characters, where Dolge Orlick is described as: '*a journeyman blacksmith, employed by Joe Gargery; afterwards porter at Miss Havisham's*' and Mr Wopsle as: '*the clerk at church, afterwards an actor*' indicating that circumstances for both characters change at some point in the book, and that these circumstances have an effect on their employment.<sup>92</sup> The organisation of illustrations could be considered an additional mild spoiler, as they usually appear several pages ahead of the scene they represent. The most significant plot spoiler, however, occurs in the list of illustrations, where we are told before having even begun 'Old Orlick means Murder'.<sup>93</sup> Readers who peruse this section prior to beginning are provided evidence of Orlick's guilt far stronger than Pip's weak misgivings.

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<sup>92</sup> Dickens, *Great Expectations*, pp. viii-ix (original italics).

<sup>93</sup> Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p. x.

One of *Life is Strange*'s most significant hints (although not necessarily a spoiler) comes in what could be described as a **paratext**, or text proper, as it comes in the form of one of the game's key choices. When asked who is most at fault in terms of Kate's suicide (or attempted suicide, depending on player choices), Max is presented with the options: 'Nathan dosed her', 'Jefferson made her cry', or 'David bullied her'. Up until this point, photographer and teacher Mark Jefferson has been viewed as a largely benevolent character. Max writes effusively of him in her diary (see *Figure 11*), describing him as 'one of the best photographers in the world' but also notes that he is 'kinda aloof', 'condescending' and 'pretentious'.<sup>94</sup>

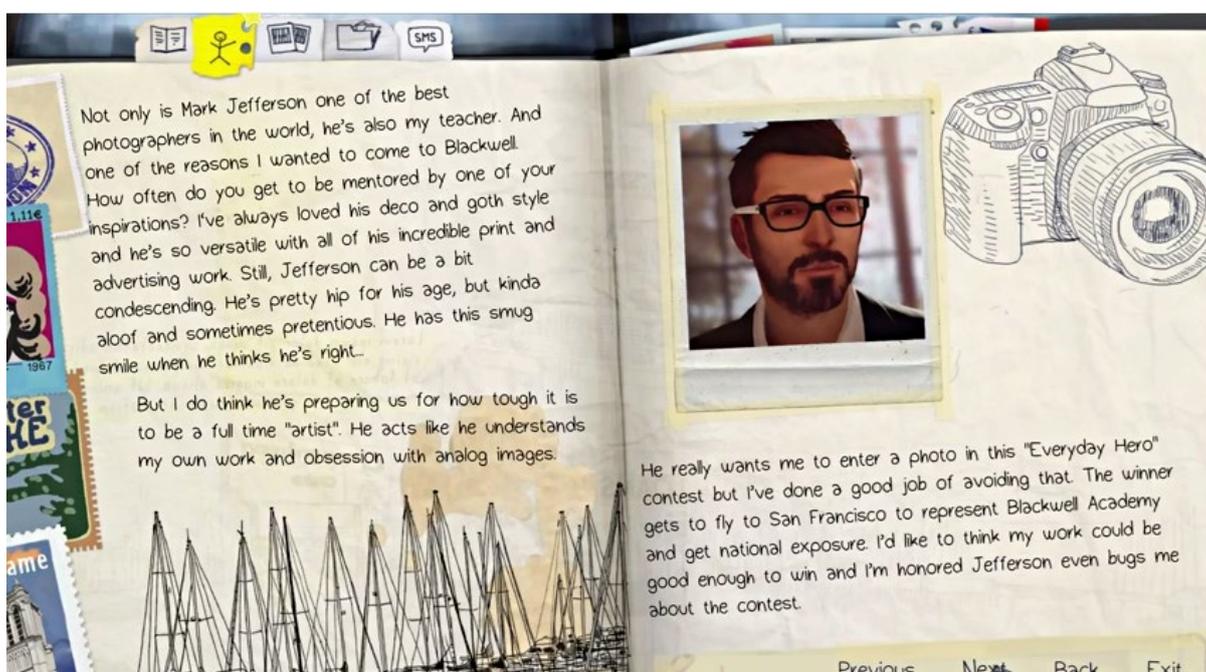


Figure 11: Max's diary entry on Mr Jefferson<sup>95</sup>

Suddenly, Jefferson's previous descriptions of photography as a means to capture subjects in a moment of desperation take on a whole new meaning, and this did not go unnoticed by *Life is Strange*'s fan community, with multiple theory videos and discussion threads arguing Jefferson's guilt and possible role in Rachel Amber's disappearance.<sup>95</sup> Therefore, in the case of *Life is Strange* it is not just the seriality and

<sup>94</sup> Dontnod, *Life is Strange* (all episodes).

<sup>95</sup> Prominent examples include: Geek Remix, *Fan Theory: A Baseless Accusation [Life is Strange]*, YouTube, 12 April 2015, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sSdCHNwtK5Q>> [accessed 28 June

sensationalist elements which contribute to the reader-players' 'active building of concepts', but also its ludic structure.<sup>96</sup>

More important still (and more obviously paratextual) is another element which falls into this ludic structure category, the post-episode statistic screen. It is only at this point that players are able to discern which actions have resulted in a branch in narrative, which were smaller choices, but still had impact, and which were largely set-dressing. This information is conveyed in the form of two percentage charts, post-game.<sup>97</sup> The first shows major decisions:

## Image Redacted

*Figure 12: Choice percentages, major choices in Life is Strange Episode 1*<sup>95</sup>

(These figures are subject to change as they are updated dynamically as more players complete the game episode. However, the most frequent outcome in each choice remains largely the same). Access to these statistics, while potential spoilers for players, offer insight for writers. In this example, the majority of players opt for the altruistic

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2016] and Geek Remix, *Fan Theory and Analysis: Mark Jefferson [Life is Strange]*, YouTube, 8 April 2015, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MnKbkl8RVvU>> [accessed 28 June 2016].

<sup>96</sup> Iser, *Act of Reading*, p. 48.

<sup>97</sup> Image sources: *Figure 11*: Anonymous, 'Jefferson (Max's Journal)', *Dontnod Entertainment Wiki*, <[http://dontnodentertainment.wikia.com/wiki/Jefferson\\_\(Max%27s\\_Journal\)?file=Mark\\_Entry.png](http://dontnodentertainment.wikia.com/wiki/Jefferson_(Max%27s_Journal)?file=Mark_Entry.png)> [Accessed 5 December 2018]; *Figure 12*: Various, 'What were your choices? \*spoilers\* ALL EPISODES', PSN Profiles Forums, January 31 2015, <<http://psnprofiles.com/forums/topic/23933-what-were-your-choices-spoilers-all-episodes/>> [Accessed 29 September 2016]; *Figure 13*: Various, 'Life is Strange choices?', Outlaw Gamers Society Forum February 3 2015, <<http://www.outlawgamers.com/forum/m/27218095/viewthread/19188781-life-strange-choices/filter/most-views>> [accessed 29 September 2016].

option – behaviours that involve helping, and comforting. In the fourth choice where there are more options, most players chose passive, rather than active options. However, this is not necessarily due to conscious decision-making. The scene in which the player may hide from David lacks clear decision points and although it *may* lead to the more clear cut, albeit still morally grey, choice of blaming Chloe or lying for her, players may stay hidden for the entire argument, largely unaware a narrative-altering decision is even being made. Essentially, such statistics provide an indication of the kind of options the majority of reader-players might choose, and therefore how writers might guide or subvert reader-player expectations.

Further percentage charts also show figures for the more minor choices: those that will affect dialogue choices and character relationships, but not the main story arc. (See *Figure 13*).

## Image Redacted

*Figure 13: Choice percentages, minor choices*<sup>96</sup>

These statistics raise questions not only about reader-player's moral behaviours, but about their interactions with the gameworld itself. As shown in *Figures 12 & 13*, *Life is Strange* players overwhelmingly choose helping behaviours. Yet at the point this image (*Figure 13*) was taken (shortly after release of the episode), most players did not rescue the bird. Therefore, we may theorise that this was not because players knowingly abandoned the bird, but because it was not sufficiently discoverable in the gameworld,

or lacked the necessary in-game cues for players to understand this action was possible. Examples such as this illuminate opportunities for writers to consider which elements should be disclosed to reader-players, which details readers should be able to discover (or not discover) freely and which are essential to the overall experience the writer is attempting to offer.

To summarise, reading games and novels as serialised, sensationalist fiction draws attention to certain structural and stylistic techniques and allows writers to consider how these might be interpreted by both reader and writer. Of these structural techniques, the paratext is often overlooked, and yet can provide valuable (or detrimental) cues to reader-player and writer alike.

You should now have all the information you need to return to those mine carts. ([Go to p. 72](#))

## 2.4 Essential Mysteries

Wynne suggests that the sensation novel's early tendency towards not only mystery and secrecy, but also violence and shock as a means of attracting an audience, appalled many contemporary critics, noting H.L. Mansel's claim that readers of sensation fiction possessed a 'vulture-like instinct which smells out the newest mass of social corruption'.<sup>98</sup> Writers such as Dickens sought to tone down and contextualise sensationalism's more shocking tropes in order to create more 'respectable' literature that would be more palatable to the middle classes.<sup>99</sup> Could this indicate the future of videogames?

While many early games were based around sports and puzzle solving, destroying waves of enemies has long been a dominant **mechanic** in games. Early games like *Pong* and *Pele's Championship Soccer* were abstracted versions of tennis and football, while *Space Invaders*, *Centipede* and *Combat* all had the destruction of enemies as a key gameplay element. Even *Pac-Man* offers the opportunity to temporarily subdue enemy characters. The top-selling game of 2017 was a **first person shooter**, *Call of Duty: WWII*, and although the top ten included three sports games, predominantly violent games, or those which contain elements of violent gameplay (albeit sometimes comic or cartoonish), made up the rest of the list.<sup>100</sup> This is the aspect of videogames that tends to be emphasised by the media (and therefore usually assumed by the general public to be the norm), particularly with regard to controversial titles like *Grand Theft Auto* and *Man Hunt*.

More recently, Telltale Games' story-driven output aims to give greater emotional depth to what are essentially traditional **point-and-click** adventures. Many

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<sup>98</sup> Wynne, p. 5. See p. 37 of this thesis for another similarly outraged critic...

<sup>99</sup> Wynne, pp. 9-10.

<sup>100</sup> Erik Kain, *The Best-selling Video Games of 2017*, Forbes, 19 January 2018, <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2018/01/19/the-best-selling-video-games-of-2017/>> [accessed 18 June 2018].

**third person adventure** titles such as *Mass Effect*, *Red Dead Redemption* and *Shadow of the Colossus* still include killing as significant game mechanics, but now ask the player to reflect on their actions while playing, and foreground matters of moral greyness. Even the characteristically bombastic military first person shooter genre is finally moving beyond simplistic glorifications of militaristic heroism and into more nuanced critique of war and its human cost as Brendan Keogh observes in his study of *Spec Ops: The Line*.<sup>101</sup> Is this the beginning of videogames' move towards a more widespread attitude of 'respectability'?

Perhaps Victorian serial fiction can serve not only as an indicator for future public perceptions videogames, but also the direction writers' attitudes may take. While Vann suggests '[b]oth reviewers and authors were aware that [serialisation] had altered the shape of [fiction] at some cost', numerous contemporary and modern critics have implied that serialisation was beneficial to author creativity in various ways.<sup>102</sup> Frederick Marrayat noted in 1833 that 'when every portion is severally presented to be analysed and criticized for thirty days, the author dare not flag'.<sup>103</sup> In other words, the regular responses of the reading public force the author to maintain consistent quality. Similarly, Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund observe 'the positive attributes of serialization, demanding [...] long-term commitment and sympathy, expanding structures of thought, the ability to connect distant pieces of a whole'.<sup>104</sup> Allen suggests that prior to the success of Wilkie Collins' serial fiction '[t]here are few examples of

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<sup>101</sup> Brendan Keogh, 'Spec Ops: The Line's Conventional Subversion of the Military Shooter', in: *Proceedings of the 2013 DiGRA International Conference: DeFragging Game Studies* (2014), 1-17, <<http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/spec-ops-the-lines-conventional-subversion-of-the-military-shooter/>> [accessed 18 June 2018].

<sup>102</sup> J.D. Vann, *Victorian Novels in Serial*, 2nd edn (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1985), p. 2.

<sup>103</sup> Vann, p. 3.

<sup>104</sup> Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund, *The Victorian Serial* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991) p. 275.

such tightly plotted novels’, implying techniques developed due to serialised novels resulted in improvements to the novel as a whole.<sup>105</sup>

Videogames are already an iterative form, with lessons learned from previous releases being applied to future instalments, but story elements have historically been a far lower priority than, for example, graphical fidelity and user interface.<sup>106</sup> However, this interplay between creators and audience has been observed in relation to story where episodic games are concerned. For example, in *Life is Strange*, where ‘real life or online [discussions] between and after each episode [...] effectively influenc[ed] [the game’s] developers in the ongoing writing of the last episodes’.<sup>107</sup> Producer Luc Baghadoust expresses this in no uncertain terms as a ‘benefit’ in a 2015 interview.<sup>108</sup>

While time pressures exist for all forms of commercial media, the large number of stakeholders and dependencies within both the games industry and the Victorian serial press make for more frequent calls on writers to cut or create content at the expense of creativity and coherence. This may have been a reason for Dickens’ initial defensiveness when faced with potential criticism of his plotting and characterisation. In the preface to the 1837 edition of *The Pickwick Papers* (after its initial publication and initial round of criticism) Dickens argued: ‘the general design should be so simple as to sustain no injury from’ being published in serialised form and therefore, that ‘no artfully interwoven or ingeniously complicated plot can with reason be expected’.<sup>109</sup> Allen asserts that this was a response ‘to objections that *The Pickwick Papers* were a “mere

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<sup>105</sup> Rob Allen, ““Pause You Who Read this””: Disruption and the Victorian Serial Novel’, in Allen and Van den Berg, pp. 33-46 (p. 43).

<sup>106</sup> See p. 49 of this thesis.

<sup>107</sup> Luis de Miranda, ‘*Life is Strange* and “Games are made”’: A Philosophical Interpretation of a Multiple-Choice Existential Simulator with Copilot Sartre’, *Games and Culture*, 11 (2016), 825-842 <<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1555412016678713>> [accessed 30 December 2016], p. 836.

<sup>108</sup> Damien McFerran, ‘Be Kind, rewind: The Making of *Life is Strange*’, *Red Bull*, 28 August 2015, <<https://www.redbull.com/gb-en/life-is-strange-interview>> [accessed 18 June 2018]. A similar model was adopted in *Writers Are Not Strangers* during the testing phases and proved to be as beneficial as Baghadoust suggests. See Appendix B, pp. 10-12.

<sup>109</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*, 5th edn (London: Vintage, 2009) p. xxv.

series of adventures” with “ever changing” scenes and “characters [who] come and go”’.<sup>110</sup>

However, by the time he reached *Dombey and Son* some ten years later, John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson claim the increased complexity of his plotting and planning demonstrated ‘[...] his belief that there was no insuperable obstacle to writing [...] monthly instalments complete in themselves [which also formed] a novel with a well-defined purpose’.<sup>111</sup> The fact that much of Dickens' work is now generally considered part of Britain’s literary canon indicates he was largely successful in this apparent aim.<sup>112</sup> When we again consider the games writers’ lament that ‘it’s spectacularly, trudgingly hard to make games mean things,’ we can now view it with a more sympathetic eye, one which sees this for the disclaimer against accusations of simplistic writing it likely is.<sup>113</sup>

‘Who is this “we” you keep invoking?’ you ask indignantly. ‘I suppose I’m included in that? Well, what if I don’t want to be?’

Just know that with time, as with Dickens, this attitude too will change.

‘Now I don’t know if you’re referring to my attitude or the games writer’s!’

‘Can’t it be both?’ I ask.

If you haven’t yet discovered the sensationalist similarities between *Life is Strange* and *Great Expectations*, ([go to p. 54 now](#))

If you want to finally do something about those minecarts ([Continue](#))

Or, for more about ‘we’ and avoiding being included in it, ([go to the second paragraph of p. 106](#))

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<sup>110</sup> Allen, pp. 165-166.

<sup>111</sup> John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, *Dickens at Work*, 3rd edn (London: Methuen, 1968), p. 90.

<sup>112</sup> Indeed, this was my own experience in developing *Writers Are Not Strangers*. While initially I either attempted to write text to match code features I wished to use, or added code to sections I had already written, by the later chapters I was writing code and text in concert with one another, managing far greater levels of complexity than I had imagined possible at the outset.

<sup>113</sup> Stern, quoted in Lewis, NP.

## 2.5 On Parallel Tracks

‘Okay’, I say, putting my shoulder to one of the carts, ‘I think I’ve figured this out. We both have to push together’.

‘That’s what I said!’ You say indignantly.

‘Not the same one. We each have to push one at the same time. Two quite different but similar carts working in tandem, running along parallel tracks’.

‘Is this another one of your analogies?’ You ask, and you take one cart, perhaps the one piled with serials, and I take the other, maybe the one teetering with consoles, but really that decision is up to you and how you decide to picture it, and we lean and push as one, and something beneath the wheels clicks. The carts slide forwards like the tracks are greased, gaining speed, wheels thudding faster and faster towards the wall, each cart shedding consoles and books in a flurry of pages and smashing of plastic casings until the inevitable happens and each cart CRASHES through its wall of naysaying.

[\(Continue\)](#)

# 3.0 The Roles We Play

## 3.1 Real Fictional Characters

You come around to find yourself covered in book dust and flakes of masonry. It takes a moment for your eyes to adjust to the light. Despite your previous certainty that the cave was underground, the crumbled wall has opened out onto a lush grassy field. In the distance, a waterfall gushes, rainbows dancing in its furious foam. You could probably reach it within a few minutes' walk, although you have no intention of doing any such thing – it has no guard rail and looks dangerous.

As you're trying to get your bearings, there's a commotion from one of the minecarts. Books fly through the air, thudding into the grass left and right, and you cower away to avoid getting clonked on the head.

“Where is she now?” [says] a voice. “Tell me that”.<sup>1</sup>

You open your eyes to find a man standing in the serials mine cart, waist-deep in books. He's vaguely familiar, balding -

‘Wouldn't you say,’ he interrupts, ‘that it's actually that my “active brain has at last cleared a space on the top of” my head?’<sup>2</sup>

‘No’, you retort, ‘no-one would say that’.

- wild greying beard, clothes faintly ridiculous -

“Sumptuous”.<sup>3</sup>

- ridiculous, with a garish oversized flower and excessively frilled shirt -

‘Do not forget the “showy buttons”’,<sup>4</sup> he says proudly, picking a chunk of rock from the folds of his cravat. ‘And do you not think’, he adds, ‘that the manner in which

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, 3rd edn (London: Vintage, 2010), p. 542.

<sup>2</sup> Anonymous, ‘Death of the Great Novelist’, *New York Times*, June 11 1870, p.1.

<sup>3</sup> Anonymous, *New York Times*, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Anonymous, *New York Times*, p. 1.

my cravat is tied bespeaks “faculties of a mind not developed [...] in any of the published works of the author”?’<sup>5</sup>

‘How would a cravat do that?’ You ask. ‘And anyway, I’m not entirely sure that last one’s a compliment’.

‘You may be right at that’. His eyes twinkle, and you get the distinct feeling he’s playing with you, but with purpose, stalling you somehow. His previous words come back to you.<sup>6</sup>

‘Where’s who?’ You ask, and as you glance around and see only grass, trees and tumbledown fences for miles around, realise he’s referring to me. You are the only one to have come out of the mineshaft. Well, you and whoever this is. The man clambers down from the cart, apparently amused by your confusion, and gives his clothes a cursory dust, although he remains looking as if he’s been wearing them for two hundred years.

‘Yes, about that’, I say, watching you wheel around, trying to pinpoint my voice. ‘I’m afraid I’m not actually there with you. Wherever there is. I just gave you the impression I was’.

‘Marvellous’, you say, or words to that effect, perhaps less savoury.

‘But you’ve got Dickens there, now’, I say. ‘Or a version of him at least. You’ll love him. He’s a real character’.

[\(Continue\)](#)

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<sup>5</sup> Anonymous, *New York Times*, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> “Where is she now?”.

## 3.2 Fictional Dickenses

The Dickens you see before you, covered in book dust and flakes of masonry, is one of many Dickenses to appear in works of fiction, and like them, he seems as much a reflection of the writer and the writer's story as he is of any so-called 'real' Dickens. He could be the Dickens of his critics – beloved genius or fanciful lunatic depending on their preference; he could be Boz, the persona Dickens created to avoid risking his standing as a journalist; he could be the Dickens invoked by modern writers looking back on his life with fondness or scepticism; or any one of a number of other Dickenses, as many Dickenses as there are readers and players and writers to imagine him. Each of these Dickenses serves to demonstrate that the boundaries between reader, writer and **text** have long been more permeable and mutable than Gendolla and Schafer might imagine, and that the **bleed effect** is not confined to affecting players experiencing digital virtual worlds and characters, but may also be applied to readers and textual characters, even if those 'characters' are portrayals of real people.<sup>7</sup>

For example, historian Philip Collins' apocryphal tale of Dickens' death seeks to mythologise the writer's relationship with his audience. Collins claims: "A costermonger's girl in Drury Lane that day, exclaimed: 'Dickens dead? Then will Father Christmas die too?'"<sup>8</sup> He suggests this exchange (for which he provides no source) demonstrates the breadth of Dickens' appeal across all classes and the strong association that existed between Dickens and Christmas in the minds of the Victorian public, yet what it more strongly shows is the writer's desire to equate Dickens with a universally-known (and loved) fantasy character. In a piece about portraits of Dickens at various points in his life, Malcom Andrews describes Dickens in the oddly aggrandising nickname often applied to him: 'the young lion'. While doubtless in reference to his

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<sup>7</sup> Gendolla and Schafer, p. 24; see also p. 47 of this thesis.

<sup>8</sup> Philip Collins, 'Dickens and His Readers', *History Today*, 37 (1987), 32-40, p. 34.

‘thick, clustering’ hair, the description also evokes imagery of heraldic bravery and symbolic courage.<sup>9</sup> ‘Dickens’ as a real-life person is already slowly bleeding into a legendary or mythological character, weakening the ontological barrier between reality and fiction.

Although Boz was also a fictional representation of Dickens, his primary function was to allow ‘Dickens to maintain a respectable distance between his own name and a literary experiment’ – in some ways, the Richard Bachman of his day.<sup>10</sup> Richard Bachman was the penname adopted by Stephen King at the beginning of his career because ‘there was a feeling in the publishing business that one book a year was all the public would accept’.<sup>11</sup> King sought to circumvent this received wisdom, and in doing so, disproved it when his fans realised he was Richard Bachman and bought the books anyway.

In his essay on Boz as an authorial persona, Rob Allen shows how ‘the **paratextual** elements of a literary work also serve to create or modify the image of the author responsible for it’, noting in particular how Boz’s role shifted from young, aspiring writer, to astute editor of another talented writer (Dickens) before finally revealing his identity and stepping aside to allow Dickens his due.<sup>12</sup> This begins to demonstrate the oddness of the relationship between author and authorial persona (which has parallels with the relationship between player and avatar). Boz was revealed to be Dickens, and yet still required to step aside, because he had become a character in his own right, as well as an embodiment, or representation, of Dickens.

Throughout his existence, Boz served as a way for Dickens to differentiate himself from the commercial side of his work, allowing him to forge a friendship with

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<sup>9</sup> Malcom Andrews, Sketches of Boz., *The Dickensian*, 108 (2012), p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> Allen, “‘Boz versus Dickens’” in Hinks and Day, p. 155.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen King, ‘Why did you write books as Richard Bachman?’, *Frequently Asked Questions*, StephenKing.com. <<http://stephenking.com/faq.html#1.6>> [accessed 5 August 2016].

<sup>12</sup> Allen, in Hinks and Day, p. 157.

his readers, rather than a relationship built on economics.<sup>13</sup> Even after his ‘outing’ as a creation by the author, Boz was also presented as a living character alongside Dickens, acting as ‘witness’ to Dickens’ dedication in an edition of *The Pickwick Papers*.<sup>14</sup>

Again, this has links with Bachman, who joined Stephen King to offer an edited version of an old manuscript. Bachman is named as author, while King offers a foreword, and, like Boz, the use of an authorial persona in this instance is playful – we are told the text is a posthumous publication following Bachman’s death from ‘cancer of the pseudonym’ in 1985.<sup>15</sup> Boz and Bachman also represent fictionalised versions of their authors, and although they were created for playful and pragmatic reasons rather than self-promotion or mythologizing they serve to further blur the line between author and textual creation.

Dan Simmons’ *Drood* offers a further example of writer as character, this time depicting a Dickens which calls Dickens’ public persona into question. He is presented, not as the jovial Boz, but as a complex, sombre character, with a dark and dangerous side. The authorial role is further complicated as the story is presented from the perspective of a fictionalised Wilkie Collins. Collins introduces Dickens in conjunction with ‘the Staplehurst accident that took away his peace of mind, his health, and, some might whisper, his sanity’, again blurring the lines between reality and fiction by invoking the real world setting of the Staplehurst rail crash.<sup>16</sup>

Collins attempts to concretise Dickens’ depravity via descriptions of disturbing acts, such as witnessing Dickens ‘become the bully-thug Bill Sikes from *Oliver Twist*’ when practising a scene for a public reading, ‘lost in the bloody act of murdering Nancy’.<sup>17</sup> This obviously draws on the fact that Dickens ‘often spoke of his

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<sup>13</sup> Allen, in Hinks and Day, pp. 158-163.

<sup>14</sup> Allen, in Hinks and Day, p. 170.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen King, *Blaze*, StephenKing.com, <[http://stephenking.com/library/bachman\\_novel/blaze\\_flap.html](http://stephenking.com/library/bachman_novel/blaze_flap.html)> [accessed 5 August 2016].

<sup>16</sup> Dan Simmons, *Drood*. 2nd edn (London: Quercus, 2009), p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Simmons, p. 549.

performances in the role of Sikes bludgeoning Nancy as “murders” he had committed’, joking about his ““murderous instincts””.<sup>18</sup>

However, Collins’ somewhat flippant use of the nickname, ‘the Inimitable’ (a moniker frequently delivered with more than a little sarcasm), casts doubt on the sincerity of Collins’ fear.<sup>19</sup> First, Collins introduces the ironic concept that, technically, *all* writers are unique when he observes: ‘even the most famous actor has an understudy. A writer does not. No one can replace him. His distinctive voice is everything’.<sup>20</sup> He also mentions that he had ‘seen Charles Dickens stuck in a rural, doorless privy with his trousers down around his ankles, bleating like a lost sheep for some paper to wipe his arse’. This is the Dickens he perceives as ‘more true’ than the image of ““the greatest writer who ever lived””.<sup>21</sup> ‘The inimitable’, therefore, mocks Dickens’ status and uniqueness as much as it upholds them.

Terry Pratchett’s Dickens as portrayed in the novel *Dodger* is ‘Charlie’, a ‘gentleman known as a bit of a scribbler’, friendly and amiable.<sup>22</sup> Yet the notion he ‘might well be a dangerous cove’, ‘the type who would look at a body and see right inside you’ and who has plumbed the depths of the city ‘as a matter of business’ is retained.<sup>23</sup> This suits the tone of what is essentially a darkly comic young adult novel, and also merges effectively with Pratchett’s own writerly persona. Simmons keeps his own authorial voice at a distance by ventriloquizing Wilkie Collins, while Pratchett, like Dickens himself, more willingly intrudes on the narrative, most often via his footnotes. For example, a footnote in *Dodger* reads: ‘[...] the single women in question plied their

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<sup>18</sup> Brantlinger, p. 83.

<sup>19</sup> E.g. Simmons p. 58, p. 670, p. 710 etc.

<sup>20</sup> Simmons, p. 481.

<sup>21</sup> Simmons, p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Terry Pratchett, *Dodger*, (London: Doubleday Random House, 2012) p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Pratchett, *Dodger*, p. 7; p. 65.

[...] trade under licence [...] Delicacy [...] prevents the author from describing what exactly they were trading'.<sup>24</sup>

In the promotional testimonies prefacing *Men at Arms*, Pratchett is described as the 'Dickens of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century' a comparison made by various other fans and journalists.<sup>25</sup> However, as several readers observe in an online discussion, there is little similarity between the writing styles and subject matter of Pratchett and Dickens, beyond the frequent use of dialogue.<sup>26</sup> Victor Nell observes how Dickens 'uses dialogue rather than description to establish character vividly' and invokes Tom Wolfe's assertion that "realistic dialogue [...] involves the reader more completely than any other single device".<sup>27</sup> If characters become real to the reader and authors are blurred with their creations, perhaps readers become attached to both. This could go some way towards explaining the extent of readers' public sadness at both writers' deaths. Philip Collins' tale of the young girl placing Dickens' death on a par with the death of Santa Claus is not as outlandish as it first seems when situated alongside the petition sent by more than 30,000 of Pratchett's fans to Death to demand the safe return of their beloved author.<sup>28</sup> Both events could have come straight from the pages of their author's novels, and yet, the latter at least, was definitely true.

Both Pratchett and Dickens were often denounced by the critics of their time because their enormous popularity was seen as a reflection of poor writing that appealed to the uneducated masses. By way of a retrospective of the author's work, *The Guardian's* Jonathan Jones suggests Pratchett's writing 'justif[ies] mental laziness and

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<sup>24</sup> Pratchett, *Dodger*, p. 270. *Intrude via footnotes? I would never!*

<sup>25</sup> Terry Pratchett, *Men at Arms*, 18th edn, (London: Corgi, 1994), p. iv; See for example: Rachel Cooper, 'Terry Pratchett - A Modern Day Dickens', Penguin Books New Zealand, <<http://penguin.co.nz/article/12-modern-day-dickens>> [accessed 1 August 2016].

<sup>26</sup> Various, 'Terry Pratchett as a modern Charles Dickens?', Reddit, 12 October 2015, <[https://www.reddit.com/r/books/comments/3of8s3/terry\\_pratchett\\_as\\_a\\_modern\\_charles\\_dickens/](https://www.reddit.com/r/books/comments/3of8s3/terry_pratchett_as_a_modern_charles_dickens/)> [accessed 20 June 2018].

<sup>27</sup> Victor Nell, *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure*, 3rd edn, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) pp. 53-54.

<sup>28</sup> Tom Pride, 'Reinstate Terry Pratchett', Change.org petition, <<https://www.change.org/p/death-bring-back-terry-pratchett>> [Accessed 5 August 2016].

rob[s] readers of the true delights of ambitious fiction’, and calls for an end to ‘this pretence that mediocrity is equal to genius’.<sup>29</sup> A similar posthumous appraisal of Dickens compared his fans with children unperturbed by the fact their wooden horse ‘does not move his legs but runs on wheels’, characterising Dickens’ writing as similarly wooden.<sup>30</sup>

You glance at Dickens to see if he’s offended by this,<sup>31</sup> but he’s over by the spilled consoles, picking them up and turning them thoughtfully in his hands, no doubt trying to discern their purpose.

‘So which one is he?’ you hiss. ‘It seems quite important to determine whether I’m with the murderous one or the affable one!’

Well, I continue, Simmons evidently lacks the fondness for Dickens displayed by Pratchett, as he characterises Dickens in an interview as “‘an absolute misogynist’”.<sup>32</sup> However, his unreliable narrator Wilkie Collins, seeing Dickens’ portrayal of Sikes as a demonstration of real-life murderous intent, matches that of one of Dickens’ critics, George Henry Lewes, in that it fails to distinguish between Dickens embodying his artistic imagination, and losing his grip on reality. Dickens’ editor and friend John Forster complains that rather than recognising his imaginative ability, Lewes classifies Dickens as ‘hallucinative’, a “‘seer of visions’”.<sup>33</sup> According to Forster, another critic, M. Taine, ‘places on the same level of creative fancy the phantoms of the lunatic and the personages of the artist’, suggesting Dickens ‘dazzl[es]

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<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Jones, ‘Get real. Terry Pratchett is not a literary genius’, *Guardian*, 31 August 2015, <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2015/aug/31/terry-pratchett-is-not-a-literary-genius>> [accessed 1 August 2016].

<sup>30</sup> John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens Vol. 2* (London: J M Dent & Sons Ltd, 1950), p. 269.

<sup>31</sup> If you’re wondering why I’m concerned Dickens might be party to this train of thought, see pp. 104-106 of this thesis.

<sup>32</sup> John Joseph Adams, David Barr Kirtley, and Dan Simmons, ‘Interview: Dan Simmons’, *Nightmare Magazine*, 14 (2013), <<http://www.nightmare-magazine.com/nonfiction/interview-dan-simmons/>> [accessed 24 August 2016].

<sup>33</sup> Forster, p. 269.

and overpower[s]’ his readers; ‘the effect is enchantment’.<sup>34</sup> The overall impression is of madness and magic, and malign magic at that.

This connection between Dickens and the supernatural is also present in his portrayal in the videogame *Assassins’ Creed: Syndicate*, although here, Dickens represents rationality in the face of superstition. Dickens acts as quest-giver, sending players to debunk apparent paranormal activity, saying: “‘Here we are in the world’s most advanced city, yet its citizens are so in thrall to the supernatural they leave themselves vulnerable to charlatans! Which is why I joined ‘The Ghost Club’, the first society in the world to look systematically at the phenomenon’”.<sup>35</sup> Again, this depiction of Dickens blurs reality with fantasy, drawing on his real-life scepticism, whilst depicting events of pure fantasy, involving demons, cults, hypnotists and ghosts.<sup>36</sup>

‘He could be magic, mad, or both, then, is that what you’re saying?’

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<sup>34</sup> Forster, p. 264-265.

<sup>35</sup> Ubisoft Quebec, *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate*, (2015), Playstation 4, Xbox One and Windows.

<sup>36</sup> Dickens refers disparagingly to seances as ‘table-rapping’ and uses *All the Year Round* as a platform to scathingly review demonstrations of mediumship. ‘Rather a Strong Dose’, *All the Year Round*, IX (1863), 84-87, in *Dickens Journals Online* <<http://www.djo.org.uk/all-the-year-round/volume-ix/page-84.html>> [accessed 30/11/2018] and ‘The Martyr Medium’, *All the Year Round*, IX (1863), 133-136, in *Dickens Journal Online* <<http://www.djo.org.uk/all-the-year-round/volume-ix/page-133.html>> [accessed 30/11/2018].

### 3.3 It's a Kind of Magic

No. What I am saying is that magic and the supernatural seem to be commonly linked with writing, and offer a way for writers to frame their practice, both in fiction and outside of it. Magic may therefore provide a method for understanding how fiction affects readers, by offering a framing metaphor for the reader-creator relationship. Which will in turn help you identify your Dickens.

In Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Through the Magic Door*, the act of reading is framed as a kind of trans-dimensional necromancy, encouraging would-be readers to 'plunge back into the soothing company of the great dead' and go 'through the magic portal into that fair land wither worry and vexation can follow you no more'.<sup>37</sup> Despite the potential for these supernatural subjects to be dark and frightening (as with Dickens's supposed status as a "seer of visions"), Conan Doyle instead presents them as a source of familiarity and comfort.<sup>38</sup> The dead are 'great' and 'soothing', this magical dimension one of ease and respite from the 'worry and vexation' of the real world.<sup>39</sup> Yet Conan Doyle does not dismiss the potential for unease out of hand, acknowledging that 'there would be something eerie about a line of books were it not that familiarity has deadened our senses to it. Each is a mummified soul embalmed in **cere-cloth** and **natron** of leather and printer's ink'.<sup>40</sup> Here Conan Doyle makes an inference he repeats throughout the text: that reading and writing are a special kind of necromancy. To read is, for Conan Doyle, to grant immortality to writers who 'may have faded to thinnest shadows, as their bodies into impalpable dust, yet here are their very spirits at your command'.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, *Through the Magic Door* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1907), <<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/006871388>> [accessed 21 May 2018] p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> Lewes, quoted in Forster, p. 269.

<sup>39</sup> Conan Doyle, *Through the Magic Door*, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> Conan Doyle, *Through the Magic Door*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>41</sup> Conan Doyle, *Through the Magic Door*, p. 2.

These links between writing and magic go back far further than Victorian England. Historian Steven Fischer reports that ‘people purchasing clay bowls inscribed with Aramaic incantations believed that, through reading the incantations, malevolent spirits would become trapped under the bowls. That is, the writing itself held magical power. It required no human audience’.<sup>42</sup> Here both writer and reader become incidental – it is the words themselves that are magical, capable of casting a spell through their very existence. Kurt Seligman’s account of Egyptian magical rites shows a similar reverence for the making of marks, although this time the magician himself becomes the page, much like Conan Doyle’s ‘mummified soul’ books: ‘On his tongue, in green ink, the magician drew a feather, the sign of truth’.<sup>43</sup>

Conan Doyle suggests a similar kind of spell when he advocates for ‘inspiring’ texts ‘everywhere engraved on appropriate places, and our progress through the streets will be brightened and ennobled by [...] beautiful impulses and images, reflected into our souls from the printed thoughts which meet our eyes’.<sup>44</sup> He also introduces a sense of communion between reader and writer via the medium of the printed word. This offers an alternative formulation of Iser’s assertion that ‘in reading we think the thoughts of another person’ but also raises the question of whether such ‘shared consciousness’ is always desirable, a question neither Iser nor Conan Doyle ever stop to ask.<sup>45</sup>

The closest that Conan Doyle comes to self-reflection in this regard is when he asks: ‘Is it possible that we [writers] are indeed but conduit pipes from the infinite reservoir of the unknown?’<sup>46</sup> While Conan Doyle never explicitly expresses any sense of fear or foreboding where this exchange with ‘the unknown’ is concerned, his word

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<sup>42</sup> Steven R. Fischer, *A History of Reading* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), p. 25.

<sup>43</sup> Kurt Seligman, *The History of Magic: A Catalogue of Sorcery, Witchcraft and the Occult* (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1997), p. 69.

<sup>44</sup> Conan Doyle, *Through the Magic Door*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>45</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 126. See also pp. 104-106 of this thesis.

<sup>46</sup> Conan Doyle, *Through the Magic Door*, p. 41.

choice when describing ‘the creative thought’ as flying through the writer’s ‘brain like a bullet’ perhaps indicates some awareness of the potential danger associated with this transaction with the unfamiliar.<sup>47</sup>

This idea of the unknown and unknowable was a source of anxiety that Brantlinger identifies in both Victorian and modern writers, describing it as ‘the ultimate unknowability of the common reader’.<sup>48</sup> Here though, far from supernatural, the unknowability stems from the sheer multitude of possible readers and therefore possible interpretations of the text. This returns us to the question of ‘thinking another’s thoughts’ and whether this is the desired outcome for both reader and writer, or an imposition.<sup>49</sup> Is this idea of ‘shared consciousness’ really more of a question of narrative ownership? Of authorial power in opposition to reader sovereignty, or player agency in opposition to creator agency?

Nell suggests that the reader’s power is absolute because ‘there is no book: each reader creates the book anew. My dominion over the book is absolute because when I lift my eyes from the page, the book ceases to exist’.<sup>50</sup> This could equally be said of videogames – if the audience of a DVD or film leaves the room, the story will continue, but progress in a videogame ceases the moment the player lays down their controller. Or does it? Attempts to stack food, *Tetris*-like on the supermarket conveyor belt is just one way the ‘game’ might continue.<sup>51</sup> The reader-player’s ‘dominion’ *during* the reading/playing process is even less certain. N. Katherine Hayles indicates that this uncertainty is heightened for the reader of digital texts, when she highlights the ‘complex networks extending beyond our ken and operating through codes’ which are

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<sup>47</sup> Conan Doyle, *Through the Magic Door*, p. 41.

<sup>48</sup> Brantlinger, p. 17.

<sup>49</sup> Iser, *Act of Reading*, p. 126.

<sup>50</sup> Nell, p. 226.

<sup>51</sup> See pp. 21-22 of this thesis.

‘invisible and inaccessible’.<sup>52</sup> The computer takes on the role of both magician and stooge in this instance, so what might the reader-player and writer-creator’s positions be?

Echoing Carlisle’s description of narration as ‘mutual activity’, Iser describes the process of reading as a ‘co-operative enterprise’, thereby suggesting that whatever the reader-player and writer-creator’s roles might be, there is a degree of partnership involved.<sup>53</sup> Although Iser suggests that the power balance fluctuates between text (and for Iser, the boundaries between text and author seem somewhat blurred) and reader throughout the enactment of this co-operation, he seems to view it as an entirely positive exchange. His entire conceptualisation of aesthetic response centralises the reader: ‘a literary text can only produce a response when it is read’, yet he also notes that ‘the reader’s imagination can be manipulated and even reoriented’ by the text.<sup>54</sup> While Iser gives no indication of conceiving this shifting powerplay as anything other than a wholly enjoyable experience for the reader, he describes the process as becoming ‘entangled’ in the text, a turn of phrase that evokes not only the kitten amusingly ensnared in the ball of yarn, but also the fly trapped in the spider’s web.<sup>55</sup> Conan Doyle uses the same term when describing the ‘worst’ of the problems associated with the creative process (the fact that a multitude of possibilities are presented and choosing between them is a struggle): ‘You can’t pull one out without a dozen being entangled with it’.<sup>56</sup> That Iser and Conan Doyle present both the reader and the writer in this context suggests entanglement is –

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<sup>52</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2010 [2008]), p. 138.

<sup>53</sup> Carlisle, p 15; Iser, p. 27. See also pp. 47-48 of this thesis.

<sup>54</sup> Iser, *Act of Reading*, p. ix & p. 125.

<sup>55</sup> Iser, *Act of Reading*, p. 127; p. 130.

<sup>56</sup> Conan Doyle, *Through the Magic Door*, p. 36.

### 3.3.1 An (Un)Welcome Interruption

‘Help! Help! Goodness me, HELP!’ Dickens is plunged head first into the serials cart, his legs wiggling ineffectually as he tries to right himself. You feel obliged to help, even though he could be a psychopath not above a bit of bludgeoning.<sup>57</sup>

‘I think someone has me by the arm!’ he says, and you grab him around the waist and pull as hard as you can. You grit your teeth against the strain. You’re forced to brace one foot against the side of the cart and pitch back with all your might. This seems to do the trick, for Dickens comes hurtling backwards into your lap, dragging another fellow with him, who indeed has him by the arm.

‘How many more people are in that cart?’ you grumble, rubbing the base of your spine where it collided with the ground. I direct your attention away from that and instead towards the new man, whose ‘very person and appearance [are] such as to strike the attention of the most casual observer. In height he [is] rather over six feet and so excessively lean that he seem[s] to be considerably taller’. He has ‘sharp and piercing’ eyes, while his nose is ‘thin and hawklike’.<sup>58</sup> However, he does not yet possess the characteristics by which you might know him. Perhaps if you add him to your steadily growing party, get to know him, spend some time with him, you’ll come to realise just who this gentleman is.

‘I’m already figuring out Dickens’, you say. ‘Isn’t it rather repetitious of you to give me another man to figure out before I’ve even finished the first?’

‘It’s ‘not repeating, but replying’, I say.<sup>59</sup>

‘Interesting’, says the man, who before your eyes develops a deer stalker and produces a magnifying glass from the depths of an Ulster you are certain he wasn’t

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<sup>57</sup> See pp. 77-78 of this thesis.

<sup>58</sup> Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, ‘A Study in Scarlet’ in *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Stories*, ed. by [Helen Trayler Ranson], (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2006), p. 19

<sup>59</sup> Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. by Arthur Mitchell (New York: Project Gutenberg, 2008) <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/26163/26163-h/26163-h.htm>> [accessed 22 June 2018], p. 58

wearing before. To your surprise he looks up into the sky, the magnifying glass to his eye. 'Do you mark how she's trying to make detectives of us?' he asks.

'Yes, actually', says Dickens. 'I noticed, even if this one didn't'.

[\(Continue\)](#)

### 3.4 Everyone's a Detective

In his study of Victorian detective fiction, Lawrence Frank suggests that the narrative of 'Hound of the Baskervilles' highlights the flaws in the detective (and scientific) method, observing: 'The detective, like the geologist and the palaeontologist [...] [interprets] fragmentary evidence'.<sup>60</sup> In other words, these experts' discoveries are not quite so definitive and objective as might be implied – detectives are, like readers, undertaking an act of interpretation, and moreover, an interpretation arising from partial information. Like Wynne, Frank argues that this attitude is due to the scientific climate of the time – the influence of Darwin, geologist Charles Lyell and palaeontologist Georges Cuvier on the creative imaginations of Dickens and Conan Doyle.<sup>61</sup> However, I would argue that there is something more complex at work, that it is not just the era in which Conan Doyle and Dickens are writing, but also the form in which they are writing which shapes their portrayal of mystery, detectives and detection.

Frank notes that Lyell rejected the notion of geological time as an evolution, emphasising it instead as 'cyclical and non-linear'.<sup>62</sup> He observes that Conan Doyle 'responded to [Lyell and Darwin's] discussion of the geological record as a fragmentary text written in different languages demanding decipherment and interpretation', yet does not consider why this might have appealed to a writer of serialised fiction – texts which are inherently cyclical, non-linear and fragmentary due to their mode of release.<sup>63</sup>

While the relationship between evolutionary theory and Victorian detective fiction is evident via studies such as those by Frank and Wynne, there is an additional relationship at work – that between the reader and character which emerges as a by-product of serialisation. Both 'The Hound of the Baskervilles' and *Life is Strange*, have

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<sup>60</sup> Lawrence Frank, *Victorian Detective Fiction and the Nature of Evidence: The Scientific Investigations of Poe, Dickens and Doyle*, 3rd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), p. 161.

<sup>61</sup> Frank, pp. 155-165. See also p. 60 of this thesis.

<sup>62</sup> Frank, p. 163.

<sup>63</sup> Frank, p. 155.

an intriguing relationship with temporality and impending apocalypse, as well as with the shifting identities (and processes of identification) of and between the reader-player and characters.

All the **texts** encountered thus far cast the reader-player as detective in various ways. This serves the dual purpose of encouraging identification with and motivation for the protagonist. In *Life is Strange*, the reader-player is encouraged to share the protagonist's curiosity, taking on an investigative role both through gameplay and identifying with or blurring into the protagonist.<sup>64</sup> *Great Expectations* differs somewhat in that Pip makes only the most perfunctory attempt to identify his sister's attacker, although it could be argued that it is this inaction which encourages the reader's speculation.<sup>65</sup> The Sherlock Holmes stories further complicate the role of the reader in that there are two very different characters with whom the reader might identify. Is the reader the detective, a double for Holmes, or Watson, the sidekick, along for the ride and offering up a series of (ultimately wrong) guesses before stepping aside to allow the master to do his work, much as Boz stepped aside for Dickens?<sup>66</sup>

In videogames, the relationship between player and character(s) is often complicated by the process of identification. Identification, or 'the experience of relating to a fictional being', is convoluted by factors such as how the character operates with regard to in-game progression or perspective.<sup>67</sup> A focus on progression could cause the player to see the protagonist as a means to an end, a tool to be used rather than a character to empathise with, as Newman observes.<sup>68</sup> Perspective may refer to the game's camera perspective, which may be first or **third person**, or the narrative

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<sup>64</sup> See pp. 59-64 of this thesis.

<sup>65</sup> And if you're thinking 'Isn't this almost the exact opposite of what you argued earlier?!' Well... quite.

<sup>66</sup> See pp.76-77 of this thesis.

<sup>67</sup> Caspar J. van Lissa, Marco Caracciolo, Thom van Duren and Bram van Leuven, 'Difficult Empathy: The Effect of Narrative Perspective on Readers' Engagement with a First-Person Narrator' in *DIEGESIS: Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research*, 5.1 (2016), 43-63 (p. 43).

<sup>68</sup> Newman, *Videogames*, p. 136.

perspective the player is offered. Usually narrative perspective is second or third person, but on occasion, first person, as in *80 Days*, or omniscient, as in strategy games such as *Medieval Total War*. Many games use multiple camera perspective techniques, or offer players the choice to select their preferred camera perspective, and increasingly, story-based games offer the player the option of focussing on narrative or gameplay elements as part of the initial game set-up options, as shown in *Figure 14*.

## Image Redacted

*Figure 14: Mass Effect 3 mode selection menu*<sup>69</sup>

If we take Max from *Life is Strange* as an example, the in-game camera perspective is primarily third person. That is, we ordinarily see Max physically enacting all the things she does, rather than experiencing them from her perspective as would be the case in a first person view, although there is frequent usage of an ‘over the shoulder’ view to build the player’s connection with Max (see *Figure 15*).

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<sup>69</sup> Andrew Burnes, ‘*Mass Effect 3* Demo: Impressions and Benchmarks’, *GeForce*, 14 February 2012, <<http://www.geforce.com/whats-new/articles/mass-effect-3-demo-impressions-and-benchmarks>> [accessed 30 December 2016].

# Image Redacted

Figure 15: (top l) Max in 3rd person view, (top r) 3rd person over the shoulder view (below) 1st person perspective in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*<sup>70</sup>

The narrative perspective is also third person here, as Max is a distinct character in her own right. The player cannot choose her back story or appearance as in *Mass Effect*: Max is always a teenage girl with brown hair and grey eyes who studies photography at Blackwell Academy. Yet, due to the **bleed effect**, an element of second person perspective is inescapable, because however far the player attempts to role-play as Max, the impact of the player's own real-world opinions and biases when making in-game decisions is unavoidable.<sup>71</sup> Max is 'Max' but she is also 'You'. This complex player/character relationship is not unique to videogames, though. Gérard Genette argues that narrative in general always has 'two protagonists: the narrator and his audience, real or implied'.<sup>72</sup> This suggests that the reader-player is not only external to the text, but also a part of it. An example of this complex relationship can be found in

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<sup>70</sup> Image sources L-R & below: Now Gamer, 'The Hardest Choice in *Life is Strange* Episode 3 Involves Bacon', *NowGamer.com*, 21 May 2015, <<https://www.nowgamer.com/the-hardest-choice-in-life-is-strange-episode-3-involves-bacon/>> [accessed 16 October 2018]; Steven Strom, 'Life is Strange Episode One review: Trying and retrying new things', *Ars Technica*, 30 January 2015, <<https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2015/01/life-is-strange-episode-one-review-trying-and-retrying-new-things/>> [accessed 16 October 2018]; PC Magazine Editor, 'Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 (PC, PS3, Xbox 360)', *PC Magazine*, 7 November 2011, <<https://uk.pcmag.com/call-of-duty-modern-warfare-3-pc-ps3-xbox-360/19962/review/call-of-duty-modern-warfare-3-pc-ps3-xbox-360>>, [accessed 16 October 2018].

<sup>71</sup> Jorgensen, p. 319. See also pp. 21-22 of this thesis.

<sup>72</sup> Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 31.

Conan Doyle's Holmes stories in terms of how the reader relates to Holmes and Watson.

The majority of the Sherlock Holmes stories are told in first person by Dr Watson, and yet, for the most part, the story they tell is not Watson's, but that of detective Sherlock Holmes. With whom, then, is the reader expected to identify? As Frank observes, 'Dr. Watson has become Arthur Conan Doyle's fictionalised "man in the street"' indicating he is the character most aligned with the (expected) reader.<sup>73</sup> James Krasner appears to agree when he suggests that '[t]he stories are structured not around their protagonist's detecting, but around their narrator's frustrated desire to behold and comprehend that detecting'.<sup>74</sup> Here the position of the narrator and that of the reader surely merge, as both are excluded from Holmes' process of deduction, unless they are able to piece it together for themselves from the fragmentary clues and information he provides. Like Watson, the reader 'may only take what details his friend offers'.<sup>75</sup> If this interpretation identifies Watson as an analogue for the reader, then it consequently positions Holmes as an analogue for the writer.

An example of this dangling of clues (from Holmes to Watson and the writer to the reader) occurs in 'Hound of the Baskervilles' in the form of Sir Henry Baskerville's missing boots. A lengthy scene is devoted to the first footwear theft and an even lengthier one when a second, different boot is pilfered.<sup>76</sup> Holmes takes great pains to establish that this is a "'a new brown boot'", as does Conan Doyle, via Sir Henry, who emphasises: "'Last night they took one of my brown ones, and today they have sneaked one of the black"'.<sup>77</sup> This highlights the significance of the theft to both Watson and the

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<sup>73</sup> Frank, p. 176.

<sup>74</sup> James Krasner, 'Watson Falls Asleep: Narrative Frustration and Sherlock Holmes', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 40 (1997), 424-436 (p. 425).

<sup>75</sup> Krasner, p. 428.

<sup>76</sup> Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Hound of the Baskervilles' in *Complete Stories*, ed. by [Trayler Ranson], pp. 177-304 (p. 202).

<sup>77</sup> Conan Doyle, 'Hound of the Baskervilles', p. 208.

reader. Yet it is at this point that the first complication of the reader's identification with Watson may be observed. For while Holmes and Henry discuss this at length, Watson makes no remark, and offers no possible reason as to why the boot may have been taken. If Watson is acting as an analogue for the reader, surely he would press this matter further? Krasner suggests that this lack of forethought on Watson's part 'breeds a sort of resentment against the narrator'.<sup>78</sup> However, I would argue that in doing so, it pairs the reader with Holmes in a way which would be otherwise impossible, due to both his own aloofness and coldness and Watson's insistence on 'portraying himself and Holmes as a unit'.<sup>79</sup> In becoming frustrated with Watson, the reader is able to empathise with Holmes as well as with the narrator. Much in the way that if you are becoming frustrated with me, I offer you the alternative of Dickens and Holmes to spend time with. But if you *like* them, well, then I've tricked you, because they are also me. Sally Bachner indicates that this merging of multiple identities is intrinsic to mysteries and their resolution when she observes: '[...] identification with another is the necessary precondition for revelation; [...] the route through which the empirically untraversable space between subjects can be breached'.<sup>80</sup>

Frank notes the 'blurring' of 'the differences between the male figures involved in the case' in 'Hound of the Baskervilles' and the proliferation of doubles throughout.<sup>81</sup> There are certainly many cases of this, not only the dead Selden mistaken for Sir Henry, and Watson misidentifying the two men inhabiting the stone age houses as one man, as Frank highlights, but also Holmes pretending to mistake one hotel guest for another in order to glean information from the desk clerk, the similarities in appearance between

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<sup>78</sup> Krasner, p. 432.

<sup>79</sup> Krasner, p. 434.

<sup>80</sup> Sally Bachner, "'The Seeing Eye": Detection, Perception and Erotic Knowledge in *The Good Soldier*' in *Ford Madox Ford's Modernity*, ed. by Robert Hampson and Max Saunders (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), pp. 103-116, (p. 105).

<sup>81</sup> Frank, p. 188.

Stapleton's bearded disguise and the bearded butler Barrymore, and Stapleton using Holmes' identity when following Holmes and Watson around London.<sup>82</sup>

Such cases of doubling and blurring occur in *Life is Strange* also. When Max borrows some of Rachel Amber's old clothes from Chloe, Nathan mistakes her for the missing girl. Like Watson, Max does little with this opportunity, providing the option to interrogate Nathan about Frank's relationship with Rachel, but asking nothing about his own. Perhaps this serves a similar purpose to Watson's own ineptitude, encouraging the player to identify with Max (and Rachel), while simultaneously maintaining a more independent detective role. After Max's time-tampering, a double moon appears, and Max meets alternate versions of many of the game's characters when she creates an alternate timeline by attempting to prevent the death of Chloe's father. Max is even confronted with multiple copies of herself when time breaks down towards the end of the game, forcing her to literally confront her previous actions.<sup>83</sup>

In both texts, blurring serves the purpose of reminding reader-players to question everything, to become the detective and avoid relying on safe distinctions and comfortable assumptions. Doubling serves as a representation of duplicity, but also as a tool to allow the protagonist to confront themselves and therefore their actions and choices, either literally, as in *Life is Strange*, or more indirectly, as in 'Hound of the Baskervilles' when finding Selden's corpse (and presuming it to be Henry) causes Holmes to doubt his approach: "In order to have my case well-rounded and complete, I have thrown away the life of my client".<sup>84</sup> Not only does this seem to be an argument against completeness, it also indicates the precarious nature of the detective's entanglement with both his case and his client. Holmes' experience, then, is much like the reader's: an impossible desire for a completeness which can never be realised.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Conan Doyle, 'Hound' p. 207; p. 209 & p. 213.

<sup>83</sup> Dontnod, *Episodes 4 & 5*.

<sup>84</sup> Conan Doyle, 'Hound', p. 274.

<sup>85</sup> See pp. 50-51 of this thesis for more on completeness.

In both texts the reader-player is encouraged to adopt the role of both detective and detective's sidekick. Through doubling and blurring of characters, duplicities are highlighted, and yet, it would be incorrect to assume that duplicitous behaviour is always malicious. 'Innocence is staged in the game via naive young female characters who can't pretend to be what they are not, as opposed to adults who are able to indulge in duplicity', writes Luis de Miranda of *Life is Strange*.<sup>86</sup> Yet, throughout, Max pretends to be what she is not, using her time-winding powers to uncover information about her friends she would otherwise not have access to, and utilising it not only to discover secrets pertaining to Rachel's disappearance, but also to present herself to her peers in a more favourable light. De Miranda's use of the word 'indulge' positions duplicity as a taboo pastime, something to be enjoyed on occasion despite an awareness of its unhealthy qualities, much as videogames and serials themselves have both been viewed.<sup>87</sup>

Duplicity is thus an essential tool for the would-be detective. Holmes and Max both casually, often playfully, deceive those around them in the course of their investigations, through disguises (in the case of Holmes, at least, although Max wearing Rachel-Amber's clothes also serves this purpose) and through withholding, or faking knowledge in order to obtain more. Even Watson presents a conversation with Mrs Lyons as a game in which 'incredulity and indifference were evidently my strongest cards'.<sup>88</sup> In fact, the conversation is framed much like one of *Life is Strange's* **dialogue trees**, when Watson expresses frustration that: 'Again and again I cross-questioned her, but could never get past that point' as if there is a correct route leading to the information he desires if only he could navigate the conversation successfully.<sup>8990</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> de Miranda, p. 832.

<sup>87</sup> See section 2.0 of this thesis.

<sup>88</sup> Conan Doyle, 'Hound', p. 265.

<sup>89</sup> Conan Doyle, 'Hound', p. 262.

<sup>90</sup> Perhaps you feel the same about navigating this thesis? Certainly, some routes will be more rewarding than others.

As Watson and Holmes, (and even the tetronimoes in *Tetris*) show, the relationship between reader-player and character changes throughout the course of a reading/playing session, with the reader-player identifying with the ‘character’ differently at different points in the narrative or play session.<sup>91</sup> However, this is coupled with the complication of the delineation between roles such as ‘reader/player,’ ‘writer’ and ‘character’. Writers become characters in their own books, readers identify with both readerly and writerly characters, and characters live outside of the narrative through the concerted efforts of their readers and players. Therefore, to say that duplicity can be beneficial for the reader is also to say it can be beneficial for the writer and the character, as distinctions between these constructs become increasingly blurred and malleable. While the figures of the detective, side-kick and client go some way towards representing the complex nature of these relationships, they are not the only possible analogy.

Conan Doyle has touched upon another – magic.

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<sup>91</sup> See pp. 16-18 of this thesis.

### 3.5 Everyone's a Magician<sup>92</sup>

Dickens produces a coin from his inner jacket pocket. He holds it aloft to you and Holmes, turning it this way and that, before tossing it high into the air. With a swift slap he traps it against the back of his hand.

‘So?’ he asks. ‘Heads or tails?’

You cannot know until you look, although you could perhaps hazard a guess.

Those watching the 2008 TV special *The System*, will have seen illusionist Derren Brown perform a trick in which he flips a coin and achieves ten consecutive heads.<sup>93</sup> This astonishing feat conjures various possibilities in the mind of the viewer. Is he palming the coin somehow, changing unwanted tails to heads with sleight of hand? Does he switch out the coin as soon as the trick has begun, substituting it for a double-headed fake? Is he using camera trickery, making multiple attempts look like a single, unedited shot? According to Nell, this multiplicity of possible solutions, and the weighing of likely answers posited by the conundrum of the trick, could contribute to the viewer's enjoyment: ‘our participation in [a story's] unfolding may render our enjoyment even keener’.<sup>94</sup> **Texts** in general, and **interactive fictions** in particular have various parallels with this coin-tossing trick, in that the multitude of virtual outcomes they suggest are actually illusory while the reality is magical in its simplicity.

Newman rejects the terms ‘interactive’ and ‘ergodic’ in relation to videogames because enjoyment may also be derived by onlookers from merely watching gameplay,

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<sup>92</sup> An extended version of this section in which I discuss some examples of ‘magical’ interactive works in more detail is available in: ‘It’s a Kind of Magic: The Tricks of Interactive Fiction’, *The Birmingham Journal of Literature and Language*, VIII (2016 [2017]), 55-65, <[http://upload.birmingham.imperiumuk.com/res\\_pageturner\\_flick.php?pt=133](http://upload.birmingham.imperiumuk.com/res_pageturner_flick.php?pt=133)> [accessed 16 October 2018].

<sup>93</sup> *Derren Brown: The System*, Dir. Simon Dinsell (Channel 4, 2008).

<sup>94</sup> Nell, p. 58.

rendering **interactivity** obsolete as an integral component of the gaming experience.<sup>95</sup> Even for those who do interact directly with videogames, the agency experienced is an ‘illusory agency’ and hypertexts have the ability to ‘play with the reader’s assumed freedom’.<sup>96</sup> Victorian serials may be regarded as a type of interactive fiction due to their capacity to allow the reader to affect the story’s outcome, or to leave the reader with the impression of having altered the course of the story, at least.<sup>97</sup> Why are readers left with such impressions? Why might readers imagine digital interactive fiction to have more **interactivity** than it actually does? How might writers imbue their work with this ‘magic’, and how might they encourage their reader/players to experience a sense of having been enthralled, rather than duped?

Iser would probably have conceded that Brown’s trick contained a degree of ‘indeterminacy’, due to the variety of possible solutions suggested above. According to Iser, moments of indeterminacy prompt readers to imagine, for example, a character’s motivation, rather than being explicitly told what it is. For Iser, much like Nell, it is this call to action that fosters textual engagement and reader satisfaction.<sup>98</sup> Yet evidently, such readers do not wish to take on an entirely authorial role at all times, or they would be writing, rather than reading, during these moments of leisure.

Murray infers that for players too, agency and multifarious possibility are desirable qualities when she suggests: ‘if we ask the interactor to pick from a menu of things to say, we limit agency and remind them of the fourth wall’.<sup>99</sup> In other words, reminders of the interactive text’s limitations are best avoided. However, this kind of subtle fourth wall breaking may serve to pique the reader-player’s interest, as seen in

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<sup>95</sup> James Newman, ‘The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame: Some Thoughts on Player-Character Relationships in Videogames’, *Games Studies*, 2 (2002), <<http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/newman/>> [accessed 19 October 2015].

<sup>96</sup> Ensslin, *Literary Gaming*, p. 81.

<sup>97</sup> See pp. 47-48 of this thesis.

<sup>98</sup> Iser, *Act of Reading*, pp. 48-50.

<sup>99</sup> Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, pp. 190-191.

*Life is Strange*.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, in his study of readers of digital interactive fiction, James Pope's findings indicated that most preferred 'limited choice', 'countering the [view][...] that there is pleasure to be derived from [...] almost limitless indeterminacy and much-increased reader 'input''.<sup>101</sup> It appears, then, that what reader-players really want the type of agency which Joshua Tanenbaum describes as the 'unusual blend of freedom and constraint [...] [which results in] unique narrative pleasure,' or '**bounded agency**'.<sup>102</sup> Whether they are cognisant of it or not reader-players want merely the *illusion* of agency, and digital interactive fiction is particularly good at creating this illusion because of its 'invisible and inaccessible' qualities: the paths not chosen, of which the reader-player may be aware, but cannot readily see.<sup>103</sup>

Such techniques are not limited to digital interactive texts, however. 'If Pip is a kind of Everyman', Stewart Justman observes, 'this is not because he is a bare shell of a human being, but on the contrary because of his "surplus" of conflicting possibilities'.<sup>104</sup> Yet Pip's possibilities, however numerous they may seem, are nevertheless authored by Dickens, and as such, bounded by him. A reader seeing themselves in Pip is not so much creating their own version of the character, as curating him from the choices offered by Dickens.

That coin under Dickens' hand? Its orientation is not completely indeterminate. Unless he's using a trick coin, it can only be heads or tails. But, like Schroedinger's famous cat, it exists in a state of flux until you look at it.

Look at it now.

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<sup>100</sup> See p. 64 of this thesis.

<sup>101</sup> James Pope, 'Where do we go from here? Readers' Responses to Interactive Fiction: Narrative Structures, Reading Pleasure and the Impact of Interface Design', *Convergence*, 16 (2010) 75-94 (pp. 81-82).

<sup>102</sup> Joshua Tanenbaum, 'Being in the Story: Readerly Pleasure, Acting Theory, and Performing a Role', *ICIDS 2011, Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, 7069 (2011) 55-66 (p. 55).

<sup>103</sup> Hayles, p. 138.

<sup>104</sup> Stewart Justman, '*Great Expectations*: Absolute Equality' in Bloom, pp. 131-156, (p. 139). This idea was influential regarding the characterisation of Alix in *Writers Are Not Strangers*. While the reader-player was not able to directly select her personality traits from a menu, the choices and descriptions offered in relation to her allowed for multiple interpretations of her personality.

Heads.

He hands it to you. 'Toss it again'.

Heads.

'And again'.

Heads.

On and on until you have your ten heads in a row.

Incredible.

How was it done? Holmes is smiling to himself. He already knows, of course.

Interactive fiction and magic tricks are alike in that their ambiguity is often tied to their structure and therefore may decrease with successive viewings. In other words, to understand their workings is to see through the illusion of multifarious choice. For a highly literary and overdetermined text (Iser gives the example of James Joyce's *Ulysses*) the multiplicity of possible readings is a permanent feature.<sup>105</sup> Successive readings are more likely to uncover further nuances that invite further possible interpretations, rather than allowing the reader to comfortably come to a conclusion.<sup>106</sup> For the magic trick or the interactive fiction, meaning-making is tied up in structure and if that structure is laid bare, the audience becomes aware that their level of involvement was misplaced – that there were far fewer possibilities than they might have imagined. In the case of the magic trick, usually only a single possibility.

The magic trick has the distinct advantage that its structure may only be revealed if either the magician (or someone else) chooses to offer an explanation of how the trick was performed, or if the observer becomes sufficiently adept at magical techniques themselves to correctly deduce how the effect was achieved. In most interactive fiction, merely replaying or rereading the text has the potential to reveal the truth, illuminating

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<sup>105</sup> Iser, *Act of Reading*, p. 48.

<sup>106</sup> Iser, *Act of Reading*, p. 49.

the choices offered as a set number of navigable routes rather than the endless branching the reader may have previously imagined.

If we return to Derren Brown's magic trick, the real solution is probably one we had not imagined. Brown reveals that he really did toss the coin and achieve ten consecutive heads. However, it took him thousands of attempts to do so and the nine hours of unsuccessful coin tossing was edited down to a dazzling thirty seconds of footage. Rather than the array of possible techniques we might have imagined, Brown used far simpler, more reliable, but less glamorous tools: perseverance and time.

The real symmetry between a magician's trickery, and interactive fiction (or fiction more generally), then, is the 'real magic' employed. This is the hidden third option, after (or before, depending on your perspective) time and perseverance. The real magic comes via the viewer's imagination, as Brown indicates: 'magic isn't about fakes and switches and coins dropping into your lap. It's about entering into a relationship with a person whereby you can lead him, economically and deftly, to experience an event as magical'.<sup>107</sup>

The coin flip trick is arguably no less admirable once its secret is revealed, and the viewer's imagination is one reason for this. Because the viewer's imagination is far more varied and expansive than the reality, the solution, although simple, is unexpected. Therefore, the viewer maintains the sensation already established by the initial trick (surprise) albeit for different reasons. Secondly, the trick is technically achievable. There is nothing to stop the viewer recreating it if they had the patience and inclination. They have been misled by omission of the extra attempts, rather than truly cheated (as they would have been if this was a pure camera trick). As Brown himself notes, viewers

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<sup>107</sup> Derren Brown, *Tricks of the Mind* (London: Channel 4 Books, 2007), p. 34.

tend to collaborate in exaggeration of how impressive the trick is, as this helps to exonerate them of any foolishness in being tricked.<sup>108</sup>

In a miniature version of Brown's trick, another toss of the coin, another slap of the hand to hide the result, I have performed a similar act of omission with the quote I provided from Nell earlier. The full quote reads: 'our pleasure at a story a friend is telling for the fourth time is certainly different from the pleasure we felt the first time we heard it, but not necessarily less: on the contrary, our participation in [a story's] unfolding may render our enjoyment even keener'.<sup>109</sup> Why leave out that initial sentence first time around? Well, at that point it would have appeared to run counter to my argument. I was suggesting that ambiguity was an important factor in audience engagement, and that subsequent experiences of the same text or trick declined in ambiguity and therefore the potential for engagement. However, now I am acknowledging that the ambiguity may be replaced with wonderment of other kinds, as in Brown's trick. As Iser asserts: 'effect and response arise from a dialectical relationship between showing and concealing'.<sup>110</sup>

'I'm not sure dialectical is the word for what's going on here', you interrupt. 'In your case, I'd say it's more dictatorial.'

'Oh, I don't know', says Holmes. 'There is a dialogue going on, but it's not the one you mean'.

Dickens snatches the coin back from you and tosses it once more, slapping it onto the back of his hand.

Part of the joy of Brown's coin trick is its reliance on engineering coincidence through perseverance. The idea that a coin could coincidentally land on heads ten times in a row seems ridiculous. Perhaps this is the reason many of us would discount this as a

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<sup>108</sup> Derren Brown, *Tricks of the Mind*, pp. 36-7.

<sup>109</sup> Nell, p. 58.

<sup>110</sup> Iser, *Act of Reading*, p. 45.

possibility when considering how the trick had been done. Perhaps I am imposing a particular perspective on you just by saying that. If you turn back to the possible techniques I suggested at the beginning of this section, this was not among them. I trimmed the footage, hid those thousands of unwanted coin tosses. Brown observes what Heider and Simmel showed all those years [and pages and links](#) ago with their bullying triangle: ‘Our innate and important capacity to look for patterns makes us terrible at thinking in terms of coincidence or randomness’.<sup>111</sup>

Seeing interactive fiction (or fiction more generally) as a kind of magic is to acknowledge our tendency towards assuming ‘apparent behaviour’ or inferring story. Reframing interactive fiction (even fiction) in this way encourages writers to rethink their creative practice in terms of the experience created for reader-players rather than the writing techniques employed, or the game **mechanics** used. ‘There is no book’, to use Nell’s expression, highlighting the true magic of the reading experience.<sup>112</sup>

Dickens removes his covering hand to show that the coin beneath has vanished.

‘There is no book, there is no coin, there is no spoon’, you grumble. ‘Well, what is there then? This’, and you wave your arms furiously at the fields and the waterfall and Dickens and Holmes and all the rest of it, ‘this isn’t some empty void. So what’s going on?’

[\(Continue\)](#)

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<sup>111</sup> For Heider and Simmel, see pp. 16-17 of this thesis; Brown, *Tricks of the Mind*, p. 293.

<sup>112</sup> Nell, p. 226.

### 3.6 Everyone's a Telepath

'You mentioned a dictatorial dialogue', says Holmes, stepping in front of Dickens who looks aggrieved not to have had the genius of his coin trick acknowledged. 'But have you considered who it's with?'

You roll your eyes. You know how this works now. It will be some time before they finally deign to tell you.

Stephen King describes books as 'a uniquely portable magic' which he goes on to clarify as 'a mentalist routine not just over distance but over time as well [...] actual telepathy in action'.<sup>113</sup> This echoes Conan Doyle's journey *Through the Magic Door*, Iser's 'in reading we think the thoughts of another person', and Royle's observation of how easily we overlook the fact that when reading '[s]omeone is telling us what someone else is thinking, feeling, or perceiving'.<sup>114</sup> Each of these writers assumes that the **text** is a medium in both senses of the word, a means for the writer to communicate telepathically with the reader. While not explicitly raising this idea in relation to interactive fiction, Landow observes the 'distant writing' of the telegraph, 'distant hearing' of the telephone and 'distant seeing' of cinema and television, but offers no suggestion as to what we might be doing at a distance through hypertext or interactive fiction.<sup>115</sup> Similarly, with regard to games studies, Till Heilmann suggests that 'playing a game is always *playing at an interface*', acknowledging the role of mediumship undertaken by the medium.<sup>116</sup> If reading is also always undertaken at an interface, which part of the system might be the interface? The text? The characters? The story? And what are the risks associated with such an interface?

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<sup>113</sup> Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2001), p. 114 & 115.

<sup>114</sup> Iser, *Act of Reading*, p. 176; Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 256. See also pp. 82-84 of this thesis.

<sup>115</sup> Landow, p. 46.

<sup>116</sup> Till A. Heilmann, "'Tap, Tap, Flap, Flap.'" Ludic Seriality, Digitality, and the Finger', *Eludamos*, 8 (2014), 33-46 (p. 38) [original emphasis].

Royle suggests two potential horrors of these ‘telepathic networks’ which are difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile: being unable to escape from them and being excluded from them entirely.<sup>117</sup> This subjugation or exclusion arises, in part, from the reader-player’s identification with the text. As Royle observes, the ‘I’ of a narrative text is ‘just as much created *by* the narrative as s/he is the creator *of* it’.<sup>118</sup> This echoes my remarks regarding the manner in which characters are produced not only by the author, but also by the reader and by the character’s relationships with other characters in the text.<sup>119</sup>

‘I’ is often frowned upon in academia, Jasmine Donahaye observes, because scholars must ‘*invoke* authority rather than *assert* it’.<sup>120</sup> Similarly, the ‘I’ in fiction may introduce uncertainty and mistrust.<sup>121</sup> Who is this ‘I’ here speaking to you? And who is ‘you’? Where is ‘here’? An ‘I’ is fallible in ways that an omniscient narrator is not. Watson cannot possibly see and know everything occurring in one of Holmes’ investigations, and therefore cannot share all, because he is an ‘I’ restricted to a single location and viewpoint. But there is more to it than that. ‘I’ is the character, but it must also be the author, because it is the author who has conferred the words to the page, and therefore the page necessarily contains their ‘shadow’, as Conan Doyle puts it, even when the writing is not autobiographical.<sup>122</sup> Richard Bachman both is and is not Stephen King, just as Boz is and is not Dickens, and the ‘I’ of this text is and is not me. As Genette suggests, the writer may share the narrator’s opinions, but they can never

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<sup>117</sup> Nicholas Royle, *Telepathy and Literature: Essays on the Reading Mind* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1991), p. 11-12.

<sup>118</sup> Royle, *The Uncanny*, p. 257, original emphasis.

<sup>119</sup> See section 3.2 & pp. 92-94 of this thesis.

<sup>120</sup> Jasmine Donahaye, ‘Noisy, Like a Frog...’, in *The Writer in the Academy: Creative Interfrictions*, ed. by Richard Marggraf Turley (Suffolk: Brewer, 2011), pp. 199-219, (p. 208, original emphasis).

<sup>121</sup> Donahaye, p. 207.

<sup>122</sup> Conan Doyle, *Through the Magic Door*, p. 1.

truly be one and the same, because the writer only *imagines* the characters and world, while the narrator *knows* them.<sup>123</sup>

However, the ‘I’ is going to become even more crowded because, as Royle notes, ‘[t]he writing I is always inscribed by its double’, the reader.<sup>124</sup> The reader is being asked to take on the role of this ‘I’, to ‘think their thoughts’ while reading. In many ways the role of ‘I’ in videogames is simpler, because the characters’ movements, even in a first person view (see *Figure 15*), are instantly observable. Therefore, we know when we say: ‘I died’ that we mean our actions contributed towards the death of the character on screen. We did not *actually* die, the character did, but that character is also us. Yet the ‘I’ of the traditional text is sneakier. Not only is its telepathic nature amongst the ‘least questioned, most taken-for-granted’ features of a text, so too is the collaboration this telepathy demands from the reader.<sup>125</sup>

Which brings us to the matter of ‘we’, or the assertion of authority ‘by shared agreement’ as Donahaye astutely calls it.<sup>126</sup> Yet as Donahaye goes on to argue, this ‘we’ may be neither shared nor agreed. It carries with it the same dual issue as telepathy, of ‘the incapacity to free oneself from the interlocutor,’ or exclusion due to a lack of shared experience.<sup>127</sup> ‘We, as readers might balk if it were *you* instead of *we*: “as *you* shall see” ... “as *you* have seen”, but that is what is meant, because the person who writes “as we shall see” is lying: the person who writes “as we shall see” has already seen and wishes to show’.<sup>128</sup>

‘Or to conceal’, remarks Holmes, laying his long fingers thoughtfully against his chin. ‘Every time you get close to the “I” she pushes you away, do you see?’

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<sup>123</sup> Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p. 214.

<sup>124</sup> Royle, *The Uncanny*, p. 198.

<sup>125</sup> Royle, *The Uncanny*, p. 256.

<sup>126</sup> Donahaye, p. 208.

<sup>127</sup> Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 236.

<sup>128</sup> Donahaye, p. 211.

And you do see, for a moment. You see me, doubled and blurred and disguised as the scholarly voice behind this thesis, and the player controlling the avatars of Holmes and Dickens, and the smiling face in the profile picture you might have idly searched online, and the tired woman in 2018 writing at her untidy desk and fearing that this will never be finished and it will never be right.

But before you can do anything with any of this information, you are interrupted once more as a burning shape streaks through the sky like a dying meteor hell-bent on destroying the world. [\(Continue\)](#)

# 4.0 The Beginning of the End

## 4.1 A New Challenger Appears

Your party of three reaches the smouldering crater to find the charred body of an astronaut nestled in its hollow. A helmet obscures their features, and as the spray from the waterfall lands on the bright red N7 logo emblazoned on their chest, the droplets hiss and turn to steam. A dog tag dangles from their neck, and Dickens, ever the magpie, reaches for the glinting metal. As his fingers close around the silver tag, the astronaut's chest heaves and they sit up suddenly.<sup>1</sup>

‘Well, well’, says Holmes, unmoved by the sudden action which caused Dickens to leap back in alarm. ‘Another addition to our party’.

‘All of this is making me feel quite unwell’, says Dickens. ‘I think I shall return to my minecart. It’s not as though I shall want for reading material’. He turns on his heel, heading back towards the tumbledown wall of the mine, but as he does so, the astronaut lets out a loud cough, startling poor Dickens more than ever, and he jumps back and slides over the waterfall edge in a tumble of loose, mossy shale.

Knuckles white, he grips the edge, dangling, wild hair made wilder by the spray.

‘My, my’, says Holmes. ‘It seems we have something of a cliffhanger’.

To find out more about Dickens’ predicament ([continue](#))

To quickly check on the astronaut ([go to p. 115](#))

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<sup>1</sup> This is the final scene of *Mass Effect 3* if the player completes the game with all military assets and chooses to destroy the enemy rather than allying or merging with them, implying such actions result in the survival of Commander Shepard.

## 4.2 Artificial and Arbitrary

Brooks suggests that narrative endings tend to be ‘artificial and arbitrary [...] rather than cosmic and definitive’ sometimes occurring only because ‘we have no more pages to read’.<sup>2</sup> Yet, in Pope’s study of reader responses to hypertexts, one of the most commonly cited reasons for reader displeasure was ‘the lack of an ending’, indicating that however arbitrary, endings are necessary.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, in their study of games with ‘choose-your-own adventure’ elements (including *Mass Effect 2 & 3*), Eric Tyndale and Franklin Ramsomair found that ‘Any jarring or unsatisfactory events in the final moments of gameplay [could] spoil the entire experience’.<sup>4</sup> So, as we might expect, not only is the presence of a clear ending important, the nature of the ending is also crucial. Perhaps surprisingly, though, ‘[p]layers particularly enjoyed mental stress as related to issues of morality and social responsibility’, during their playthroughs.<sup>5</sup>

Considering this offers an alternate perspective on Dickens’ revised conclusion to *Great Expectations*, which Harold Bloom declared to have ‘ruined the original ending’.<sup>6</sup> *Great Expectations*’ ending was amended following suggestions from Edward Bulwer Lytton, who apparently intimated that the original ending was somehow unacceptable, since Dickens informed Forster that ‘Bulwer [...] so strongly urged it upon me, after reading the proofs [...] that I resolved to make the change’.<sup>7</sup> Dickens could have ended on a wedding between Pip and Estella, or at the very least, concrete assurance of their mutual love. However, what he offers instead leaves room for the ‘mental stress’ Tyndale and Ramsomair observe in multiple choice stories. Although

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<sup>2</sup> Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 314.

<sup>3</sup> See p. 99 of this thesis; Pope, p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Tyndale and Franklin Ramsomair, ‘Keys to Successful Interactive Storytelling: A Study of the Booming “Choose-Your-Own-Adventure” Video Game Industry’, *I-Manager's Journal of Educational Technology*, 13 (2016), 28-34 (p. 32).

<sup>5</sup> Tyndale and Ramsomair, p 31.

<sup>6</sup> Bloom, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Dickens, *GE*, p. 461.

Pip takes Estella's hand and can see 'no shadow of another parting from her', Estella seeks confirmation from Pip that they "will continue friends apart", indicating that, for her, Pip's company is less important than his forgiveness, perhaps even that their joining is only temporary.<sup>8</sup> So, although *Great Expectations* of course did not offer multiple endings to contemporary readers in the manner of *Mass Effect* or *Life is Strange*, it did offer a certain ambiguity which allowed astute readers to make a decision of 'morality and social responsibility'.<sup>9</sup> Assuming that Pip and Estella stayed together, despite their childhood roles as wards of Miss Havisham, and adult roles as adoptive son and blood relative of Magwitch, requires the reader to indulge a view which, for contemporary Victorian audiences, likely verged on incest due to the pair's shared 'parentage'.<sup>10</sup> Alternatively, the reader must instead opt for the more emotionally distressing but morally and socially responsible position (and one which is closer to Dickens' original ending in which Pip and Estella remain apart) that this is merely a momentary coupling and that the pair will soon realise the error of their ways and part for good.<sup>11</sup> In this manner, the ending retains its multiplicity even though Dickens has nominally chosen an ending for his audience.

Caroline Levine raises further complexities by claiming *Great Expectations* has not two endings, but three, with Pip's thwarted plans to settle down with Bidley offering a further alternate, happy, ending that never comes to pass.<sup>12</sup> If this is the case, then, like *Mass Effect 3*, all available endings result in a less-than ideal outcome for the protagonist.<sup>13</sup> In each instance, Pip either ends up alone, or with an uncertain future – it is only the imagined life with Bidley which holds any promise of happiness, and this is

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<sup>8</sup> Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p. 460.

<sup>9</sup> Tyndale and Ramsoomair, p. 31.

<sup>10</sup> Wynne, pp. 96-97.

<sup>11</sup> Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p. 461.

<sup>12</sup> Caroline Levine, 'Realism as Self-Forgetfulness: Gender, Ethics, and *Great Expectations*', in *Charles Dickens's Great Expectations*, ed. by Harold Bloom, pp. 99-113, (p. 108).

<sup>13</sup> See pp. 115-116 of this thesis.

never to be due to Bidley's marriage to Joe. Brooks suggests yet another ending point, arguing that 'the real ending may take place with Pip's recognition and acceptance of Magwitch after his recapture' since this is 'the ethical denouement'.<sup>14</sup>

Despite all of this, Pip's reunion with Estella was apparently sufficient closure for *Great Expectations*' readers, as neither Dickens nor Forster report any significant backlash against the ending, either in its serial or novelised form. Bloom was of course reviewing the text many years after publication and with an awareness of both endings. Perhaps, then, it is the mere knowledge of another ending which causes dissatisfaction? Dickens' contemporary audience would not have known about the alternate ending until sometime after the original serial publication, and therefore found little fault with it.

Of course, the very notion of endings in *Great Expectations* is further complicated not only by the indeterminacy of the actual ending, and the other possible alternate endings within the text, but also due to the division of the text into the 'Stages' of 'Pip's Expectations,' and Dickens' own repeated revisions to the ending. The 'Stages' arose, as Simon Eliot observes, from the commercial requirements of the 'three-decker [...], the fashionable, respectable, and high-status way of publishing the first edition of a novel', and served to introduce further endings into the middle of the text, even for contemporary readers following the story in its original serial form.<sup>15</sup> The final line published in *All the Year Round* reads: 'I saw the shadow of no parting from her', which was amended to the more definitive 'I saw no shadow of another parting from her' for the three-decker.<sup>16</sup> Again, this points to a lack of stability around the text's end, even for contemporary readers.

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<sup>14</sup> Brooks, *New Literary History*, p. 521.

<sup>15</sup> Simon Eliot, 'The Business of Victorian Publishing', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Deirdre David, pp. 37-60 (p. 38).

<sup>16</sup> Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, part xxxvi, in *All The Year Round*, V (1861) 433-437 in *Dickens Journal Online* <<http://www.djo.org.uk/all-the-year-round/volume-v/page-437.html>> [accessed 13 July 2018] (p. 437); Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p. 460.

Over and above the many other connections (e.g. sensationalism, moral panic, commercialism and completism), Alistair Brown claims that it is endings which link serial texts and videogames: ‘the experience of their respective readers and players is intimately related to ideas of endings and continuations’, namely ‘[...] divergence from the expected or simplest route to [the] ending’.<sup>17</sup> For Brown, the divergence that players and readers expect is the route to the ending, not the ending itself. Therefore, the strong reaction surrounding the death of characters like Commander Shepard and Sherlock Holmes may arise not from the deaths themselves per se, but from their unexpectedness. What of the cliffhanger then? What is a cliffhanger if not the postponement of an expected ending, and if this definition stands, why are cliffhangers not as maligned as the unexpected death of a character?

Robert Allen queries whether cliffhangers might be considered primarily structural or stylistic in nature. If they are structural, then they are ‘constituted by the enforced breach in the narrative endemic to serialisation and dictated by the rhythms of periodic publishing’, much as Iser infers when suggesting ‘[t]he reader is forced by the pauses imposed on him to imagine more than he could have if his reading were continuous’.<sup>18</sup> If cliffhangers are stylistic, then it is ‘what is narrated in the final sentences of the instalment [...] a promise of a plot mystery that will be revealed’ which distinguishes them from other endings.<sup>19</sup> Ultimately Allen observes that the cliffhanger is created through a combination of structure and content, and suggests ‘that it consists of both these elements, existing on a boundary between them’.<sup>20</sup> When adopting this definition of the cliffhanger ending, requiring not only ‘the enforced breach in the narrative’, but also the ‘promise of a plot mystery that will be revealed’,

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<sup>17</sup> Brown, in Allen and van den Berg, p. 157 & p. 160. See also section 2.0 of this thesis.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Allen, ‘Perpetually Beginning Until the End of the Fair: The Paratextual Poetics of Serialised Novels’, *Neohelicon*, 37 (2010), 181-189, <<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11059-010-0061-x/fulltext.html>> [accessed 22 February 2016] (p. 181); Iser, *Act of Reading*, p. 192.

<sup>19</sup> Allen, *Neohelicon*, p. 186.

<sup>20</sup> Allen, *Neohelicon*, p. 186.

such endings are not as prevalent in the serials chosen for analysis as might be expected.<sup>21</sup>

Of the thirty-six sections of *Great Expectations*, I determined that around twenty-one tentatively fit Allen's definition of cliffhanger: a textual end which leaves a scene or mystery unresolved, *the reader left dangling like Dickens*.<sup>22</sup> However, of these, only six clearly meet the stylistic criteria Allen describes, introducing the point of suspense a few lines before the episodes' end. In these instances, Dickens creates an air of suspense through overt deferral techniques,<sup>23</sup> for example: 'A great event in my life, the turning-point of my life, now opens on my view. But, before I proceed to narrate it [...]'.<sup>24</sup>

The highest concentrations of consecutive cliffhangers come near the beginning, and near the end of the story, emphasising the commercial component 'dictated by the rhythms of periodic publishing' that Allen observes in his definition.<sup>25</sup> But what of these other, non-cliffhanger section endings? They simply end, often with Pip going to bed, or embarking on a journey, so that the next instalment may begin with a new day or location. There is no 'spectacular denouement', no 'marriages and deaths' occur, there are just 'no more pages to read'.<sup>26</sup> E.S Dallas highlights this as one of *Great Expectations*' strengths, suggesting that despite its 'abundance' of 'faults', in contrast to those authors who feel the need to finish off their 'monthly work with a flourish of some sort to sustain the interest', Dickens offers something different, instead addressing 'a much higher class of readers'.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Allen, *Neohelicon*, p. 186.

<sup>22</sup> See Appendix A for a full analysis.

<sup>23</sup> *Not as overt as literally falling over a cliff edge, but close.*

<sup>24</sup> Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p. 285.

<sup>25</sup> Allen, *Neohelicon*, p. 181.

<sup>26</sup> Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 314.

<sup>27</sup> [E.S. Dallas], 'From an Unsigned Review, *the Times*: 17 October 1861, p. 6', in *Charles Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Philip Collins (Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 1995), pp. 443-446, (p. 444).

*Life is Strange* comprises far fewer episodes than *Great Expectations*, but still only two of the five have Allen's brand of cliffhanger ending: Episode 3, in which Max discovers her time-meddling has left Chloe paralysed and Episode 4 in which Chloe is shot and her attacker is revealed. While videogames are easily as commercially driven as Victorian serials, the first instalment of *Life is Strange* carries no specific dramatic enigma, instead offering a general atmosphere of mystery and intrigue rather than a single melodramatic event which must be pursued.<sup>28</sup> In the case of the cliffhanger in particular, Brooks' emphasis on the arbitrary nature of endings seems apt.

Obviously when Pope's readers complained of the 'lack of an ending', they were actually referring to the lack of a clear 'textual finis' as Brooks puts it, or 'the lack of clear narrative structural markers' as Pope suggests in relation to hypertexts.<sup>29</sup> *Mass Effect*, although one ongoing story, is also a series of self-contained stories each with an ending of its own, and in which none of the sections end on a cliffhanger. Yet Shepard's ending, or lack thereof, became the source of ire for many fans disappointed with the series' conclusion. So, did *Mass Effect's* ending lack a clear stopping point? Was this the reason for fans' dissatisfaction with the trilogy's climax? Or did it arise from the disconnect between the finality of death and a form associated not only with ending but with continuation? Can an ending involving the death of a character ever be anything other than artificial and arbitrary?

For more on character deaths as endings ([go to p. 116 now](#))

If you haven't yet checked in on the crashed astronaut ([Continue](#))

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<sup>28</sup> See p. 61 of this thesis.

<sup>29</sup> Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 314; Pope, p. 82.

## 4.2.1 Meanwhile, by the Waterfall

‘I thought I was dead’, says the astronaut, their voice giving no indication as to their gender.

‘I thought so too, for a while’, says Holmes. ‘But I grew out of it’.

‘Could we please return to the matter at hand!’ Dickens almost screams, still dangling, legs kicking over nothing, eyes squinted against the spray.

[\(Continue\)](#)

### 4.3 Reports of Their Death Were Greatly Exaggerated

At the end of *Mass Effect 3*, after more than 75 hours of gameplay, the vast majority of the game's possible endings result in protagonist Commander Shepard's death.<sup>30</sup> Yet, according to the series' fan community, none of these were the 'right death'.<sup>31</sup>

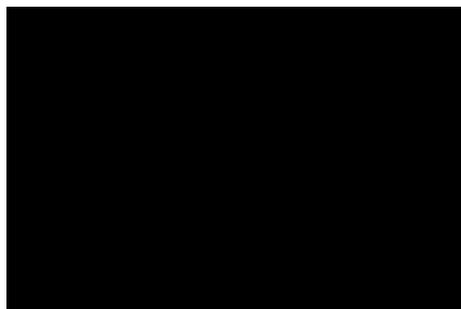


Figure 16: *Mass Effect 3* Main Ending<sup>32</sup>

The standard 'Renegade', 'Destruction' or 'red' ending involves Shepard's self-sacrifice to defeat the Reaper enemy. In the 'Paragon', 'Control' or 'blue' ending Shepard merges with the Reaper enemy in order to divert them away from populated areas of the galaxy. (The newly formed Reaper-Shepard makes it clear that the Shepard the player knew is dead, saying of its human counterpart: 'Through his death, I was created').<sup>32</sup> The 'Synthesis' or 'green' ending involves a similar merging with the Reapers, but in this instance, all life is encouraged to merge with technology in a similar way, resulting in a universal transcendence. This could be interpreted as an evolution rather than a death, although 'Shepard' as we have seen them for the majority of the game certainly ceases to exist, a point emphasised by the final voiceover being given to AI EDI, rather than a disembodied Reaper-Shepard as in the 'Control' ending. The 'Refusal' or 'opt out' ending where the player refuses to make any choice at all results in the destruction

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<sup>30</sup> Technically speaking there are eight endings, as each of the coloured endings contain additional small changes to their cut scenes depending on the player's success in previous instalments, decisions and multiplayer battles. However, these variations are sufficiently small as to be irrelevant to this discussion, and therefore only the endings with significant differences are discussed.

<sup>31</sup> Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 103. See also p. 129 of this thesis.

<sup>32</sup> Bioware, *Mass Effect 3* (2012), PS3, Xbox and PC. This quote comes from a male avatar. In the event the player used a female avatar, the quote remains the same, but with a female pronoun.

of the majority of life in the galaxy, presumably Shepard included, although this is not shown.<sup>33</sup>

It is only in the ‘perfect’ Renegade ending, where the player has met all necessary combat, diplomatic and exploratory challenges, that the inert Shepard is seen taking a breath. In a scene adjusted after widespread outcry regarding the ambiguity of the original ending, a Normandy crewmate refuses to place Shepard’s name on the ship’s war memorial, indicating that there is still hope for the Commander to be reunited with their crew, a hope that was minimised by Shepard’s name being added to the memorial with the rest of the fallen in the original cut scene. Rather than offering the clear ‘textual finis’ suggested by Brooks as a requirement for a satisfying conclusion, this instead offers the promise of continuation.<sup>34</sup>

Bioware is not alone in buckling to audience pressure to turn an ending into a continuation. Rescinding on endings due to audience reaction is another commonality between Victorian serials and videogames. Like Shepard, Sherlock Holmes was resurrected due to popular demand. The reaction to Holmes and Shepard and their subsequent reinstatement leads to questions regarding the death of main characters, the use of protagonist death as series endings, and the effect and function of endings more generally. Is there really any such thing as a ‘correct end’?<sup>35</sup> Is the death of a character in serial texts particularly problematic due to the inherent expectation of continuation? Is death rendered meaningless in interactive texts due to save points and reloads? Frasca appears to believe so when he insists: ‘Whatever you do in a game is trivial, because you can always play again and do exactly the opposite’.<sup>36</sup> If this is true, then surely a

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<sup>33</sup> ZoominGames, *Mass Effect 3 Extended Cut, All new endings menu*, YouTube, 27 June 2012, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPknKne\\_KTc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPknKne_KTc)> [accessed 10 July 2018].

<sup>34</sup> Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 314. See also p. 113 of this thesis.

<sup>35</sup> Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 103.

<sup>36</sup> Gonzalo Frasca, ‘Ephemeral Games: Is it Barbaric to Design Videogames After Auschwitz?’ in *CyberText Yearbook 2000*, ed. by Markku Eskelinen and Raine Koskimaa (Saarijärvi: University of Jyväskylä, 2000), <<http://cybertext.hum.jyu.fi/index.php?browsebook=4>> [accessed 6 December 2018] pp. 172-180 (p. 174).

similar accusation could be levelled at the Victorian serial, home to one of the most famous resurrections of all time.

Despite his assertion that “I shall kill [Holmes] off at the end of the year [...] If I don’t [...] he’ll kill me”, there is evidence to suggest Conan Doyle never intended to kill Holmes at all.<sup>37</sup> Conan Doyle’s desire for his readers to be satisfied with Holmes’ departure (and therefore, awareness that death may not be a satisfactory end) is indicated when Holmes remarks to Watson: “I think I may go so far as to say, Watson, that I have not lived wholly in vain [...] If my record were closed tonight I could still survey it with equanimity”.<sup>38</sup> The capture of Moriarty as a precursor to Holmes’ retirement is used as an additional reason to bring the stories to a close, as if pre-empting audience assertions of Holmes’ survival: “Your memoirs will draw to an end, Watson, upon the day that I crown my career by the capture or extinction of the most dangerous and capable criminal in Europe”.<sup>39</sup> To underline this point, there is not only Watson’s report of Holmes’ words, but also Holmes’ words delivered directly via the letter he has left for Watson, apparently in preparation for his impending death. He explains the ‘cost which will give great pain to my friends’ and assures Watson (and by extension, his readers, most likely the ‘friends’ to which he refers) that ‘my career in any case had already reached its crisis [...] no possible conclusion to it could be more congenial to me than this’.<sup>40</sup>

Despite this, so much ambiguity and uncertainty remains in Watson’s account of Holmes’ demise, Conan Doyle’s commitment to his hero’s death is called into question. Watson assures us that ‘An examination by experts leaves little doubt that a personal contest between the two men ended, as it could hardly fail to end in such a situation, in

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<sup>37</sup> Frank, p. 155.

<sup>38</sup> Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, ‘The Final Problem’ in *Sherlock Holmes: Complete Stories*, ed. by [Helen Trayler Ranson], pp. 830-846 (p. 841).

<sup>39</sup> Conan Doyle, ‘The Final Problem’ in [Trayler Ranson], p. 841.

<sup>40</sup> Conan Doyle, ‘The Final Problem’ in [Trayler Ranson], p. 844.

their reeling over, locked in each other's arms'.<sup>41</sup> Yet, as Elizabeth Glass-Turner asserts, Holmes' 'examination of dead bodies and their surroundings would occasion strange facts and circumstances that befuddled others'.<sup>42</sup> The examinations undertaken by Watson and other 'experts' often fall short of those of which Holmes is capable. Only Holmes is able to offer certainty, and without his version of events, doubt remains.

'How often have I said to him that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth? He knew that my body was not recovered from the falls. He also knew that I have some knowledge of baritsu. Why, then, did he assume my death?' Holmes muses to himself, apparently deaf to Dickens' cries for help.<sup>43</sup>

If Holmes' death was so certain that even Holmes himself predicted it ('I made every disposition of my property before leaving England'), then why did Conan Doyle not permit Watson to witness Holmes' death?<sup>44</sup> As well as ensuring the finality of Holmes' adventures, as Conan Doyle claimed to desire, this would surely have allowed for a far more dramatic and emotional climax.

Despite its title, even Sidney Paget's illustration of the fateful moment shies away from depicting the

Image Redacted

Figure 17: *The Death of Sherlock Holmes*<sup>42</sup>

death of either Holmes or Moriarty, instead showing both poised on the cliffside, possibly about to tumble to their doom, but equally likely to be about to regain their

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<sup>41</sup> Conan Doyle, 'The Final Problem' in [Trayler Ranson], p. 846.

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Glass-Turner, 'The Grim Reaper on Baker Street', in *The Philosophy of Sherlock Holmes*, ed. by Philip Tallon and David Baggett (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), pp. 181-195 (p. 183).

<sup>43</sup> Paraphrased from Conan Doyle, 'The Sign of Four', pp. 97-174 (p. 122) and 'The Empty House', pp. 849-865 (p. 853 & 854), in [Trayler Ranson].

<sup>44</sup> Conan Doyle, 'The Final Problem' in [Trayler Ranson], p. 846.

balance after a moment's vertiginous struggle.<sup>45</sup> Conan Doyle's own comments regarding 'The Final Problem' suggest he purposefully left Holmes' death unwitnessed. Conan Doyle lists 'The Final Problem' in the top five of his own favourite stories because it "deceived the public (and Watson) into the erroneous inference of [Holmes'] death".<sup>46</sup> This implies he never intended to kill Holmes permanently, contrary to his own earlier assertions that Holmes' death was essential to Conan Doyle's survival. If, as Frasca posits, videogame character death is largely meaningless because the character's resurrection is only a save file away, does this mean Holmes' temporary death was meaningless?<sup>47</sup> Surely any character's death can be reversed by returning to the start and stopping when the reader or viewer chooses? True, more traditional texts cannot be rewritten in the same way a videogame can be replayed, but the deaths which occur in them are no more 'permanent' than those occurring in videogames.

Conversely, there are many indicators in *Mass Effect*'s storyline which imply Bioware intended for the series to end with Shepard's death, or at least, to question what 'life' actually means in a post-human context. For Bioware at least, character death is far from 'trivial'. *Mass Effect 2* begins with Shepard's death. Their body is then recovered by the pro-human organisation Cerberus, and reconstructed. This automatically calls Shepard's 'life' into question. Is Shepard the same Shepard of the previous game, given the artificial status of their body and mind? Hayles suggests that 'the "human" neither encloses the technological nor is enclosed by it', implying that the incorporation of technology into human processes does not necessarily equate a loss of humanity.<sup>48</sup> Yet Shepard initially questions their status as a human, saying: "Maybe

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<sup>45</sup> Sidney Paget, *The Death of Sherlock Holmes*, 1892, photographic reproduction of ink or watercolour on paper, illustration for Arthur Conan Doyle's 'The Final Problem', formatted by George P Landow, <<http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/pagets/195.html>> [accessed 09 July 2018].

<sup>46</sup> Conan Doyle quoted in John A. Hodgson, 'Doyle's Favourite Sherlock Holmes Stories', in *Sherlock Holmes: The Major Stories with Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. by John A. Hodgson, 4th edn (Boston, USA: Bedford-St Martin's, 1994), pp. 435-436, (p. 436).

<sup>47</sup> Frasca, *Cybertext Yearbook 2000*, p. 176.

<sup>48</sup> Hayles, p. 131.

they really fixed me, or maybe I'm just a hi-tech VI that thinks it's Commander Shepard".<sup>49</sup>

The process of reviving Shepard is named the Lazarus Project, implying that Cerberus perceives this as resurrection. However, the fact that Shepard undergoes significant physical reconstruction indicates otherwise. It is this reconstruction which allows the player to customise Shepard to their liking, aligning the player's sculpting of Shepard's features with the reconstructive actions of Cerberus, the games' secondary antagonists. Character creation is not framed in this way in any other game in the series, instead being presented as **paratextual** material external to the game proper in all other instalments, including the most recent addition, *Mass Effect: Andromeda*.

Shepard's story also reflects the player experience in role-playing games, and highlights the 'manipulation' used by developers to ensure emotional investment in the game. When discussing this re-animation of Shepard, series antagonist the Illusive Man stresses the importance of surrounding Shepard with "sympathetic faces [...] and old friends" and the need to ensure Shepard is "invested".<sup>50</sup> This results in a multi-directional blurring, not only between the player's real-world self, role-playing self and the in-game character, as described by the **bleed effect**, but also between the original Shepard of *Mass Effect* and this recreated, potentially different Shepard from *Mass Effect 2* and *3*.<sup>51</sup> This multiplicity of Shepards is further emphasised through the introduction of the illegal Commander Shepard VI in *Mass Effect 3* and the Cerberus clone of Shepard in the *Citadel DLC*.<sup>52</sup> Rather than the playful doubling seen in *Life is Strange* and 'Hound of the Baskervilles', here the proliferation of Shepards is used to

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<sup>49</sup> Bioware, *Mass Effect 3*.

<sup>50</sup> Bioware, *Mass Effect 3*.

<sup>51</sup> See pp. 21-22 of this thesis.

<sup>52</sup> Bioware, *Mass Effect 3*.

exacerbate the commander's existential turmoil, although it may also serve as a further reminder that the player's version of Shepard is one of hundreds of thousands.<sup>53</sup>

The sometimes surprise re-appearance of favoured characters throughout the *Mass Effect* series serves as another opportunity for the blurring of Shepard's experience with that of the player. As the Illusive Man indicates, seeing 'familiar faces' helps to 'establish empathic relationships', prompting favourable reactions, or compliance.<sup>54</sup> For Shepard, this desired reaction is co-operating with Cerberus. For the player, the desired reaction is co-operating with the game itself, pursuing the storyline until its end and undertaking side missions (since some characters are only re-encountered via optional side quests). This is a technique Conan Doyle himself highlighted as a way of 'bind[ing] that reader to that particular magazine,' and proved the impetus for the creation of Holmes and Watson as recurring, familiar characters.<sup>55</sup>

Perhaps it is this 'binding', this sense of unity between audience member and recurring characters, which caused the similarly powerful reactions to the apparent deaths of Holmes and Shepard.<sup>56</sup> While the tales of mourning Londoners taking to the streets in black armbands seem a work of fiction (Peter Calamai of the Baker Street Journal issued a challenge in 2013 for readers to come forward with contemporary evidence of any such behaviour, a challenge which, as yet, remains unmet), there was an undeniably strong reaction.<sup>57</sup>

'I'll say!' Holmes nods sagely. 'The letters of abuse which showered upon him when it was thought that he had killed me!'<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> de Miranda, p. 836. See also pp. 94-96 of this thesis.

<sup>54</sup> Bioware, *Mass Effect 3*; Jorgensen, p. 318.

<sup>55</sup> John A. Hodgson, 'Arthur Conan Doyle and Sherlock Holmes: Biographical and Critical Contexts', pp. 1-14, in *Sherlock Holmes: The Major Stories with Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. by John A. Hodgson, (p. 9).

<sup>56</sup> An affinity for recurring character Billie was noted amongst beta readers during beta testing of *Writers Are Not Strangers*, which may have been an example of this effect in action. See Appendix B, p. 11.

<sup>57</sup> Peter Calamai, 'A Reader Challenge and Prize', *Baker Street Journal*, Spring (2013) <<http://www.bakerstreetjournal.com/armbands.html>> [accessed 19 March 2017].

<sup>58</sup> Paraphrased from: Arthur Conan Doyle, 'Some Personalities About Mr. Sherlock Holmes', *The Strand Magazine*, December (1917), pp. 531-535 in *The Arthur Conan Doyle Encyclopaedia* <

“‘You BRUTE!’” Dickens yells, still dangling.<sup>59</sup>

The infamous ‘You Brute’ and apocryphal mourning processions have their videogame equivalent in the ‘Retake *Mass Effect*’ campaign which arose following the release of the final instalment of the main *Mass Effect* trilogy. While Shepard’s death is not directly listed as a reason for displeasure, fans’ suggestions for a ‘more satisfactory’ ending are telling: ‘Some possible ideas include Shepard retiring or settling down with his/her love interest, returning to work as a Council SPECTRE, or traveling the galaxy as an inter-species diplomat.’<sup>60</sup> It seems Tyndale and Ramsomair’s findings that ‘unsatisfactory events in the final moments of gameplay [could] spoil the entire experience’ hold true, contrary to the apparent implications of Pip’s downbeat endings.<sup>61</sup> Unlike Victorian serials, in videogames a happy ending for the protagonist appears to be mandatory.

‘Oh, good’, Dickens pipes up through gritted teeth. ‘I suppose you’ll be saving me any moment now, then?’

‘You assume you’re the protagonist!’ Holmes chuckles, finally extending his cane over the cliff edge to the distraught writer.

*Mass Effect* fans highlight Dickens as an example of a writer who bowed to popular pressure and rewrote the final pages of *Great Expectations* to give readers what they wanted, because ‘people were furious that Pip and Estella didn’t end up married’.<sup>62</sup> In actuality, this is a rather simplistic interpretation of events. It was Bulwer-Lytton who suggested the change, and he did so ‘after reading the proofs’, implying the amendment

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[https://www.arthur-conan-doyle.com/index.php?title=Some\\_Personalia\\_About\\_Mr.\\_Sherlock\\_Holmes](https://www.arthur-conan-doyle.com/index.php?title=Some_Personalia_About_Mr._Sherlock_Holmes)> [accessed 10 July 2018] (p. 532).

<sup>59</sup> Conan Doyle, ‘Some Personalia About Mr. Sherlock Holmes’, p. 532.

<sup>60</sup> Retake ME3, *Demand a better ending to Mass Effect 3*, Facebook (2012), Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/pg/DemandABetterEndingToMassEffect3/about/> [Accessed 30/03/2017].

<sup>61</sup> Tyndale and Ramsomair, p. 32. See also pp. 108-109 of this thesis.

<sup>62</sup> Various, ‘What do you think of the Retake Mass Effect 3 Movement?’ *Reddit* (2012) <[https://www.reddit.com/r/truегaming/comments/vjy96/what\\_do\\_you\\_think\\_of\\_the\\_retake\\_mass\\_effect\\_3/](https://www.reddit.com/r/truегaming/comments/vjy96/what_do_you_think_of_the_retake_mass_effect_3/)> [Accessed 05 January 2016].

was made prior to general release.<sup>63</sup> Public opinion did not lead to the change, but rather the anticipation of the public's reaction, as indicated in Dickens' somewhat lukewarm assertion that 'the story will be more acceptable through the alteration'.<sup>64</sup>

However, Dickens' desire for an ending which is 'away from all such things as they conventionally go' is still at least partially realised even with the revised version, as it could hardly be described as the 'happy ending' apparently favoured by readers-players.<sup>65</sup> Ultimately the author's artistic vision won out, even if it was tempered by the potential audience reaction. Despite this, there is little indication that contemporary readers were disappointed in the outcome of *Great Expectations*. One reviewer observes the more sombre tone of the final third of the book, saying: 'The interest is still sustained, but it is of a different kind'.<sup>66</sup> Another offers the more grudging: 'on the whole, then, we may rejoice that even in Mr Dickens's ashes still live his wonted fires'.<sup>67</sup> Margaret Oliphant complains of the

arbitrary and causeless stoppage in the story— perhaps acceptable to weekly readers, as a prick of meretricious excitement on the languid road, perhaps a little stimulant to the mind of the writer, who was bored with his own production— but as a part of a narrative totally uncalled for, an interruption and encumbrance, interfering with the legitimate interest of the story.<sup>68</sup>

However, Oliphant is referring to the Wemmick subplot rather than the novel's actual end, on which, despite her rather damning review of Dickens' 'strange and frightful' story, she does not pass comment.<sup>69</sup>

Similarly, while there was disappointment and criticism surrounding *Life is Strange's* two endings, this did not appear to arise from both endings being somewhat

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<sup>63</sup> Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p. 461 & p. 108 of this thesis.

<sup>64</sup> Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p. 461.

<sup>65</sup> John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens, Volume III* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) p. 335.

<sup>66</sup> [Dallas], in Collins, p. 444.

<sup>67</sup> [John Moore Capes and J.E.E.D. Acton], 'from a review in *the Rambler*', January 1862, n.s. vi, 274-6' in *Charles Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Philip Collins, pp. 449-450 (p. 450).

<sup>68</sup> [Margaret Oliphant], 'from 'Sensational Novels'', *Blackwood's Magazine* May 1862, xci, 574- 80' in *The Critical Heritage* ed. by Philip Collins, pp. 451-453 (p. 453).

<sup>69</sup> Oliphant, in Collins, p. 453. See also p. 40 of this thesis.

downbeat and containing death (either Chloe Price dies, or the whole of Arcadia Bay except Chloe die at the games' close).<sup>70</sup> Is the issue, then, not with ending 'unhappily', or with death, but specifically with the death of the protagonist? If so, is this somehow related to the seriality of the **texts** in question - the expectation of continuity embodied through the reader/player character? While Frasca's suggestion that videogame death is trivial is clearly overstating the matter, it could be argued that because videogame death is repeatable, it cannot be considered an ending. Killing enemies is often little more than a means to obtain XP, while player character death rarely results in an end to that character's 'story' – most often it simply means the reloading of a saved game precisely as Frasca observes. Souvik Mukherjee argues against this conception of 'replay and re-enactment' as trivial, however, precisely because of literary examples such as 'Holmes's miraculous revival' and 'the two endings of *Great Expectations*'.<sup>71</sup> Mukherjee goes on to highlight the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* as examples of the longevity of and precedence for such iterative storytelling due to the 'layers of variations created in the instances of recitation'.<sup>72</sup> The idea that literary characters and stories have some kind of narrative permanence which videogame characters and stories do not is itself a fiction.

In the particular case of *Mass Effect*, death is presented as temporary not only through the use of typical videogame and serial structures (e.g. game saves and multiple instalments), but also through the games' themes. Death is temporary, but not trivial. Shepard is resurrected, and goes on to survive a 'suicide mission'.<sup>73</sup> The idea that death does not equate ending is maintained in the latest instalment of the franchise, via player character Ryder being able to experience their dead father's memories through a

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<sup>70</sup> See p. 58 of this thesis.

<sup>71</sup> Souvik Mukherjee, *Video Games and Storytelling: Reading Games and Playing Books* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 130.

<sup>72</sup> Mukherjee, *Video Games and Storytelling*, p. 131.

<sup>73</sup> Bioware, *Mass Effect 2* (2010), PS3, Xbox and PC.

sybiotic AI interface.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, audience dissatisfaction could arise from a perceived disconnect between the thematic treatment of death across the series as a whole and the usage of death as a narrative stopping point in *Mass Effect 3*.

Andrew Terjesen suggests an alternative reason for the reaction to the death of Holmes, and one which may be equally applicable to Commander Shepard: '[A]s time went on and others contributed to the popular images of Holmes and Watson, [Doyle's] claim of ownership became weaker until the character belonged to the public'.<sup>75</sup> Naturally, players of *Mass Effect* have additional reasons for feeling ownership over Commander Shepard due to their role in the character's appearance, backstory and choices.<sup>76</sup> As Iser notes, the serial form more readily lends itself to creating this sense of public ownership due to the creative downtime afforded to reader/players during the breaks between instalments: 'the pauses simply bring out a different kind of realisation in which the reader is compelled to take a more active part by filling in these additional blanks'.<sup>77</sup> Therefore the refusal to accept protagonist death could have its source in the expectations generated by seriality as a whole, rather than those encouraged by specific plots and themes.

'But what if it just wasn't a good ending?' you ask. 'Have you considered that? You've already pointed out that his death', you waggle an accusatory finger at Holmes, 'was bungled, what if theirs', a thumb in the direction of Shepard, 'was too?'

Shepard is still sitting in the soft grass, cradling their head in their hands. Clearly, they're still suffering following their meteoric fall from grace.

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<sup>74</sup> Bioware, *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017), PS4, Xbox One and PC.

<sup>75</sup> Andrew Terjesen, 'Was it Morally Wrong to Kill Off Sherlock Holmes?', in *The Philosophy of Sherlock Holmes*, ed. by Philip Tallon and David Baggett, pp. 93-108 (p. 101).

<sup>76</sup> Lynda Clark, 'Commander Shepard' in *100 Greatest Video Game Characters*, ed. by Jamie Banks, Robert Mejia and Aubrey Adams, (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017) pp. 42-44.

<sup>77</sup> Iser, *Act of Reading*, p. 192.

‘I’m Commander Shepard, and this is my favourite store on the Citadel’, they mutter indistinctly.<sup>78</sup>

‘Good and bad are so subjective’, I say. ‘I found *Mass Effect*’s ending to be perfectly acceptable, while others found it so objectionable, they campaigned about it for months. Bloom hated *Great Expectations*’ new ending, while even some of Dickens’ harshest critics appeared to find no fault with it’.<sup>79</sup> I pause as Holmes hauls Dickens back over the waterfall’s edge with a grunt, expecting ‘the inimitable’ to perk up at the mention of his name.<sup>80</sup> He’s looking a little glazed, pupils like pinpricks, but he still manages to mutter: ‘Oh, yes. *My* endings are “as pretty a little piece of writing” as could be’.<sup>81</sup>

No wonder Holmes left him dangling for so long.

‘Very well’, says Holmes, ‘then let us approach this in a different manner. Consider not whether these alternate endings are “good” or “bad”, but whether each equally fulfils the terms established by the prior narrative. You’ve done a little of that already, so this should be easy enough’.

‘Oh yes’, I say sarcastically. ‘Easy as pi’.

‘Really, it’s elementary –’ Holmes begins, but I talk over him until he shuts up.

[\(Continue\)](#)

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<sup>78</sup> Bioware, *Mass Effect 2*.

<sup>79</sup> See p. 108 & p. 125 of this thesis.

<sup>80</sup> Took him more than a page to do that. Isn’t narrative time strange?

<sup>81</sup> Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p. 461.

## 4.4 The Right Death

Endings are complicated. They appear throughout the serial text. Even at the story's end, there may be more than one, or the implication of future continuation. Conan Doyle avoids any concrete evidence of Holmes' death such as a body, or eyewitnesses, while Dickens avoids any symbol of permanent joining of Estella and Pip such as a marriage, engagement, or proposal, and both may therefore be said to lack narrative closure. Yet only Conan Doyle's 'ending' caused controversy.<sup>82</sup> What is it about the endings of some **texts** which causes reader/players to demand more?

In *Mass Effect*, only one of the four possible endings lacks Brooks' 'textual finis'.<sup>83</sup> In the 'Control', 'Symbiosis' and 'Refusal' endings, Shepard's end is clearly articulated and (in the revised versions at least) so too is the impact this has on the key species and groups established in the earlier instalments. It is only the Destruction ending which remains 'open', with Shepard, presumed dead and left behind by the Normandy's crew, taking a sudden, unexpected breath just as the screen cuts to black and the credits roll. In *Life is Strange*, Chloe's ultimate death or survival leave the reader-player in little doubt as to how things end for both Max and the remaining cast of characters. In each case there will clearly be an attempt to come to terms and rebuild, although the extent and implications of this forthcoming recovery period differs according to which ending was selected.

*Life is Strange*, 'The Final Problem' and *Mass Effect 3*'s endings all drew significant criticism specifically for their endings, with the latter two attracting not only criticism, but also widespread demands for change. *Great Expectations*, meanwhile, attracted far milder criticism for its endings, and in some cases, specific praise. This indicates that it is neither a lack of narrative closure, nor a character death alone which

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<sup>82</sup> See pp. 110-112 & 122-123 of this thesis.

<sup>83</sup> Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 314.

causes such a strong audience reaction. Ambiguity and death are clearly acceptable in some circumstances.

In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, closure has the standard definition of ‘bringing to a conclusion’, but also an archaic definition of ‘agreeing upon terms, coming to an arrangement *with*’. I wish to suggest that while all of these texts unavoidably come to a conclusion, their thematic inconsistencies mean they do not always ‘come to an agreement with’ their readers. As indicated by the title of first episode ‘Chrysalis’, and its central **mechanic**, Max’s ability to manipulate time, *Life is Strange* establishes itself as a narrative of change and consequence.<sup>84</sup> It is in this regard *Life is Strange* could be considered to undermine its own ludic and thematic ethos on reaching its ending.

Max’s time-winding ability allows her to alter key events, such as Kate Marsh’s suicide, or the death of Chloe’s father. At the beginning of ‘Chrysalis’, Max witnesses Chloe’s death during an altercation with school bully, Nathan Prescott. It is this incident which triggers Max’s powers to manifest, and it is only through learning to utilise Max’s powers and undoing Chloe’s death that the player is able to progress.<sup>85</sup>

However, it becomes evident that Max’s time-tampering is having a devastating effect on the environment, culminating in a storm which will all but eradicate Arcadia Bay. The only way this course of action may be averted is for Max to undo all of her previous choices by allowing Chloe to die during the altercation with Nathan. ‘The game wanted everyone to sacrifice Chloe’, observes critic Patricia Hernandez. ‘Or at least, this is a popular sentiment among the *Life is Strange* fandom’.<sup>86</sup> This assumption of a ‘desired’ ending may also in part arise due to its longer run-time (around thirteen

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<sup>84</sup> See pp. 55-56 of this thesis.

<sup>85</sup> Dontnod, *Episode 1: Chrysalis*.

<sup>86</sup> Patricia Hernandez, ‘*Life is Strange*’s Ending Is A Hot Mess’, *Kotaku*, 23 October 2015, <<https://kotaku.com/life-is-stranges-ending-is-a-hot-mess-1738291856>> [accessed 11 July 2018].

minutes compared to around eight minutes for the alternate ending) and more clearly developed sense of closure, established via Chloe's funeral.

Brooks suggests not only that narrative has a 'right' ending, but that '[t]he improper end [...] lurks throughout [...] frequently as the wrong choice'.<sup>87</sup> So what might be the 'wrong choice' in *Life is Strange*? Is Chloe's death 'the right death, the correct end'?<sup>88</sup> Prior to the final choice, Chloe says that Max saving her life and the impending storm "had to happen, all of this did".<sup>89</sup> One interpretation of this is that Max is justified in all her choices, and therefore to keep Chloe alive, even in the face of the storm, is the 'right' thing to do, both morally and in narrative terms. However, as the episode's title, 'Polarized', suggests, there is another entirely opposed meaning: that everything had to happen in order for Max to understand that Chloe could not be saved. De Miranda posits that through the alternate timeline, Dontnod have already shown 'that past life editing would not improve our existence'.<sup>90</sup> Several other elements point towards this interpretation. "Look at how many times I've almost died or actually died around you", says Chloe, referring to the multiple instances where she has the potential to die following the early encounter with Nathan: becoming caught in a railway track, accidentally shooting herself while playing around with a gun, and being shot by Mr Jefferson. In the alternate timeline where Chloe is paralysed, she requests that Max end her life, and there are also various graffiti messages in Chloe's handwriting (we know this from the messages written in her own bedroom) which could be read as relating to Chloe's impending death: "Please go ahead and kill me!", "Just gotta let go", and "I'd rather have a life of oh wells than a life of what ifs".<sup>91</sup> Chloe goes on to

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<sup>87</sup> Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 104.

<sup>88</sup> Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 103.

<sup>89</sup> Dontnod, *Episode 5: Polarized*.

<sup>90</sup> de Miranda, p. 831.

<sup>91</sup> Geek Remix, *Life is Strange Episode 2 Easily Missed Details*, YouTube, 29 April 2015, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hc5prt6WjWQ>> [accessed 11 July 2018] and Various, 'Chloe warning Max through graffiti', Steam Forums, 6 April 2015,

emphasise what is at stake when choosing to sacrifice Arcadia Bay – the loss of family and friends, who, as Chloe posits ““deserve better”” than the fate Max is considering meting out to them. Chloe later suggests that Max may have been simply ““delaying [Chloe’s] destiny””.<sup>92</sup>

To accept this ending, though, is to accept that all of Max’s choices were meaningless, undone as easily as returning to an earlier save point. It is to accept Frasca’s premise that ‘[d]eath in computer games is always just a minor detail’ which ‘can be fixed’.<sup>93</sup> Yet this is evidently untrue. Max’s choices and time manipulation enable her to have a significant effect on the lives of many of those around her. She can help Warren to pass or fail his chemistry test, she can save Kate Marsh from a suicide attempt, and make Taylor feel less alone by acknowledging familial health problems. In other words, as in the case of Dickens’ alternate *Great Expectations* endings, both are equally valid interpretations drawn from events within the narrative. It is through her time-tampering and choice-making that Max is able to spend additional time with Chloe and rekindle their friendship. The ‘correct’ ending in Brooks’ terms is unclear, and perhaps impossible for texts with multiple endings, yet his assertion that ‘deviance from the straight line’ is essential to prevent the ‘collapse [...] of life into immediate death’ is exemplified in *Life is Strange*.<sup>94</sup>

*Life is Strange* co-creator, Michel Koch, also stresses that the point of *Life is Strange*’s ending is not which ending is chosen, but the fact that the choice itself is difficult: “[...] in the end, you have to face consequences [...] You cannot try to cheat everything, you cannot make things perfect””.<sup>95</sup> Despite criticizing the ending,

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<<https://steamcommunity.com/app/319630/discussions/0/618458030670594163/>> [accessed 11 July 2018].

<sup>92</sup> Dontnod, *Episode 5: Polarized*.

<sup>93</sup> Frasca, ‘Ephemeral Games’, p. 175.

<sup>94</sup> Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 104.

<sup>95</sup> Joe Skrebels, ‘Directors’ Commentary - revisiting Life is Strange with its creators’, Games Radar, 24 January 2016, <<http://www.gamesradar.com/life-is-strange-interview-directors/>> [accessed 18 July 2017].

Hernandez also comments: ‘I won’t lie, it was a difficult choice [...] I deliberated for minutes’, indicating that at least experientially, if not narratively, *Life is Strange* fulfils its self-imposed goals.<sup>96</sup> If this perspective (that there is no such thing as a perfect ending, and it is the experience of choosing which is of greatest importance), is also applied to *Mass Effect*, then aspects which seem like inconsistencies instead serve a clear purpose.

In the original *Mass Effect*, Shepard says of Saren being under Reaper control: “‘I’d rather die than live like that’”.<sup>97</sup> Therefore any players opting for the ‘Control’ ending must consider the fact that they are actively undermining this wish, since Shepard, although nominally in control of the Reaper, ultimately gives over their identity in order to achieve a semblance of peace. The player is not only asked to make considerations relating to their own personal or role-played morality, and those suggested by the overall narrative, but also those relating to Shepard as an individual. It is a moment of **bounded agency** where the boundary is, for once, more visible and delineated.<sup>98</sup>

As de Miranda observes regarding *Life is Strange*, there is also an entire social ecosystem surrounding the game due both to its status as an episodic text and as an **interactive fiction**, which further complicates the matter: ‘[H]undreds of thousands of players piloted hundreds of thousands of versions of Max Caulfield. They discussed it [...] between each new episode. [...] *Life is Strange* has become a platform of cocreation and collective rhetoric’.<sup>99</sup> In other words, reader-players are not only responding to the story and its characters, but also to each other. Their collaboration is not solely with the text and its creator(s), but also the text’s community. Furthermore, as noted in a study of *Mass Effect* players by Boyan, Grizzard and Bowman, when it

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<sup>96</sup> Hernandez, NP.

<sup>97</sup> Bioware, *Mass Effect* (2007), Xbox and subsequently other platforms.

<sup>98</sup> See p. 99 of this thesis.

<sup>99</sup> de Miranda, p. 836.

comes to episodic artefacts, it is impossible to discern how far reader-players are reacting in direct response to the content of the narrative, and how many are engaging in performative acts of ‘social desirability’, behaving as the consensus of the group dictates.<sup>100</sup> This could also have a bearing on the public reactions to the other texts discussed in this thesis, and be exacerbated for the digital examples due to **paratextual** elements such as trophies, achievements and statistics.<sup>101</sup>

Many aspects of *Mass Effect 3*’s ending were deeply ambiguous until the revised version provided a clearer depiction of certain events: how Joker escaped the Reapers and piloted the Normandy to safety, whether the crew of the Normandy had any notion of Shepard’s survival in the Destruction ending, and what became of many of the other *Mass Effect* universe’s races and factions. Even if the ending was intended to be experientially rather than narratively rewarding (feeling a sense of loss and shock at Shepard’s fate rather than having everything nearly tied up), it seems these changes likely arose from public pressure. However, attempting to separate out which decisions were author-driven and which were audience-driven is a meaningless task if we accept the model of creativity suggested by de Miranda and Boyan, Grizzard and Bowman. In this model, the creation and consumption of creative artefacts are both collaborative efforts driven by a group consensus, but not controlled by it. Like the detective investigation, or the magic trick, or the telepathic exchange, the creative artefact requires multiple and shifting roles of its participants, all different, but necessary.

For more on the collaborative nature of creating and experiencing creative work  
([continue](#))

For more on reading/playing/writing as detective work ([go to p. 88](#))

For more on reading/playing/writing as magic ([go to p. 97](#))

For more on reading/playing/writing as telepathy ([go to p. 104](#))

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<sup>100</sup> Andy Boyan, Matthew Grizzard and Nicholas David Bowman, ‘A Massively Moral Game? *Mass Effect* as a Case Study to Understand the Influence of Players’ Moral Intuitions on Adherence to Hero or Antihero Play Styles’, *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* 7 (2015), 41-57 (p. 53).

<sup>101</sup> 2.4.1, pp. 69-71.

## 4.5 *Mass Effect and Creatures Such As We*: Interactive Fiction as Writer Response

*Mass Effect*'s ending and the reaction to it is indirectly addressed in the digital **interactive fiction** novella *Creatures Such as We* by Lynnea Glasser.<sup>102</sup> Glasser previously worked for Bioware although she did not work on the *Mass Effect* trilogy and had not played *Mass Effect* at the time of writing *Creatures Such As We*, instead citing *Hatoful Boyfriend*, and *L.A. Noire* as influences.<sup>103</sup> However, the fact that Glasser mentions *Mass Effect* at all when discussing influences indicates an awareness of the connections between the game and her novella. A fictional account of the reaction to the titular fictional game, *Creatures Such as We* uses a mimetic didactic structure to recreate the **mechanics** of story-driven, choice-based games while also interrogating the player relationship with, and reaction to, such mechanics. This makes it a useful fictional analogue for considering player reactions to serialised products such as *Mass Effect*, and the endings of such products in particular.

In *Creatures Such As We* the player must manage relationships with the creators of the titular game-within-a-game, while also considering the fictional game itself (and by extension, how they might feel about games such as *Mass Effect* and any surrounding controversy). In the opening to *Creatures Such As We*, Glasser establishes typical player expectations through the body text: 'You're about to save the day, be the hero, put everything together' then allows the player to make a selection which tempers

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<sup>102</sup> Lynnea Glasser, *Creatures Such As We*, (2014), ChoiceScript, <<https://www.choiceofgames.com/creatures-such-as-we>> [accessed 18 November 2015].

<sup>103</sup> Lynnea Glasser, *Inspirations for Creatures Such As We*, Made Real Stories, 20 September 2014, <<http://blog.maderealstories.com/2014/09/inspirations-for-creatures-such-as-we.html>> [accessed 6 November 2015].

this assumption with their own (or a role-played) playstyle\_preference, and assists in defining the player character:

## Image Redacted

*Figure 18: Choice in Creatures Such As We*<sup>103</sup>

The first choice represents a player undertaking a game of wish fulfilment, and also implies dissatisfaction with their real-world life. The second choice implies a more generalised desire to be absorbed by the game, giving little away about their own life beyond the pursuit of escape from it. Choice three indicates the player with a narratological preference, while the final option suggests a more impetuous character and a player with a penchant for action (although of course, the distinctions between character and player are blurred and ever-changing). This has much in common with the choice structure Jorgensen identifies in *Mass Effect*, in that ‘each option reflects a different attitude and emotion’.<sup>104</sup>

The relationship between the game-within-a-game’s player character, and the supporting character, Elogy, is representative of the player/avatar relationship. Elogy ‘enters [the avatar’s] body’ and their ‘powers mingle’, much like the blurring of boundaries between player and character.<sup>105</sup> When Elogy is killed at the close of the game-within-a-game (which occurs at the very beginning of the game-story proper), the player is faced with four possible assumptions as to why this has happened: three relating to how they might have played the game differently and only one which assumes ‘It was not preventable’ indicating that this is the least likely assumption to be

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<sup>104</sup> Jorgensen, p. 318.

<sup>105</sup> Glasser, *Creatures Such As We*.

made by players. Even when this option is selected, the player character still assumes that the presence of a ‘Story Mode’ must mean that there is a ‘way to fix it’ by replaying ‘towards the good ending’.<sup>106</sup>

This idea is expanded a little further when the **PC** broods over the ending. The final line gets to the heart of many player assumptions – that it must be possible to ‘win’ and that this win condition is associated with the player character’s survival: ‘You play games to have something happy and positive in your life. This was just...depressing. You deal with that enough in real life: failure, death. So, why did they go with this ending? Why did they make a game that was unwinnable?’<sup>107</sup>

According to *Life is Strange* co-creator Michael Koch: ‘You cannot try to cheat everything, you cannot make things perfect’.<sup>108</sup> This sentiment is echoed by Diane in *Creatures Such As We* when she remarks ‘nothing can be perfect’.<sup>109</sup> She is referring to the space centre’s safety record, but it is surely significant that it is the narrative designer of the group who makes this assertion. However, while the creator of the game-within-a-game clearly thinks there is no such thing as perfection, the choices offered indicate a disconnect between this attitude and that of the player:

## Image Redacted

*Figure 19: Screenshot from Creatures Such as We<sup>103</sup>*

Once again, the latter two choices relate to the existence of a ‘correct end’, although the inclusion of the ‘inevitability’ choice also hints towards notions of seriality

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<sup>106</sup> Glasser, *Creature Such As We*.

<sup>107</sup> Glasser, *Creatures Such As We*.

<sup>108</sup> Skrebels, NP.

<sup>109</sup> Glasser, *Creatures Such As We*.

and continuity in videogames (and by implication, other serialised works).<sup>110</sup> The assumption of continued play or continued reading set up by the serial structure of these forms establishes expectations as to the central character's continued survival, a point emphasised by Glasser's reference to 'replay[ing] to get the better ending'. As well as highlighting replayability as a core element of the gaming experience, Glasser could be alluding to the fact that many story-based videogames include a 'Game Plus' mode. This mode makes additional features available only to players who have already completed the game once. Usually such features are just supplementary ludic elements, as in, for example, the *Witcher 3*, where the player's level cap is increased, as is the difficulty level of encountered enemies; or the carryover of items and achievements from a previous playthrough, allowing more difficult enemies to finally be tackled.<sup>111</sup>

This is a common feature of many games in the *Final Fantasy* series, with entire dungeons and areas intended as post-game challenges rather than as part of the game proper. On occasion, additional endings are made available, such as in *Silent Hill 2* and *Nier: Automata* where multiple completions are required in order to unlock all possible endings.<sup>112</sup> This framing of endings as mere 'artificial and arbitrary' stopping points or a means to uncover further continuations and experiences could explain why the deaths of Shephard and Holmes were deemed unacceptable by some reader-players.<sup>113</sup>

For a 'final' summing up on endings ([continue](#))

To hurry on with your journey ([go to p. 139](#))

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<sup>110</sup> Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 103.

<sup>111</sup> CD Projekt RED, *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* (2015), PS4, Xbox One and Microsoft Windows.

<sup>112</sup> Konami Computer Entertainment, *Silent Hill 2* (2001), PS2; PlatinumGames, *Nier: Automata* (2017), PS4 and Microsoft Windows, subsequently other platforms.

<sup>113</sup> Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 314.

## 4.5.1 Everyone I Know Goes Away in The End

“I can never be much nearer parting company with my dear readers for ever than I was then”, says Dickens suddenly, staring down the dizzying rush of water. ‘And never again do I wish to “until there shall be written against my life the two words with which” I close all my books. “THE END”’.<sup>114</sup>

As if summoned by Dickens’ fear and melancholia, a carriage rattles over the horizon, and approaches at speed. Dickens waves his arms over his head at the driver, and to everyone’s surprise, the driver’s most of all, it seems, the two fierce black horses come to a halt with a clatter of hooves, and the carriage screeches to a stop. Dickens hops on board, saying: ‘I’m so sorry... I really must... You do understand?’

‘Couldn’t we all -?’ you ask, but the door is summarily slammed shut by a cross-looking lady in a black bonnet and you’re forced to step back as the wheels churn the earth in a spray of mud. The carriage thunders away once more.

I feel cheated. I spent time with Dickens, got to know him and now he’s gone without so much as a goodbye.

‘Perhaps that’s the crux of it’, says Holmes, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. ‘**Chronos** is insufficient as an ending. There must be **kairos**. “Goodbye” draws a line under things, but it also announces itself as a moment of some importance. It’s the expected tock that follows the tick.<sup>115</sup> Whether that be a girl’s funeral or a young man declaring the state of his relationship with a young woman, there’s some sense of finality, of a significant moment’.

‘But kairos seems a highly personal form of time’, I argue. ‘And sometimes possible only in retrospect. A moment may only seem significant with hindsight. And

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<sup>114</sup> Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (Philadelphia: TB Peterson & Brothers, 1865), p. 350, Ebook digitised by Google.

<sup>115</sup> Holmes is referring to Kermode, p. 47.

those endings you argue as having a sense of finality could equally be argued as containing strands of continuation. Whatever the outcome for Chloe, life goes on afterwards’.

‘It feels like we’re going in circles’, you say. “‘The ending is important”, “no it isn’t”, “ambiguity isn’t a problem for endings”, “yes it is”. Which is it?’

You must already have a sense of how I will answer that by now?<sup>116</sup> A sense of an ending?

Videogames are a medium operating primarily in the temporal category Kermode describes as *aevum* ‘a mode in which things can be perpetual without being eternal’.<sup>117</sup> Character deaths, if not *kairoi* themselves due to the slipperiness of that term, at least draw attention to the existence of *kairoi*, and thereby disrupt the expected cycle. Serial forms (of which the videogame is one), exist in a paradoxical space where two differing truths are both correct, as in Allen’s description of the cliffhanger as existing in the liminal ontological space between content and structure.<sup>118</sup> Consisting of ‘both those elements’ in this case, the need for an ending, and the need for continuity, both videogames and Victorian serials exist on a ‘boundary between’ completion and continuation which renders the creation of satisfying endings all the more difficult.<sup>119</sup> Whether it be Dickens’ multiple revisions to the final lines of *Great Expectations*, the premature end to *Edwin Drood* brought about by Dickens’ death, or the introduction of prequels to the *Life is Strange* and *Mass Effect* series, endings are often uncertain, temporary and arbitrary, more readily ascribed *chronos* or *aevum*, however much we may wish for neatly packaged *kairoi*.

(Continue)

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<sup>116</sup> Or not answer it, depending on your perspective.

<sup>117</sup> Kermode, p. 72.

<sup>118</sup> Allen, *Neohelicon*, p. 186.

<sup>119</sup> Allen, *Neohelicon*, p. 186.

## 4.6 That Awful Abyss, That Dreadful Chasm<sup>120</sup>

‘I suppose that’s the best we’re going to get from you, is it?’ asks Holmes. I remain silent, still brooding over Dickens. ‘Well’, he continues briskly, ‘I noticed when I was pulling Dickens up that there seems to be something concealed behind that waterfall. We should climb down to it if we wish to continue our journey’.

And he lowers himself over the edge.

You and Shepard glance at one another. Shepard shrugs, and follows Holmes, using their **omni-tool** as a climbing axe, jabbing into the rock at intervals to aid their descent. You reluctantly join them, struggling down the slimy rock face as best you can, your annoyance growing. When you reach the ledge, you can contain yourself no longer. ‘It’s bad enough that you disappear on me’, you say, ‘but now you’re going silent on me as well?’

‘Let’s not dwell on that, shall we?’ asks Holmes, standing unconcerned on the mossy ledge as you furiously kick a pebble to the crashing depths below. There’s little else you can do to show your anger. Holmes seems as unimpressed by that as he does by the argument presented to him. Jabbing his thumbs into his pockets, he takes a step backward to better address me, saying: ‘Since I first arrived here, “I have continually been conscious of some power behind the” -AAARRGH!’<sup>121</sup> His heel slips against the damp mossy cliff edge and he tumbles backward over it and down, down into the water below. Shepard spins, and you feel that if they had made a little more effort, they could probably have reached him in time, but as it is, they snatch at empty air, and you are both left gazing down into the foaming depths.

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<sup>120</sup> Watson’s descriptions of the Reichenbach Falls in Conan Doyle, ‘The Final Problem’, in [Trayler Ranson], pp. 852-853.

<sup>121</sup> Conan Doyle, ‘The Final Problem’, p. 831.

After a moment, Holmes pops up, head and shoulders visible above the roiling surface: ‘I suppose I’ll see you in three to ten years!’ he cries before being swept downstream.<sup>122</sup>

You watch open mouthed. ‘You’re orchestrating all of this!’ you yell, although your voice is almost lost in the constant rush of water. ‘You could bring Dickens or Holmes right back here at any second if you wanted to!’

And yet, I do not.

Shepard looks at you, then looks to the cave barely visible behind the waterfall’s cascade. It seems as though you have no choice but to head through this watery curtain and into the darkness beyond.

[\(Continue\)](#)

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<sup>122</sup> Holmes is referring to his ‘Great Hiatus’ – the three years in narrative time, or ten years in chronological time when Conan Doyle and/or Watson did not write about his adventures. Terjesen, pp. 93-94.

# 5.0 A Reflection of Sorts

## 5.1 Like Looking in Three Mirrors

You emerge to find yourself in a dark room.

‘Not this again!’ You roll your eyes.

As your vision adjusts to the murky interior, you make out furniture. A desk, piled high with books and papers filled with notes, some handwritten, some word processed. Behind the desk, a hunched figure scrunches down further as if trying to avoid your scrutiny.

‘Is that you?’ you ask.

The jig is up. I straighten. You look at me, my hands poised over a keyboard, writing our words. ‘Yes’, I say/type. ‘And you’re not going to like this, but –’ Shepard removes their helmet. They are also me, but with enough resemblance to you that you could be mistaken for a relative.

‘Is this some kind of joke?’ you ask.

‘I’ve been through this before’, Shepard says, “and I can assure you, it’s no joke”.<sup>1</sup>

‘Writer, reader and text cannot be easily separated from one another’, I explain.<sup>2</sup> ‘In this one brief moment, you represent the reader, I represent the writer and Shepard represents the **text**,<sup>3</sup> but we all overlap, change roles, influence and alter one another’.

‘It seems you’ve given this more thought than I initially imagined’, you say, although the words feel strange in your mouth, as if they are not your words, but the glossolalia of a feather drawn in green ink on your tongue. ‘But to what end?’

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<sup>1</sup> During the mission ‘Citadel Docks: Retake the Normandy’, Shepard is confronted by their own clone. Bioware, ‘Citadel DLC’ (2013) in *Mass Effect 3*.

<sup>2</sup> See pp. 47-48 & pp. 76-77 of this thesis.

<sup>3</sup> Shepard also acts as a ‘shepherd’ in a similar way to some texts, striving not to draw attention to themselves, while also attempting to herd the reader in the desired direction. Who does that remind you of?

‘That’s why I brought you here’, I say, ‘so you can finally discover what all this is for’. I spin my computer screen so you can see the lines of code, orange and blue and green on black.

‘What’s that?’ you ask.

‘That’s a good question’. I say. ‘It’s the entire reason I’ve been thinking about serials and characters and endings all this time. But I don’t even know what to call it’.

[\(Continue\)](#)

If you would rather read-play the text under discussion before proceeding, follow this link first: <https://dashingdon.com/play/lclark10000/writers-are-not-strangers-alpha/>

## 5.2 The Game is Abook

Choice of Games (CoG) describe themselves as ‘a California limited-liability company dedicated to producing high-quality, text-based, multiple-choice games.’<sup>4</sup> CoG’s website, [choiceofgames.com](http://choiceofgames.com), is littered with the term ‘game’. The creative work I have produced in part fulfilment of my PhD thesis, *Writers Are Not Strangers*, is written in CoG’s ChoiceScript, the same development environment used by Lynnea Glasser to create *Creatures Such As We*.<sup>5</sup> So why do I not feel comfortable calling my work ‘a game’?

Part of this uneasiness may originate from the connotations that the words ‘game’ in general and ‘digital game’ in particular, bring with them. They are reminders of the ludology versus narratology debate, the idea that if something is a game, then it is, by default, not a narrative, that the digital game and the physical book (or even digital text) are discrete, distinct entities with no shared qualities, a rigid binary which I cannot accept for so many reasons.<sup>6</sup> **Texts** have always been ‘stuttering, uncertain’ things.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, as Landow observes, ‘[...] printed books are technology too’.<sup>8</sup>

There are several enlightening instances, however, where CoG adopt different terms for the ‘text-based-games’ they produce, terms which blur these boundaries between book and game, digital and physical. When addressing writers, CoG are much less likely to use the term ‘game’ than when promoting their works to a potential audience. Their contest for long-form works appeals for ‘interactive novels’, and this

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<sup>4</sup> Choice of Games, *About Us*, <<https://www.choiceofgames.com/about-us/>>, [accessed 17 March 2018]

<sup>5</sup> Lynda Clark, *Writers Are Not Strangers*, (2018), ChoiceScript, <<https://dashingdon.com/play/lclark10000/writers-are-not-strangers-alpha/>> [accessed 19 October 2018]. For an offline version of the text, see Appendix D. For a full code print out, see Appendix E. For plot and character outlines, see Appendices B & C. Please note, images shown of *Writers Are Not Strangers* are from the testing environment, and therefore may differ in appearance from the final text. For a discussion of *Creatures Such As We*, see section 4.5 of this thesis.

<sup>6</sup> See pp. 26-30 of this thesis.

<sup>7</sup> Turner, p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Landow, p. 49.

term is used again as part of their commissioning process, although it is used interchangeably with ‘game’ when clarifying issues of form and content, suggesting that CoG’s ‘games are like “choose a path” gamebooks, but longer, deeper, and richer’.<sup>9</sup>

This approach is distinct from the marketing technique used by developer Infocom when promoting its own text-based games more than thirty years ago. While CoG distances its works from books (as in the quote above), implying that its games’ depth and richness arise at least in part from their digital nature, Infocom distances its work from other games of the time. ‘Through our prose’, one advertisement claims, ‘your imagination makes you part of our stories’. ‘You won’t be booting up a computer game’, another stresses. ‘You’ll be stepping into a story [...] Communication is carried on just as it is in a book--in prose’. A third makes this separation between Infocom’s output and other games explicit, stating: ‘[...] while the software factories are cranking out arcade game after arcade game [...] we’re writing and rewriting, honing and perfecting’.<sup>10</sup> The suggestion here is that typically games are mass-produced consumer goods, while Infocom’s are handcrafted art works. Yet despite this emphasis on Infocom’s bookishness, and also despite recent work in the field of electronic literature, the term ‘game’ is still frequently used when referencing acclaim associated with their products, and in defining their audience.

‘ELECTRONIC GAMES found our prose to be such an eye-opener they named one of our games Best Adventure 1983’, Infocom proclaims, shortly before noting that its audience is comprised of ‘discriminating game players’.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, while one of the advertising images makes use of book pages to further emphasise this connection

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<sup>9</sup> Choice of Games, *The Choice of Games Contest for Interactive Novels*, (2017). <<https://www.choiceofgames.com/contest/>>, [accessed 17 March 2018]; Choice of Games, *We're Looking for Writers*, <<https://www.choiceofgames.com/looking-for-writers/>>, [accessed 17 March 2018].

<sup>10</sup> Hector Briceno, Wesley Chao, Andrew Glenn, Ashwin Krishnamurthy & Bruce Tsuchida, *Down from the Top of its Game: The Story of Infocom, Inc.* in *MIT Online Archive*, Fall (2000), <<http://web.mit.edu/6.933/www/Fall2000/infocom/>> [accessed 13 July 2018] (Advertisements Gallery).

<sup>11</sup> Briceno, Chao, Glenn, Krishnamurthy & Tsuchida, NP.

between these electronic works and their more traditional paper counterparts (see *Figure 20*), the presentation of this image simultaneously serves to distinguish Infocom's games from the printed page.

## Image Redacted

*Figure 20: 'The Real Trick is Getting Out' Infocom Magazine Advert [1983] <sup>12</sup>*

If the book is three dimensional, the advertising image implies, then Infocom's games are four dimensional, with the interactive, digital aspect of the text offering the reader-player a portal which goes beyond the escapism and immersion often associated with the traditional book. Although note how similar the title is in tone to Iser's description of reader entanglement – the unsuspecting reader-player might become 'lost in a book' in both senses of the phrase, as pleasant diversion, but also as irrecoverable vanishing.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the divergence in approaches and the distance in time, both Infocom and CoG arrive at the same conclusion – the interactive digital text is something 'longer, deeper and richer' than its paper forebears.<sup>14</sup> Yet this elevating of the digital over the physical is problematic. However much CoG and Infocom may claim their works are not confined to the same spatial and temporal limitations as 'physical' texts, spatial and temporal limitations persist. It is the text's potentiality which is expansive, not

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<sup>12</sup> Briceno, Chao, Glenn, Krishnamurthy & Tsuchida, NP.

<sup>13</sup> See p. 85 of this thesis; Nell, title page.

<sup>14</sup> CoG, *We're Looking for Writers*, NP.

necessarily the text itself. However much a digital text may *feel* to the reader as though it could go on in any direction and continue branching infinitely, in practice, it cannot.

*Writers Are Not Strangers* is my online interactive novella, written in ChoiceScript, and therefore having a similar interface to *Creatures Such As We*. Also like *Creatures Such As We*, but additionally drawing on *Life is Strange* and *Mass Effect*, the majority of player choice is built around managing the protagonist's (Alix) relationships with those around her. These relationships may play out in various permutations: friendships may be forged and lost, characters may survive or die or never be met in the first place. Therefore, controlling the scope of *Writers Are Not Strangers* while neither making the reader *feel* they were being restricted, nor losing narrative threads, was a central concern. This was achieved in a variety of ways which fall into two broad categories. I shall refer to these as structural coherence and code-based coherence.

In structural terms, *Writers Are Not Strangers* predominantly adheres to what Ryan refers to as a '**Flowchart**' structure (although there is also minimal use of '**Maze**' and '**Tree**' elements).<sup>15</sup> As Ryan observes, this structure 'offers a more efficient management of choice, because the strands of plot are allowed to merge, thereby limiting the proliferation of branches'.<sup>16</sup> This ensures that reader-players reach all major story beats, while also permitting a degree of freedom, thereby resulting in 'Level 3' interactivity, or 'variations in a pre-defined story'.<sup>17</sup> This structure was chosen in an attempt to offer the '**bounded agency**' Tanenbaum suggests is appealing to reader-players.<sup>18</sup> For example, in the first chapter, reader-players are offered a degree of agency when speaking to Annie at the hospital in that the topic of conversation may be selected, and therefore the reader-player chooses what to find out about Alix's

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<sup>15</sup> Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, p. 104. For more on chapter structure, see Appendix B, pp. 5-8.

<sup>16</sup> Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, p. 105.

<sup>17</sup> Ryan, 'The Interactive Onion', p. 44.

<sup>18</sup> Tanenbaum, p. 55. See also p. 99 of this thesis.

relationship with her mother and father, and even how she feels about it. Under certain conditions, the conversation may even be abandoned altogether, with Alix leaving the hospital.<sup>19</sup> These options form the ‘variations’ (or tree branches, or moments of agency). Afterwards, though, Alix will always return to her apartment and check the reception to her latest piece of writing on her laptop, because Alix’s relationship with the reader develops primarily through her reactions to these ratings. These are the moments that are ‘pre-defined’ (or flowchart nodes, or boundaries).

In addition, a technique which falls somewhere between what Failbetter Games refer to as ‘**quality-based narratives**’ and what Emily Short describes as ‘**salience-based narratives**’ is used, operating in much the same way as side quests in a videogame, or the subplots in a Victorian serial.<sup>20</sup> In other words, additional plotlines may be uncovered which affect and contribute to the main story without necessarily significantly altering it, or, to use Eco’s description of the serial: ‘giv[ing] the impression that the new story is different from the proceeding ones while in fact the narrative scheme does not change’.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, perhaps ‘salient quality narrative’ might be a suitable fusion of the two terms.

‘Quality’, because the options and text available to my reader-players are determined by numerous variables, or qualities. However, the key difference between the system described by Failbetter and my own, is that in *Writers Are Not Strangers* players are unaware of the variables being tracked, or how the system is applying variables to their choices. Short explains that in Failbetter’s *Sunless Skies* the player ‘may not even remember what the chain of causality is’, whereas in *Writers Are Not Strangers*, the player will not know in the first place.<sup>22</sup> The system’s machinations

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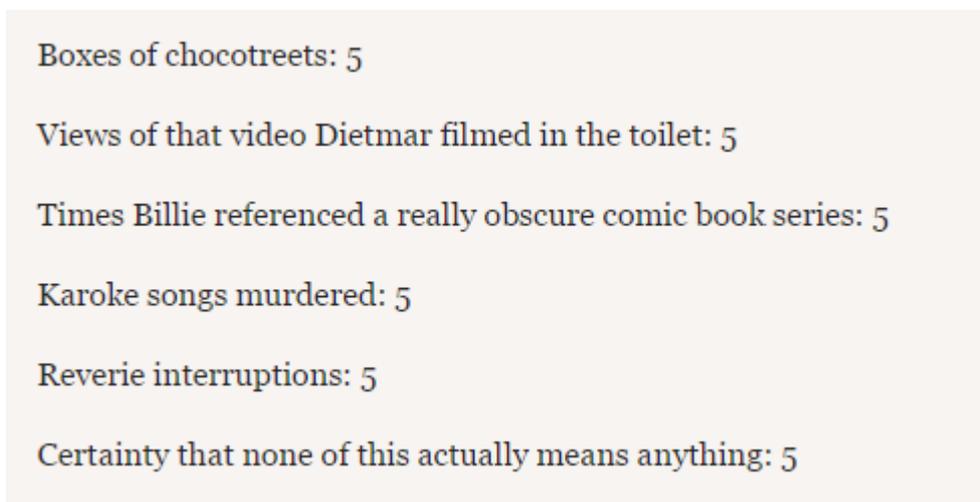
<sup>19</sup> See p. 28 of Appendix D, and pp. 5-6 of Appendix C.

<sup>20</sup> Emily Short, ‘Beyond Branching: Quality-Based, Salience-Based, and Waypoint Narrative Structures’, *Emily Short’s Interactive Storytelling*, 12 April 2016, <<https://emshort.blog/2016/04/12/beyond-branching-quality-based-and-salience-based-narrative-structures/>> [accessed 16 July 2018].

<sup>21</sup> Eco, *Limits of Interpretation*, p. 86.

<sup>22</sup> Short, np.

remain ‘invisible and inaccessible’.<sup>23</sup> No proper statistics screen is available to the reader-player, for example. The one given, although tracking genuine variables, displays them as unintelligible phrases such as ‘Reverie interruptions’ so the reader-player cannot properly determine their progress (see *Figure 21*).<sup>24</sup>



*Figure 21: Statistics Screen from Writers Are Not Strangers<sup>5</sup>*

‘Salient’ because some choices, descriptions and entire **strands** are shown to the reader-player based on their previous decisions. However, this is not a true **salience** system as described by Short, because the potential text options it draws from are for the most part more limited than the ‘large pool’ she references.<sup>25</sup> For example, there are strands which focus primarily on one of three main areas of Alix’s life: her career, her family and her creative dreams. Regardless of which strand type the reader-player is currently experiencing, choices may relate to all three story areas. Statistics corresponding to the choice selected are recorded, and this is used to determine the focus of the next chapter the reader-player will see. Opportunities to increase Alix’s creative dreams ‘score’ occur less frequently than the other areas, to reflect the difficulty Alix faces in pursuing her creative dreams during the tumultuous familial and environmental events occurring in the main storyline.

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<sup>23</sup> Hayles, p. 138.

<sup>24</sup> Clark, *Writers Are Not Strangers*.

<sup>25</sup> Short, NP.

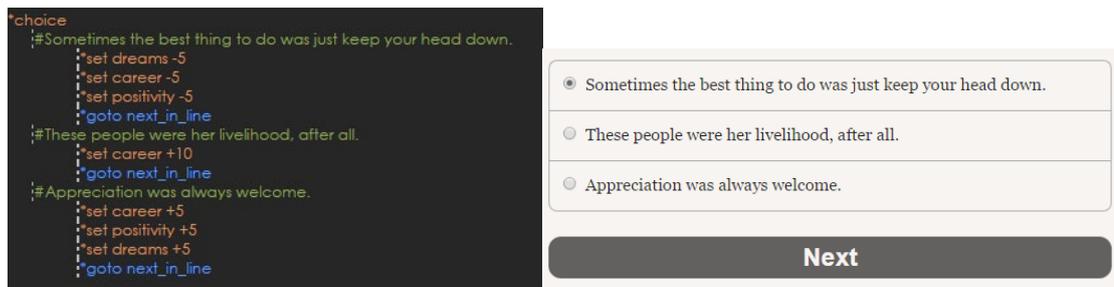


Figure 22: Code version of choice showing statistical effects (l) and how this is expressed to the reader-player (r)

In Figure 22, the image on the left shows the code relating to each choice, adding to or subtracting from Alix’s career and dream ‘scores’ (positivity performs a different function which will be discussed in relation to code-based narrative techniques). The image on the right shows the reader-player’s view of this choice. In this instance,

whichever choice is selected, the player will advance to the same section of text, labelled ‘next\_in\_line’ in the code. However, this choice will have an impact at a later stage. ChoiceScript creator Dan Fabulich refers to this as ‘delayed branching’.<sup>26</sup> Ryan notes that effects such as these make it difficult to properly map interactive fiction structures, because ‘modifications to the system of connections that take place during the user’s visit to the virtual world’ cannot be clearly represented.<sup>27</sup>



Figure 23: Subroutine for statistic checking<sup>5</sup>

Various statistical checks occur throughout the text to determine which story strand the reader-player sees during that chapter, as shown (Figure 23).<sup>28</sup> Here a reader-player with a high ‘career’ score will see Alix attend an awards ceremony relating to her

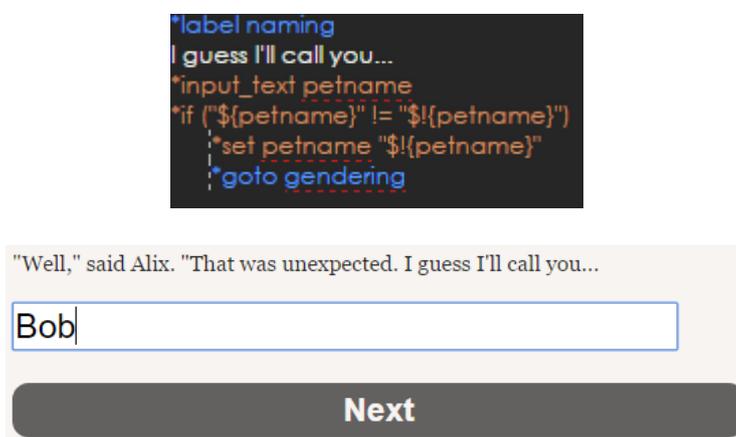
<sup>26</sup> Dan Fabulich, ‘By the Numbers: How to Write A Long Interactive Novel That Doesn’t Suck’, *Choice of Games*, 27 July 2011, <<https://www.choiceofgames.com/2011/07/by-the-numbers-how-to-write-a-long-interactive-novel-that-doesnt-suck/>> [accessed 16 July 2018].

<sup>27</sup> Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, p. 106. Despite these difficulties, this has been attempted in Appendix C.

<sup>28</sup> Subroutine adapted from: GoldenSilver, Gower and others, ‘Min-Max Command’, forum discussion, *Choice of Games* <<https://forum.choiceofgames.com/t/min-max-command/32646/2>> [accessed 26 March 2018].

career. A reader-player with a high ‘dreams’ score will see Alix go on a daytrip to a comic shop with her friend Billie. Finally, those with a high ‘family’ statistic will spend the day with one of Alix’s relatives.<sup>29</sup> In the event two statistics are equal, the first statistic in the list will be selected. The code is checked between one chapter and the next, meaning the reader-player will be unaware they have affected the text in this way unless they replay. Naturally, this does not guarantee a coherent story, as there is nothing to stop reader-players being inconsistent in the choices they make. However, additional variables are used to mitigate against this kind of incoherence.

As well as having large, structural impacts on the text, the underlying code can also make smaller adjustments at a sentence level which aid the coherence of the story. These adjustments fall into four main categories – customisation, character presence, character mood and narrative tone. Customisation occurs when the player directly or indirectly customises the text. Sometimes this is via text entry, such as when the player is invited to input the variable `#{petname}` as shown in *Figure 24*:



*Figure 24: (l) Code for the text box, (r) text box as it appears in game, with user-entered name 'Bob'*

From this point forward, when `#{petname}` is called in the code, the user-entered name will appear in the text as shown in *Figure 25*.

---

<sup>29</sup> See Appendix C, pp. 14-19.

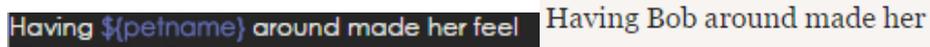


Figure 25: (l) How the user-entered text appears in the code, (r) how this is displayed to the user

Sometimes customisation occurs when a reader-player expresses more interest in one character than another, either through choices or inaction. For example, failing to avoid Uncle Simon at the party will mean he becomes the relative tagged as `${relative}` in the code, and therefore the one Alix spends most time with in the text. Customisation can therefore affect some of the other variables, such as character presence.

Character presence relates to whether or not Alix has encountered a particular character, or whether something has befallen them which removes them from the story. Some presence variables track the character's position within a scene, as shown in *Figure 26*, while others track their presence in the story as a whole. When the reader-player first encounters Billie (if they encounter her), their option to invite her to join them impacts whether she is present throughout.<sup>30</sup> This also applies to Jodie's potential death in the second chapter.<sup>31</sup>

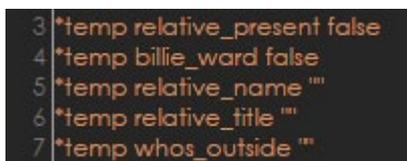


Figure 26: Temporary variables relating to the location of Billie, and Alix's relative within this scene only

These variables from Chapter Four (*Figure 26*) operate only within this chapter (hence their 'temp' status), determining whether or not Alix's relative has come to the hospital, whether or not Billie has come onto the

ward with Alix, and (on line 7) who, if anyone, goes out into the courtyard with Alix at the chapter's end. These variables are then incorporated into the text to ensure the presence of the characters the reader-player is expecting.

In the example in *Figure 27*, the text displays differently according to which characters the code determines to be present in the scene (again, Short's 'salience' model is relevant here).

<sup>30</sup> See Appendix D, p. 9.

<sup>31</sup> See Appendix D, p. 66.

```

*label dying
"I thought you were dying," Alix said softly, joining her. She couldn't help staring -
how could this bundle of sticks in a hospital gown be her mother?
The doctor exchanged a glance with
*if ((relative_present) and (billie_ward))
    :${relative} and Billie.
    *goto pretence
*elseif (relative_present)
    :${relative}.
    *goto pretence
*elseif (billie_ward)
    :Billie.
    *goto pretence
*else
    :Annie.

```

A doctor, previously lounging in the visitors' chair making airnotes leapt to her feet as Alix and Billie entered. "I thought you were dying," Alix said softly, joining her. She couldn't help staring - how could this bundle of sticks in a hospital gown be her mother? The doctor exchanged a glance with Billie. Alix pretended not to notice.

A doctor, previously lounging in the visitors' chair making airnotes leapt to her feet as Alix entered. "I thought you were dying," Alix said softly, joining her. She couldn't help staring - how could this bundle of sticks in a hospital gown be her mother? The doctor exchanged a glance with Annie.

A doctor, previously lounging in the visitors' chair making airnotes leapt to her feet as Alix entered. "I thought you were dying," Alix said softly, joining her. She couldn't help staring - how could this bundle of sticks in a hospital gown be her mother? The doctor exchanged a glance with Aunt Maude. Alix pretended not to notice.

Figure 27: (top) Code checking for character presence, (below), some of the possible textual outcomes for this check

Character mood covers variables which record how characters feel about Alix and how Alix feels about the reader-player. In the interest of limiting scope and maintaining narrative focus, only Billie, Alix and Annie's relationships are tracked, with Billie's having the greatest degree of complexity. Billie has both a numeric statistic relating to the amount of positive interactions she has had with Alix, and a string (text) mood variable which helps record more specifically how she feels about Alix. For example, if Billie and Alix argue, Billie's mood is set to 'angry', which then has the potential to colour their future interactions.

Finally, a statistic entitled 'positivity' tracks how optimistic Alix is likely to be feeling due to her interactions with the reader-player, the **storyworld** and other

characters. This then affects not only Alix’s own behaviours and interactions, but also the tone of descriptions of the storyworld. This serves both to emphasise that the reader-player’s actions and Alix’s experience of the story world are interconnected, and to develop a tone which fits with events as they are unfolding. In the example below (Figure 28), the story world appears differently depending on Alix’s outlook.

The ‘alpine shrubs’ are consistent across both possible storyworlds, but

```
She pulled back the curtains.
if positivity >20
  A grey drizzle was falling, making the sky look almost normal. The alpine shrubs
  in the decorative troughs across the street
  were no doubt grateful of the rare drink.
  goto cyclist
else
  It was dry and humid but windy. The wind only intensified the dryness,
  whipping up clouds of dusty debris from the gutters.
  Even the scrubby alpine shrubs the council had planted in decorative troughs
  were wilting.
  goto cyclist
```

Figure 28: Tonal adjustments affected by positivity score

their setting varies. The more optimistic ‘rare drink’ and the hint that normality could be just around the corner is offered to the player-reader with a higher positivity statistic, while the implied downward spiral of decay is indicated in the more pessimistic version of the text, via the ‘clouds of dusty debris’ and ‘wilting’ plants.<sup>32</sup> Even the hardy alpine shrubs are struggling to survive in this version of the storyworld. This was inspired by the ecological effect of Max’s time-winding in *Life is Strange*, but here it is the player rather than the PC who unwittingly affects the storyworld environment.<sup>33</sup>

While the text is outwardly book-like in its layout and relative lack of sound, imagery and reader-player agency (i.e. in that many significant choices are made *for* the reader-player based around their previous, seemingly less significant choices), much of what occurs at code-level is very game-like. And yet, the two overlap and intersect with one another to such a degree, that many of the distinctions drawn are above are somewhat arbitrary. ‘Change anywhere catalyzes change everywhere’.<sup>34</sup> Narrative tone

<sup>32</sup> See Appendix D, p. 43.

<sup>33</sup> See pp. 57-58 of this thesis.

<sup>34</sup> Hayles, p. 136.

is created through the positivity statistic, but with contributions from the mood of the characters. Customisation occurs in specific instances as described, but the entire text is essentially an act of reader-player customisation. Statistics guide story, but, through the reader-player, story affects statistics.

‘You’ve used that word a lot’, you interrupt.

‘What word?’

‘Story. You’ve already explained how story doesn’t necessarily exclude game, how stories don’t necessarily stay the same in the retelling, how stories and characters can take on lives of their own in the hands of their audiences. Why not just call it that?’

‘True. It’s just... It seems like something of an anti-climax after all this.’

‘Doesn’t it just.’

I try to ignore the flatness of your voice. Something else is bothering me.

‘Something else is bothering me.’

‘Shepard’s gone.’

‘I- what?’

‘Shepard’s gone.’

And they are. Just like that, while we were talking, they’ve slipped away.

[\(Continue\)](#)

### 5.3 Slip Slidin' Away

**Interactive fiction** is slippery, its smoke-like refusal to be pinned down, extending not only to the naming of ludic texts but other areas too. Stories, temporalities, and world states as well as the hardware, software and the environments in which they are created and experienced are all difficult to label definitively and discretely. *Alex Kidd in Miracle World*, released in 1987, was a piece of software, and yet, from 1990 onwards, it was released pre-installed on Master System consoles and was therefore indistinguishable from the hardware on which it was played.<sup>35</sup> Videogame studios are environments where videogames are created and yet they are also home to digital environments, which are also, arguably, where videogames are created.

Story in videogames, Mukherjee suggests, 'can only be perceived as a changing and constantly shape-shifting entity'.<sup>36</sup> The repeated iterations and updates to some of the work of Conan Doyle and Dickens, not to mention the multiple possible interpretations, refute the notion that actions and events in traditional narratives have any greater sense of permanence than those in videogames or digital texts.<sup>37</sup> Yet this common depiction of the digital as ephemeral remains, and understandably so given the changeable examples presented in *Writers Are Not Strangers*.

Infocom's advertising image (*Figure 20*) simultaneously celebrates the text game's status as a simulation while also implying that a physical object offers a more pleasing advertising aesthetic. The game itself cannot be shown, because none of its associated physical (disc, packaging, controllers) or digital parts (menus, words on the screen) properly represent the experience it affords. And yet, couldn't this also be said

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<sup>35</sup> Sega, *Alex Kidd in Miracle World* (1987), Master System and Master System 2.

<sup>36</sup> Souvik Mukherjee, 'Videogames as "Minor Literature": Reading Videogame Stories through Paratexts', *Gramma*, 23 (2016) 60-75 (p. 62).

<sup>37</sup> See pp. 108-109 & pp. 118-121 of this thesis.

of books? In this context, Nell's suggestion that 'there is no book' takes on new meaning.<sup>38</sup> The book is not its pages or its cover. The 'experience' of reading it is both contained within and extends beyond its existence as a physical object. Yet, while Infocom and CoG suggest the digital supersedes the physical text, others seem to emphasise the physicality of paper texts over the apparent insubstantiality of their 'ephemeral' digital counterparts.<sup>39</sup>

As Hayles observes, 'print and electronic textuality deeply interpenetrate each other'.<sup>40</sup> Just as the 'digital leaves its mark on print', 'literary effects are revaluing computational practice'.<sup>41</sup> Games overflow with books, paper and handwriting, all making important contributions to the player experience. Max's handwritten scrapbooks form the majority of *Life is Strange*'s in game menus and record details such as character information and current tasks. The novels Max shares with Kate aid character development for both characters. The files Max finds in David's garage, Principal Wells' office and Nathan's bunker provide evidence in her investigation, offer clues and information and initiate further objectives. The letters she finds in Alternate Chloe's house offer additional backstory regarding the Price family's situation.<sup>42</sup>

Even in **storyworlds** where communication is primarily digital, the written (or typed) word is still given priority. In the *Mass Effect* series, game menus, character backstories, and clues and information relating to quests are supplied via digital codices, discarded datapads, email exchanges and information terminals. While some of these terminals offer humanoid virtual assistants who relay information (such as the Avina AI found throughout the Citadel), many still rely on the written word. Videochats occur among key characters throughout the course of the three games, but these virtual

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<sup>38</sup> Nell, p. 226.

<sup>39</sup> Mukherjee, 'Videogames as "Minor Literature"', pp. 60-61.

<sup>40</sup> Hayles, p. 160.

<sup>41</sup> Hayles, p. 159 & p. 131.

<sup>42</sup> Dontnod, *Life is Strange, Episode 1, Episode 3 & Episode 4*.

meetings tend to be reserved for important political summits, or final words recorded by the dying for loved ones. It is via written email exchanges that the majority of interactions with other characters occur. Although these exchanges between the crew of the Normandy and the people they meet across the *Mass Effect* universe serve to deepen characterisation and endear the characters to the reader-player, I must confess that there is something pleasingly, intimately tactile about Max's notebooks even in the digital realm, something apparently absent in the uniform font of Shepard's inbox. Handwritten notes (even digital ones) somehow suggest the hand that wrote them in a way that typed digital text may not.

Heilmann's reframing of the digital suggests that a hand is always closer than we might think. Operating a playing interface, he argues, means that 'the primary organ of digitality [is] the fingered hand', and therefore perhaps just as evocative of the human body as a note scrawled on (digital) paper.<sup>43</sup> For Heilmann, the digital is inextricably linked to numbers via computer code, even if the numbers in question are merely the background binary used by the operating system or digital device in order to display the text or images. This numerical counting tradition, he asserts, 'goes back to the technique of finger counting'.<sup>44</sup> With this definition of digital in mind, Heilmann concludes, a flesh and blood finger is never far away. Yet he goes further, drawing on his own conclusion and Denson and Jahn-Sudmann's concept of digital seriality to suggest 'there is no seriality but digital seriality' because seriality cannot exist without counting (the awareness that one part follows another), and counting cannot exist without digitality (the aforementioned finger counting).<sup>45</sup> If this is the case, perhaps the Victorian serial is not only interactive, but also digital. Conversely, the physical fingers of the reader-player are already closely entwined with the digital through touching the

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<sup>43</sup> Heilmann, p. 41.

<sup>44</sup> Heilmann, pp. 41-42.

<sup>45</sup> Heilmann, p. 40. See also p. 45 of this thesis.

screen, keys, or mouse, or, as Hayles puts it ‘entangle[d] [...] in open-ended recursivity’.<sup>46</sup> *Once more we are entangled.*<sup>47</sup>

An investigation of some of these ideas is at play in *Writers Are Not Strangers*. The relationship between the personal and the public is explored through the concept of the physical versus the digital. In the course of their reading, the reader-player may find ‘handwritten’ fragments from both Billie and Alix. These excerpts occur infrequently so that when they appear, they are surprising, as if the reader-player really has stumbled across an actual handwritten note. Drawing on Pip’s attempts to discern his parent’s personalities ‘from the shape of the letters on the tombstones’, the selected handwriting fonts aim to convey more about the characters who ‘wrote’ them.<sup>48</sup> Billie dots her i’s with hearts, indicating her sweet, child-like nature, while Alix’s writing is flowing, but with a certain spikiness to it. The fact remains, though, that these ‘handwritten’ texts are actually pre-rendered fonts.

Despite this disclosure of personality through ‘handwritten’ text, handwriting in *Writers Are Not Strangers* is used in conjunction with secrecy. Billie’s note to Alix contains sentiments she would never speak aloud.<sup>49</sup> Alix’s notes do not contain sensitive information, but they are intended just for her, made personal through their banality.<sup>50</sup> Alix’s father’s handwritten diary becomes central to one of Alix’s potential plotlines, but even if Alix chooses to read this writing, she keeps it entirely to herself. The reader-player is never privy to its appearance or its contents.<sup>51</sup>

Digital texts in *Writers Are Not Strangers*, however, reflect openness, even though this openness may be presented in fictionalised or embellished terms. Alix shares aspects of her life with her viewers via her MyBoxx videos, and with the reader-

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<sup>46</sup> Hayles, p. 130.

<sup>47</sup> See p. 86 of this thesis.

<sup>48</sup> Brooks, *New Literary History*, p. 517.

<sup>49</sup> See Appendix D, p. 35.

<sup>50</sup> See Appendix D, pp. 114-116.

<sup>51</sup> See Appendix D, pp. 116-117.

player via the short stories she uploads to Wiff.net, the storyworld's online writers' forum. As the story progresses, there is the potential for these digital texts to become Alix's primary means of communication with the reader-player, culminating in a further reality bleed, where Alix addresses them directly. These sequences foreground the **bleed effect**.<sup>52</sup> The story becomes an interface between Alix and the reader-player.<sup>53</sup>

‘And therein lies my other concern’, I say.

‘Other than Shepard vanishing’.

Frankly, I had forgotten about Shepard altogether. ‘Other other concern’, I correct myself.

The submission criteria for creative writing PhD theses usually stipulates that the creative work should be bound with the thesis. This criterion assumes that the thesis will be a physical object. Ink on paper. Bound. The additional component may take many forms, but that the resulting thesis will exist in a form which can be bound is a given. You may even be reading it in such a form right now (although I really cannot recommend that). How to even begin transforming something intended to be ‘born-digital’ and multi-dimensional like that book-shaped portal in the Infocom poster, into a flat, offline format? The irony being, I suppose, that the poster is already flat...

As you may have guessed, my solution is to offer both, allowing them to demonstrate further the strengths, weaknesses, similarities and differences of the two formats through their very presentation, as well as demonstrating some of the techniques present in the serial **texts** under discussion. These techniques include the complicated positioning of the reader-player and writer as character as seen in *Mass Effect*, *Creatures Such As We* and Conan Doyle and Dickens' work more generally; the interruptions, digressions and withholding of information found in ‘Hound of the

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<sup>52</sup> See pp. 21-22 of this thesis.

<sup>53</sup> See p. 104 of this thesis.

Baskervilles' and *Great Expectations*, (and to a lesser degree, *Life is Strange*); and the multiple endings found in all the example texts.

[Is this the end?](#)

## 5.4 All Good Things Must Come to an

‘That’s it’, I say, spreading my hands to show there is no more.

‘That’s it?’ you say, aghast. ‘That’s not how it should end!’

Then how should it?

‘Give me the proper, academic ending. The conclusions you’ve drawn from the things you’ve studied’.

Very well. ([Go to p. 162](#)).

‘I want an end to this story. What happened with Dickens and Holmes and Shepard?’

If that’s what you want ([go to p. 163](#)).

‘What does all of this mean? Who is this for? Tell me that’.

([Go to p. 166](#)) and I’ll tell you.

‘What happens next? That can’t be all of it’.

([Go to p. 168](#)) for more.

### 5.4.1 (a) The Critical-Creative Ending

Reading interactive digital texts as serials and vice versa places emphasis on the breaks between instalments, the techniques leveraged by creators around these instalment breaks, and what actions such breaks might prompt in reader-players. Such an approach encourages consideration of not only what is part of the **text** (cliffhangers, intertextual references, characterisation, **paratexts** etc.), but also those which exist outside of the text, such as the creator's authorial persona (whether a pen name or alternate self), audience reactions (fan fictions, theories, contact with creators etc.), and the creator's responses (e.g. prefaces, letters, interviews, subsequent textual material). Contrary to the notion that videogames and electronic literature afford the reader-player a greater degree of agency, this emphasis on the reader-player experience also fosters a different reading of central characters. Rather than being the sole creation of reader-player or writer-creator, the character is instead positioned as being curated by the reader-player (or reader-player community) from options presented by the writer-creator.

Reading serials as interactive texts and vice versa acknowledges that the fixity of the text and its endings are uncertain, even in formats where certainty and finality is assumed, such as the novel. Narratology and ludology are not cast aside outright, but rather combined and extended with consideration of visual, aural, discursive, social and technological elements. Characters are never really dead, and never really alive, operating in their own strange dimension, which, for all its strangeness, is not so different to that occupied by writers and creators themselves. Or at least, the version of themselves they present to the world.

Ultimately, such readings are also 'playings', playing with, in, and around the text in a manner intended to amuse and entertain while also promoting thought and discussion. For more thought, discussion and play, ([go to p. 161](#)) and choose again.

### 5.4.1 (b) Your Ending

‘There’s nothing more to say’, I say. You look ahead and see only a blank page and realise I am telling the truth. Unless... Perhaps there is some way to find more words [in the online version, all the text following this sentence is in white, so the reader must highlight it in order to read it, perhaps here you could trace it with a pen or your finger to help make sense of it.] together. That’s it. You’ve got it.

Like those long dead writers brought back to life in Doyle’s study, I make my spectral presence felt.<sup>54</sup> I’m no longer standing beside you in the room behind the waterfall, instead, I’m reaching through the text like it’s a magic door, or a portal. My hand, invisible, ghost-like, hovers over yours as you move the mouse, or perhaps the scratch pad, as much telekinesis as telepathy. Across time, across distance, we’re uncovering the story together, like we always do, chipping away at the smooth surface of the text to reveal the gargantuan fossilized bones of the tale beneath.

Dickens, long traumatised by the Staplehurst Carriage incident, died on June 9<sup>th</sup>, 1870, at ten minutes past six in the evening.<sup>55</sup> Or, he died, as Simmons/Collins observes with only a little poetic license (the Staplehurst accident occurred around 3pm): ‘almost to the hour, [of] the fifth anniversary of the railway accident at Staplehurst’.<sup>56</sup> Either way, I ran into him a few months ago, rounding the corner in a virtual London. It was unmistakably him, with his wild comb-over and bristling beard, the manuscript of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* he carried scattered to the wind as we bumped shoulders. “‘You can always find me where the ale is warm and tempers are hot!’” he told me.<sup>57</sup> And he was right. All I need do is insert the disc for *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* and

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<sup>54</sup> See p. 82 of this thesis.

<sup>55</sup> Frank T. Marzials, *Life of Charles Dickens with a Biography of Dickens by Sir Leslie Stephen* (Philadelphia: J. D. Morris, 1908), p. 254.

<sup>56</sup> Simmons, p. 740.

<sup>57</sup> Ubisoft Quebec.

there he is, forever walking the streets of virtual London. Not just Dickens, but Conan Doyle too, although ‘Artie’ is significantly less recognisable, being a mere slip of a boy.

Conan Doyle’s creation, Holmes, has even more endings (and continuations) than Dickens. Despite ‘living the life of a hermit among [his] bees and [his] books in a small farm upon the South Downs’, Holmes still managed numerous further adventures, penned by Conan Doyle himself and other writers such as Laurie R. King, Mitch Cullin and Michael Chabon.<sup>58</sup> He has been immortalised on screens of all kinds. In cinemas, portrayed by Robert Downey Jr, Basil Rathbone, Ian McKellen and Peter Cushing; on television under the guise of Jonny Lee Miller, Benedict Cumberbatch and Jeremy Brett; and in videogames both visual (*Sherlock Holmes and the Devil’s Daughter* and *Sherlock Holmes: the Awakened*, for example) and textual (*Toby’s Nose*, *Sherlock* and *Sherlock Holmes: The Vatican Cameos* to name but a few).

Shepard’s ending is a little less cheerful. Just as they faded from existence in this story, that seems to be their fate ‘out there’ too. While some of the side quests in the *Mass Effect* sequel *Andromeda* seemed to hint at a possible Shepard cameo in later DLC, *Andromeda* faced heavy criticism at release, and any plans for further *Mass Effect* DLC or full games were shelved. It seems any future Shepard may have is not in videogames, but via ‘comics and novels’.<sup>59</sup> And of course, like Dickens, Shepard is only ever a saved game away.

But what of you and me? Soon, our time together must end. You’ll let go of the mouse, (or track pad, or screen, or page) and these words will disappear, and yes, you can click and drag again, read them again, but it will be different. You will be different, and because of that, so will I. Conan Doyle seemed to understand that when he wrote

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<sup>58</sup> Conan Doyle, ‘His Last Bow’, in [Trayler Ranson], pp. 1218-1230 (p. 1227).

<sup>59</sup> Owen S. Good, ‘Mass Effect: Andromeda Gets no DLC as Single-Player Support Comes to an End’, *Polygon*, 19 August 2017 <<https://www.polygon.com/2017/8/19/16174510/mass-effect-andromeda-no-dlc-last-update>> [accessed: 28 April 2018].

*Through the Magic Door* and yet, in his effort to contact spirits, he showed it was never enough for him. He was always reaching for something more.

Sometimes, though, there is no more.

Unless you ([go back to p. 161](#))

### 5.4.1 (c) The Creative-Critical Ending

Whenever I talk to non-games writers about creating interactive texts, they tend to say: ‘That sounds interesting, but *I* wouldn’t be able to do it’. What this thesis has, I hope, shown is that interactive writing is not about code and subroutines and complicated AI systems simulating human dialogue. ‘It’s about entering into a relationship with a person whereby you can lead him, economically and deftly, to experience an event as magical’.<sup>60</sup>

Writers are often given conflicting advice, and the subject of who to write for is no exception. Stephen King suggests writing ‘for the pure joy of the thing’ as a starting point.<sup>61</sup> Conan Doyle, for all his reluctance to resurrect Holmes, seems to have had an eye on his audience from the beginning due to his desire to ‘bind’ his readers through their affinity to Holmes and Watson.<sup>62</sup> In the preface to the 1850 edition of *David Copperfield*, Dickens presents a somewhat conflicted position on this, acknowledging ‘that I am in danger of wearying the reader whom I love, with personal confidences, and private emotions’, and thereby highlighting the reader’s central position in his thoughts.<sup>63</sup> However, he goes on to indicate that his own drive to and experience of writing the story is perhaps of greater importance than that of the reader and their experience of reading it, when he insists: ‘no one can ever believe this Narrative, in the reading, more than I believed it in the writing’.<sup>64</sup>

Positioning writing as a magic trick, or a detective adventure, or a telepathic exchange helps writers to rethink their relationship with their reader-player without privileging the needs of one above the other. Instead, these approaches acknowledge

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<sup>60</sup> Brown, *Tricks of the Mind*, p. 34.

<sup>61</sup> King, *On Writing*, p. 301.

<sup>62</sup> Conan Doyle, quoted in Hodgson, ‘Arthur Conan Doyle and Sherlock Holmes’, p. 9.

<sup>63</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Personal History of David Copperfield*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1860), p. vii, Ebook digitised by Google 23 October 2008.

<sup>64</sup> Dickens, *David Copperfield*, pp. vii-viii.

that the reader-player and the writer each have roles to play which are connected, but different. Three different metaphors are provided in recognition of the fact that no single approach will be applicable to all writers, or all reader-players, and none are intended to be prescriptive. Contrary to popular opinion, neither the author, nor the reader, nor the novel, is dead.

THE END

Unless you want more, in which case, ([go to p. 161](#)) and choose again.

### 5.4.1 (d) The Unending Ending

Limiting scope to aid coherence was a key concern throughout my thesis. Therefore there were numerous avenues I was forced to leave unexplored which could provide fruitful areas for future study. Firstly, The Victorian Videogame seems to be a more substantial category than I had imagined when undertaking this study. In addition to the few text-based and **adventure games** briefly touched upon in this thesis, there are a wealth of neo-Victorian games available such as the Bertram Fiddle **point-and-click** adventure series, *The Order: 1886*, and *Murderous Pursuits*.<sup>65</sup> Further study of this growing genre could examine the intertextualities and **interludicities** involved in these games and the ways in which they build on and deviate from their source materials, drawing out any commonalities.

Various areas of interactive storytelling could not be addressed within the scope of this thesis, namely alternate, augmented and virtual reality, multimodal texts and the growing area of storytelling AI chatbots. The Sherlockian Game (in which reader-players attempt to support outlandish claims with evidence from the texts, and ‘peculiarities in the stories have been investigated as phenomena worthy of any academic or professional discipline’) was operating as an alternate reality game long before that term was coined.<sup>66</sup> Therefore studying The Game in this context might engender unexpected connections and points of comparison with modern ARGs (Alternate Reality Games) and their players. Alternatively, the writing analogies of magic, telepathy and detection could be tried against these interactive story types, or a different approach could be developed to aid writers (and readers) in understanding their role in the creation of these burgeoning forms.

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<sup>65</sup> See p. 81 of this thesis.

<sup>66</sup> Kate Donley, 'Hounding the Paratexts of the Game', *The Saturday Review of Literature*, (2016), 24-26 (p. 24).

Finally, the relationship between writing and the supernatural is one which arises repeatedly throughout literature and videogames, from Margaret Atwood's *Negotiating with the Dead*, to *Alan Wake*, to Dickens' and Conan Doyle's numerous connections with seances, mediumship and magic via their personal interests and membership of the Cambridge Ghost Club. Interviews with writers and magicians on their craft, the relationship between Ghost Club members' supernatural investigations and their creative work, and an examination of magic tricks as **texts** may all prove instructive areas for future study.

Would you like to continue? If so, ([go to p. 164](#)) and choose again.

## Glossary

**Adventure Games** (pp. 69 & 168) Videogame genre in which the primary gameplay element is something more than combat. This includes but is not limited to traversal, exploration, dialogue and puzzle-solving. Any combination of these elements may be present, and the presence of combat **mechanics** does not necessarily exclude a game from the genre assuming other elements are present.

**Amnesiac Protagonist** (p. 13, fn) A common videogame trope in which the player character knows nothing of their surroundings or personality because they are suffering from amnesia. Ernest W. Adams discusses this issue at length in the chapter ‘The Problem of Amnesia’ in his thesis. ‘Resolutions to Some Problems in Interactive Storytelling’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Teesside, 2013), pp. 48-52.

**Bleed Effect** (pp. 21, 75, 91, 120 & 159) Described by Kristine Jorgensen as the process whereby ‘real world thoughts and emotions [...] increasingly bleed into the role identity, and vice versa.’ Kristine Jorgensen, ‘Game Characters as Narrative Devices. A Comparative Analysis of *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Mass Effect 2*’, *Eludamos*, 4 (2010), 315-331 (p. 319).

**Boss** (p. 56) Powerful end of level character who must be defeated in order for the player to progress.

**Bounded Agency** (pp. 99, 131 & 146) Joshua Tanenbaum’s term for the most desirable kind of agency for players, a kind of readerly participation rather than an authorial interaction: ‘an unusual blend of freedom and constraint’. Joshua Tanenbaum, ‘Being in the Story: Readerly Pleasure, Acting Theory, and Performing a Role’, *ICIDS 2011, Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, 7069 (2011), 55-66 (p. 55).

**Cere-cloth** (p. 82) Waxed cloth used for wrapping a dead body prior to burial.

**Chronos** (p. 137) Defined by Frank Kermode as ‘passing time’ or ‘waiting time’. Chronos is clock time, the natural passing of minutes, hours, seasons. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 47.

**Dialogue Tree** (p. 95) Dialogue-based choices presented to the player, which branch (or give the impression of branching) in different directions, hence ‘tree’. Branches may be based around tone (e.g. angry versus placatory choices) or topic (e.g. asking about a location versus asking about a person). Depending on the nature of the game, selecting particular branches may have consequences in other areas of gameplay or result in success or failure of ‘completing’ the conversation.

**DLC** (pp. 44, 50, 121 & 164) Downloadable Content. Additional content made available after, or in conjunction with the game’s release in order to expand or customise the base game in some way. (e.g. Additional playable characters, levels, weapons, clothing, game modes, or quests).

**Early Access** (p. 49) A funding model where developers sell early, incomplete versions of their games at a lower cost, with the understanding that early adopters will either directly benefit in some way (e.g. receiving exclusive items or levels when the game is released in full) or through the prestige of being involved in the game’s creation (e.g. by suggesting features to developers which are then implemented).

**Flowchart** (p. 147) A structure of interactive fiction in which the story branches, but may also converge, thereby allowing limited choice. Marie Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) pp. 104-105.

**First Person Shooter** (p. 68-69) A genre of videogame in which a first person camera perspective is used, and the primary **mechanic** is shooting.

**Interactive Fiction** (pp. 12, 97-103, 131, 133 & 155) A form of fiction in which the reader-player is able to contribute towards (or feel they are contributing towards) the creation of the artefact’s story. Marie Laure Ryan suggests that the distinguishing factor between works of interactive and non-interactive fiction is ‘their ability to modify themselves dynamically’. ‘The Interactive Onion’, in *New Narratives: Stories and Storytelling in the Digital Age*, ed. by Ruth Page and Bronwyn Thomas, Frontiers of Narrative (Nebraska: UNP Nebraska Paperback, 2011), pp. 35-62, <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1df4h49>> [Accessed 18<sup>th</sup> May 2019], (p. 35).

**Interactivity** (p. 46) Defined by Chris Crawford as ‘A cyclic process in which two active agents alternately (and metaphorically) listen, think and speak.’ *Chris Crawford on Interactive Storytelling* (San Francisco: New Riders, 2005), p. 76.

**Interactivity** (pp. 47 & 98) I am inclined to update Crawford’s definition here to move it out of the conversational, and into the generative, with the following edits: ‘A cyclic process in which active agents alternately (and metaphorically) listen, think and act’. The metaphoric aspect is retained because the experience of having acted or prompted an act is, I would argue, as important as a genuine act. The number of agents is removed to acknowledge that there may be an asymmetry occurring with multiple agents listening to or acting on the responses of a single agent, or vice versa.

**Interludic/Interludicity** (pp. 14 & 168) The ludic equivalent to intertextuality. For example, the ‘Backtalk’ **mechanic** used in *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* may call to mind the ‘Insult Sword Fighting’ of *Monkey Island* despite these two games having entirely different visual, narrative and thematic (and therefore traditional intertextual) characteristics. Till. A. Heilmann discusses the many interludic associations of *Flappy Bird* in “‘Tap, Tap, Flap, Flap.’ Ludic Seriality, Digitality, and the Finger’, *Eludamos*, 8 (2014), 33-46.

**Kairos/kairoi** (pp. 137-138) Defined by Frank Kermode as ‘a point in time filled with significance, charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end.’ Kairos is the experience of time, and awareness of or anticipation of something momentous. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 47.

**Let’s Play** (p. 17) A video of one or a group of players’ playthrough of a videogame (may be a record of an entire play session, or edited highlights), usually with accompanying commentary.

**Ludologist** (pp. 16, 18, 26 & 29-30) Usually assumed to be the scholarly position that games should be studied primarily in terms of their rules and systems (i.e. their uniquely ludic properties). A problematic notion, since virtually all alleged ‘ludologists’ (e.g. Eskelinen, Aarseth etc) also refer to narrative elements in their analysis. Inverted commas are used throughout in recognition of the term’s inherent contradiction.

**Ludostylistic Toolkit** (p. 23, fn) An analytic framework devised by Astrid Ensslin which seeks to incorporate semiotics and mediality, as well as ludological and narratological concerns. Astrid Ensslin, *Literary Gaming* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2014), pp. 53-54.

**Maze** (p. 147) A structure of interactive fiction described by Marie Laure Ryan as: ‘a spatial narrative with several endings [in which] every itinerary of the user represents a different adventure in the virtual world’. Marie Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 106.

**Mechanic(s)** (pp. 17-18, 55, 68-69, 103, 128 & 133) ‘A videogame’s ludic architecture, which consist primarily of rules, options, challenges and feedback mechanisms and enables certain types of player action’. Astrid Ensslin, *The Language of Gaming* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 171.

**Model Reader** (pp. 44-45) Described by Umberto Eco as an idealised ‘possible reader’ as foreseen by the author. Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 7.

**Narratologist** (p. 18) Usually assumed to be the scholarly position that games should be studied primarily in terms of their capacity for narrative and story (i.e. the properties they share with other creative artefacts). A problematic notion, since virtually all alleged ‘narratologists’ (e.g. Murray, Ryan etc) also refer to ludic elements in their analysis. Inverted commas are used throughout in recognition of the term’s inherent contradiction.

**Natron** (p. 82) Mixture of sodium carbonate decahydrate used in the preparation of leather.

**Omni-tool** (p. 139) A multipurpose tool with a holographic interface from the *Mass Effect* universe. Functions as a computer, weapon and scanning device. Bioware, *Mass Effect Series* (2007-2017), Xbox and subsequently other platforms.

**Paratext** (pp. 17, 54, 120, 132 & 162) Gerard Genette defines the paratext as ‘the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers, and more generally to the public’. Here, I am applying this concept to videogames, and using the term to describe those parts of the game which are not essential to gameplay, or even ‘playable’ at all, yet still contribute to the player experience in some way. Gerard Genette and Marie Maclean, ‘Introduction to the Paratext’, *New Literary History*, 22 (1991), 261-272, in *JSTOR* <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/469037>> [accessed 18 June 2018], p. 261).

**Paratext** (pp. 60, 63 & 67) Expanding on the terminology above, in this instance I am using the term to describe the game’s liminal digital ephemera, although I appreciate the argument could be made for this being world-building material or additional **texts**, rather than paratextual content.

**Paratext** (p. 64) In this instance, I am querying whether choice-text could be considered paratextual (see above definitions), as it arises from the necessity of the game’s structure, and although authored, is also temporary and ultimately reader/player-defined. This draws on Robert Allen’s work on the inherent fuzziness of paratexts’ borders with the text itself. Robert Allen, ‘Perpetually Beginning Until the End of the Fair: The Paratextual Poetics of Serialised Novels’, *Neohelicon*, 37 (2010), 181-189, <<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11059-010-0061-x/fulltext.html>> [accessed 22 February 2016] (p. 182).

**Paratextual** (p. 76) Here Allen is referring to the titles and prefaces of Dickens’ early work. (See above for more on elements that might be considered ‘paratexts’). Allen, Rob, ‘“Boz Versus Dickens”: Paratext, Pseudonyms and Serialization in the Victorian Literary Marketplace’, in *From Compositors to Collectors: Essays on the Book-Trade 1660-2010*, ed. by John Hinks and Matthew Day (Delaware and London: Oak Knoll Press and the British Library, 2012), pp. 155-179 (pp. 156-158).

**PC** (pp. 135 & 153) Abbreviation of ‘Player-Character’ – the character or characters the player is in control of during gameplay. May be a named character with a specific appearance and personality, or a customisable representation of the player, or some blend of the two.

**Personal Player Stories** (p. 46) The metastory as experienced by the player, which may contain ‘aspects of character, events, and the physical structures (props and spatial settings) offered by specific game worlds [...] [which] are dependent on each player’s individual order of interacting with specific aspects of the gameworld’. Astrid Ensslin, *The Language of Gaming* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 24.

**Point-and-Click** (pp. 68 & 168) Games in which the primary mode of gameplay involves selecting dialogue options and objects in the game environment or player inventory (e.g. by pointing and clicking with the mouse or other controller).

**Quality-Based Narratives** (p. 147) Term coined by Failbetter Games to describe narratives composed of story fragments which are shown to the reader-player according to various variables. These variables may be string (text), numeric (statistics) or Boolean (true/false). Emily Short, ‘Beyond Branching: Quality-Based, Saliency-Based, and Waypoint Narrative Structures’, *Emily Short’s Interactive Storytelling*, 12 April 2016, <<https://emshort.blog/2016/04/12/beyond-branching-quality-based-and-saliency-based-narrative-structures/>> [accessed 16 July 2018].

**Saliency-Based Narratives** (p. 147) According to Emily Short, these are narrative systems whereby the most appropriate story fragments are selected from a vast bank according to the relevant information for that situation. Emily Short, ‘Beyond Branching: Quality-Based, Saliency-Based, and Waypoint Narrative Structures’, *Emily Short’s Interactive Storytelling*, 12 April 2016, <<https://emshort.blog/2016/04/12/beyond-branching-quality-based-and-saliency-based-narrative-structures/>> [accessed 16 July 2018].

**Storyworld(s)** (pp. 152-153, 156 & 159) Fictional world as experienced by the reader-player including interpretation of the characters, settings, gameplay etc as presented to the reader-player by the text and **paratexts**. This definition draws on Alice Bell’s discussion of storyworlds in ‘Interactional Metalepsis and Unnatural Narratology’, *Narrative*, 24 (2016), 294-310.

**Strands/Story Strands** (p.148) The term I am using to describe what might be called a ‘side-quest’ in a videogame, or a ‘subplot’ in a novel, but differ slightly in that these ‘sub-stories’ may be abandoned or pursued by the reader-player at will (for the most part – there are some occasions where the reader-player is prevented from or encouraged towards particular strands). They run through the story as a whole and are not confined to specific chapters, pages of text, or chunks of code. They are the individual pieces that make up my ‘salient quality narrative’ as a whole.

**Text/Textual** (pp. 11, 18, 27, 47-48, 52, 54, 59, 61-62, 64, 75, 89, 94-95, 97, 102, 104-105, 124, 127-131, 141, 143, 154, 159-160, 162 & 169) In the context of this thesis, 'text' builds on the archaic usage of the word as found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: 'The theme or subject on which any one speaks; the starting-point of a discussion' to describe any artefact which may be interpreted. 'Text' may therefore be applied equally to videogames, Victorian serials and unnameable hybrid works. On occasion, the term 'traditional text' or 'physical text' is used to distinguish print-based media from born-digital works. Alternatively, the term 'interactive text' is used to distinguish texts which were created as part of an audience-creator interactive cycle from those which were not.

**Third Person** (pp. 69 & 89-91) Usually refers to the camera perspective in videogames whereby the player is able to view their avatar during gameplay sequences. May also refer to the fact that the player is role-playing a specific, named character (e.g. Lara Croft) rather than creating their own (using in-game character creation tools). However, a game may have a third person camera perspective without having a third person character role and vice versa. See (*Figure 15*).

**Tree** (p. 147) A structural category of interactive fiction described by Ryan as one in which 'branches grow in a steady direction, are kept neatly separate, and do not allow returns to a previous point'. *Avatars of Story* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 105.

**XP** (pp. 56 & 124) Experience, or 'experience points', a method of monitoring player progress, usually in relation to the abilities available to the player-character.

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# Appendix A: Cliffhangers in *Great Expectations*

## Appendix A: Cliffhangers in *Great Expectations*

The table which follows shows the final line of each part of *Great Expectations*<sup>489</sup> as originally released in *All the Year Round*<sup>490</sup> and considers the extent to which it may be considered a cliffhanger, given the chosen definition. (A mystery posed but unanswered at instalment's end). In some cases, the 'mystery' is clearly specified in the final sentence. These have been labelled 'stylistic'. Where no mystery is raised beyond those ongoing from previous instalments, 'none' is used in the 'Mystery' column.

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<sup>489</sup> Dickens, *GE*.

<sup>490</sup> Original release details via J.D. Vann, *Victorian Novels in Serial*, 2nd edn (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1985), pp. 72-73.

Part Number	Chapters in Volume Edition	Final Sentence and Page Number	Mystery	Cliffhanger?
1	1 & 2	'Then I put the fastenings as I had found them, opened the door at which I had entered when I ran home last night, shut it and ran for the misty marshes.' (p. 13)	Whether Pip will encounter the convict again, and what will become of them both.	Yes
2	3 & 4	'But I ran no further than the house door, for there I ran head foremost into a party of soldiers with their muskets: one of whom held out a pair of handcuffs to me, saying, 'Here you are, look sharp, come on!'' (p. 26)	What will become of Pip following his encounter with the soldier.	Yes
3	5	'Then, the ends of the torches were flung hissing into the water, and went out, as if it were all over for him.' (p. 36)	The fate of the convict.	Yes
4	6 & 7	'But they twinkled out one by one, without throwing any light on the questions why on earth I was going to play at Mrs Havisham's, and what on earth I was going to play at.' (p. 48)	The reason for Pip's trip to Miss Havisham's.	Yes (stylistic)
5	8	'So, leaving word with the shopman on what day I was wanted at Miss Havisham's again, I set off on the four-mile walk to our forge; pondering, as I went along, on all I had seen, and deeply revolving that I was a common labouring-boy; that my hands were coarse; that my boots were thick; that I had fallen into a despicable habit of calling knaves Jacks; that I was much more ignorant than I	None	No

		had considered myself last night, and generally that I was in a low-lived bad way.’ (p. 60)		
6	9 & 10	‘I coaxed myself to sleep by thinking of Miss Havisham’s next Wednesday; and in my sleep I saw the file coming at me out of a door, without seeing who held it, and screamed myself awake.’ (p. 73)	None	No
7	11	‘What with the birthday visitors, and what with the cards, and what with the flight, my stay had lasted so long, that when I neared home the light on the spit of sand off the point on the marshes was gleaming against a black night-sky, and Joe’s furnace was flinging a path of fire across the road.’ (p. 86)	None	No
8	12 & 13	‘I had liked it once, but once was not now.’ (p. 99)	None	No
9	14 & 15	‘The unemployed bystanders drew back when they saw me, and so I became aware of my sister- lying without sense or movement on the bare boards where she had been knocked down by a tremendous blow on the back of the head, dealt by some unknown hand when the face turned towards the fire- destined never to be on the Rampage again, while she was the wife of Joe.’ (p.112)	The aftermath of the attack on Georgiana.	Yes
10	16 & 17	‘It never did run out, however, but was brought to a premature end, as I proceed to relate.’ (p. 125)	The circumstances surrounding the abrupt end of Pip’s apprenticeship.	Yes (stylistic)

11	18	‘I put my light out, and crept into bed; and it was an uneasy bed now, and I never slept the old sound sleep in it any more.’ (p. 138)	None	No
12	19	‘And the mists had all solemnly risen now, and the world lay spread before me. THIS IS THE END OF THE FIRST STAGE OF PIP’S EXPECTATIONS.’ (p. 152)	None	No
13	20 & 21	“‘And you,” said I, “are the pale young gentleman!”” (p. 165)	The outcome of Pip’s encounter with the ‘pale young gentleman’ (Herbert Pocket)	Yes
14	22	‘Under these circumstances, when Flopson and Millers had got the children into the house, like a little flock of sheep, and Mr. Pocket came out of it to make my acquaintance, I was not much surprised to find that Mr. Pocket was a gentleman with a rather perplexed expression of face, and with his very grey hair disordered on his head, as if he didn’t quite see his way to putting anything straight.’ (p. 177)	None	No
15	23 & 24	‘Which side he was on I couldn’t make out, for he seemed to me to be grinding the whole place in a mill; I only know that when I was stole out on tiptoe he was not on the side of the bench; for he was making the legs of the	None	No

		old gentleman who presided quite convulsive under the table, by his denunciations of his conduct as the representative of British law and justice in that chair that day.’ (p. 191)		
16	25 & 26	‘In about a month after that, the Spider’s time with Mr. Pocket was up for good, and, to the great relief of all the house but Mrs. Pocket, he went home to the family hole.’ (p. 205)	Possibly some hints that Drummle will be of importance later (Mr Jagger’s references to him along with the comment ‘if I was a fortune teller-‘ for example)	Debatable
17	27 & 28	‘I entertain a conviction based upon large experience, that if in the days of my prosperity I had gone to the North Pole, I should have met somebody there, wandering Esquimaux or civilised man, who would have told me that Pumblechook was my earliest patron and the founder of my fortunes.’ (p. 218)	None	No
18	29	‘It was but a day gone, and Joe had brought the tears into my eyes; they had soon dried, God forgive me! soon dried.’ (p. 230)	While Pip’s relationship with Estella remains unresolved, this is not a mystery as such, and is largely a repetition of his previous expressions of feelings for her.	Debatable

19	30 & 31	‘Miserably I went to bed after all, and miserably thought of Estella, and miserably dreamed that my expectations were all cancelled, and that I had to give my hand in marriage to Herbert’s Clara, or play Hamlet to Miss Havisham’s Ghost, before twenty thousand people, without knowing twenty words of it.’ (p. 244)	As above.	Debatable
20	32 & 33	‘But happening to look up at Mrs. Pocket as she sat reading her book of dignities after prescribing Bed as a sovereign remedy for baby, I thought-Well-No, I wouldn’t.’ (p. 257)	None	No
21	34 & 35	‘If they disclosed to me as I suspect they did, that I should <i>not</i> come back, and that Bidley was quite right, all I can say is- they were quite right too.’ (p. 271)	The cause of Pip’s estrangement from Joe and Bidley.	Yes (stylistic)
22	36 & 37	‘It is not much to give to the theme that so long filled my heart.’ (p. 285)	Pip informs the reader the next chapter will be given over to Estella, thereby raising anticipation for news of their relationship, while simultaneously delaying discussing what he describes as ‘the turning-point of my life’.	Yes (stylistic)
23	38	‘So in my case; all the work near and afar, that tended to the end, had been accomplished; and in	Again Pip makes reference to this life-	Yes (stylistic)

		an instant the blow was struck, and the roof of my stronghold dropped on me.’ (p. 297)	changing event with little indication of what it might be, beyond imagery of shock and devastation.	
24	39	‘When I awoke without having parted in my sleep with the perception of my wretchedness, the clocks of the Eastward churches were striking five, the candles were wasted out, the fire was dead, and the wind and rain intensified the thick black darkness. THIS IS THE END OF THE SECOND STAGE OF PIP’S EXPECTATIONS.’ (p. 308)	While obviously the aftermath of Pip’s discovery as to the true identity of his benefactor is ongoing, the fact this is the end of the second ‘stage’ indicates this as a closure point of sorts.	Debatable
25	40	“‘[...] And never believe me on mine, if Pip shan’t make a gentleman on you!’” (p. 321)	Again, the situation with Provis remains unresolved, but the scene itself is self-contained.	Debatable
26	41 & 42	‘I shut the book and nodded slightly to Herbert, and put the book by; but we neither of us said anything, and both looked at Provis as he stood smoking by the fire.’ (p. 334)	As above.	Debatable
27	43 & 44	““DON’T GO HOME.”” (p. 346)	The reason for Wemmick’s stark instruction.	Yes
28	45 & 46	‘But I thought with dread that it was flowing towards Magwitch, and that any black mark on its surface might be his pursuers, going swiftly,	While the section ends somewhat ominously, it is largely a repetition of	Debatable

		silently and surely, to take him.’ (p. 360)	Pip’s concerns for Magwitch.	
29	47 & 48	‘We exchanged a cordial Good Night, and I went home, with new matter for my thoughts, though with no relief from the old.’ (p. 373)	Estella’s parentage.	Yes
30	49 & 50	“‘I know I am quite myself. And the man we have in hiding down the river is Estella’s Father.’” (p. 386)	The aftermath of Pip’s discovery.	Yes
31	51 & 52	‘Towards the marshes I now went straight, having no time to spare.’ (p. 399)	The organiser of Pip’s meeting and the information they may have regarding Provis.	Yes
32	53	“‘When it turns at nine o’clock,” said Herbert, cheerfully, “look out for us, and stand ready, you over there at Mill Pond Bank!’” (p. 411)	The outcome of the escape attempt (and whether Orlick will attempt to interfere)	Yes
33	54	‘It was a good thing that he had touched this point, for it put into my mind what I might not otherwise have thought until too late: that he need never know how his hopes of enriching me had perished.’ (p. 424)	Magwitch’s fate (and Pip’s along with it)	Yes
34	55 & 56	‘Mindful, then, of what we had read together, I thought of the two men who went up into the Temple to pray, and I knew there were no better words that I could say beside his bed, than “O Lord, be merciful to him a sinner!’” (p. 436)	Magwitch’s death acts as a form of closure, although Pip’s relationship with Estella remains unresolved.	Debatable
35	57	‘And how I sped in it, is all I have left to tell.’ (p. 448)	The nature of Pip’s plan.	Yes (stylistic)
36	58 & 59	‘I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the	Despite this being ‘THE	Debatable

		<p>ruined place; and, as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so, the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed me, I saw no shadow of another parting from her.</p> <p>THE END.'</p>	<p>END', the limited perspective '<i>I</i> saw no shadow' (meaning Estella could have) and alternate ending indicate this is not so final as it might seem.</p>	
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**Appendix B – *Writers Are Not Strangers* Narrative Design Document**

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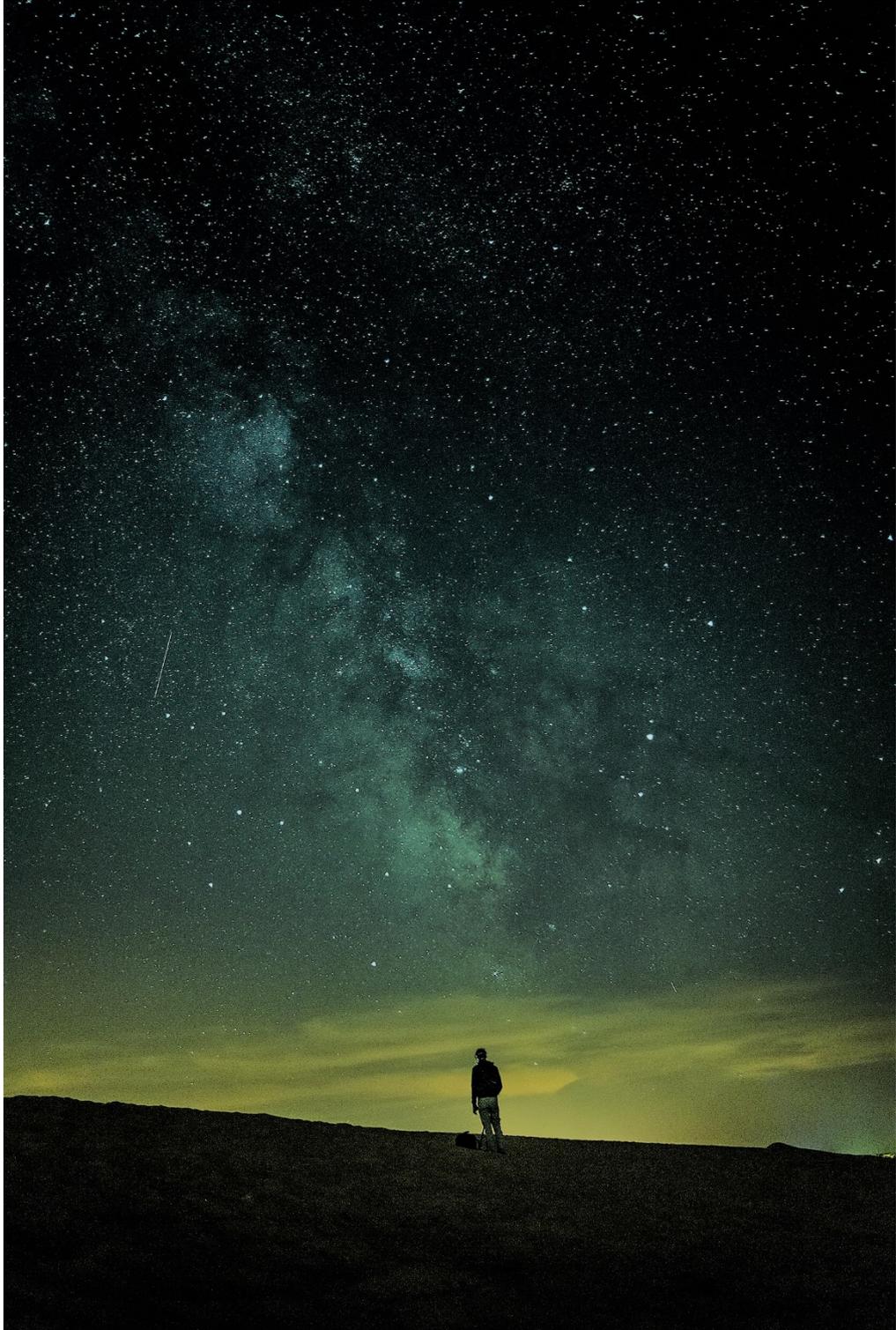


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## World/Backstory

In a near-future alternate dimension, almost Earth, but not quite, the impending threat of an approaching meteor has left society in an uncertain state. Politicians squabble over how severe the impact will be and what can be done to lessen it while everyday life becomes increasingly fraught as people worry if and how they'll survive. Ordinarily, such things would be the preserve of the Protectors who kept earth safe for the last thirty years or so. But they've been gradually dying out leaving only the last, Annie, weak and sick in her hospital bed in her hometown of Moribund. Some people are resentful of this, blaming her for squandering her powers on trivial matters rather than having the foresight to save them for such a dire threat. Others are sympathetic, blaming humanity's apathy and reliance on the Protectors for the current state of affairs. Others still welcome the chance for humanity to test its mettle against nature in this way without their super-powered guardians.

Recruited from elite military units around the world, the Protectors entered into a program of drugs and gene therapy to enhance their strength and abilities. After the first Protector death due to the therapies and increasing political pressure from campaigners uncomfortable with the amount of power entrusted to a relatively small group of individuals, the Protector Programme was wound down, although most continued to serve until their own illnesses developed.

(Much of this will initially be unclear to the reader-player and will only be gradually and/or partially revealed. They may not discover some aspects in a single playthrough.)

## Main Characters

**Alix 'Lixxil' Akerman** - Player-character Alix is 28 years old. Born and raised in Moribund, she always intended to leave, but ended up stuck there due to both parents being Protectors and constantly travelling the world. Alix felt it was her responsibility to provide a point of stability for her parents to return to. She works as a MyBoxxer, creating comedy videos for the online video platform, MyBoxx. Her most wonderful experience was being rated in the top ten of all MyBoxx channels by viewers and subscription numbers, and the attendant sponsorship that this afforded her. Her friends and family struggle to understand what she does and can be dismissive about her work. She lives in a decent flat and is grateful that her profession allows her to survive, but that's really all she's doing - surviving. She doesn't have much of a life outside of creating her videos and visiting her mother, Annie.

Alix has a complicated relationship with Annie, feeling forever in her shadow and resentful of her parenting choices. She still mourns the loss of her father, who was killed in an overseas conflict while performing his role as a Protector. This was the most traumatic event of her life as she was unable to properly say goodbye to him, while also having to endure endless news reports, newspaper articles and viral videos of the brutal circumstances of her father's death.

Alix desperately wants to be a respected writer, but is worried she simply doesn't have the writing chops and will never be taken seriously, either as a writer or a MyBoxxer. She lives in oversized khaki shirts and trousers, another point of contention with her mother who wishes for her to have more style and colour.

Alix is good at seeing the lighter side in life - something she's had to do her entire life thanks to her parents' descriptions of war zones and disaster areas over dinner. She's built her career on this - her videos are increasingly popular in the face of the looming meteor. Her dearest acquaintances are her MyBoxx subscribers, but one in particular, Billie, has become a real friend. They regularly chat via videolink but have never met in person as Billie lives in a distant country. Sometimes Alix's love of humour is a negative - she finds it hard to deal with serious issues and will deflect with humour rather than properly engaging and discussing her feelings

Alix has a live and let live approach to life, sometimes feeling that her mother meddled in affairs that weren't her concern. However, she's upset by the way certain sections of society view the Protectors, on both a personal and philosophical level - they were only trying to help, after all. She abhors drugs and alcohol having heard in graphic detail of the devastation they can wreak from her mother. Her only vice is junk food, which she eats in copious amounts.

She's never really had a serious relationship, comparing all to that of her mother and father who had a wild and whirlwind love affair that she views (unrealistically & impossibly) as the benchmark for all romantic encounters. Her favourite books are trashy romance novels, because they're the only place where relationships like that of her parents exist, and this is secretly the genre she'd like to write in, though she doesn't tell anyone and experiments with lots of genres and styles in an effort to feel more respected as a writer. Similarly, she likes romcoms, but only if they are 'safe' - no tearjerkers. Watching her parents sew each other up in the kitchen between bouts of duty has put her off horror and action for life. Music is the only area where she veers away from safety, loving dark, loud thrashing metal that she can lose herself in and cut loose once in a while. She doesn't tell her mother about this though, because Annie would sneer that it isn't music.

Her greatest fear (and current struggle) is what she will do following her mother's inevitable death. She's always put off moving far up north to a creative centre for MyBoxxers, and visiting Billie because of her commitment to caring for her mother. When her mother is gone, what excuse will she have?

Alix's handwriting is the *Kirsti* font by Birgit Pulker.

**Annie Akerman** - 65 years old, Annie has been hospitalised for the last year due to a degenerative illness related to her status as a Protector. Now Annie is the last surviving Protector, her powers depleted, torn between relief that it's almost over and utter guilt regarding those she leaves behind. Once tall and statuesque, the illness has now left her small, wizened, shrivelled. Her asset is her strong sense of justice, but sometimes this boils over into arrogance and egotism.

She once walked like she owned the world, now her walking days are behind her. She retains her fierce intelligence, which only makes her confinement all the more painful to her, although she tries not to let this show in front of Alix.

Her only friends were the other Protectors, since she lost touch with most of her army buddies after embarking on the programme, and became estranged from her family due to her determination to pursue her role as a Protector after the programme closed and the roles were officially disbanded.

She refuses to take up any 'old lady hobbies' instead spending her time people-watching through the window of her hospital room. The payout from the government for her treatment has afforded her a large, private room with patio doors looking out onto the hospital grounds. She imagines the small and large disasters of their lives and fantasises about saving them.

Her proudest moment was her selection for the Protectors programme - she was the youngest recruit accepted and believes this to be the reason she's survived the effects of the therapies the longest - her younger body was better able to take the strain. Like Alix, her most traumatic experience was the death of Alix's father. She was attending Alix's graduation at the time and therefore didn't go to assist him.

Further characterisation of both characters will be developed through the creation of various short stories exploring depictions of mother-daughter relationships, plus apocalyptic settings.

### Minor Characters

**Billie** – Billie began as a subscriber and fan of Alix's channel, but they gradually became friends thanks to a shared love of obscure metal bands and strange local snack foods which they post to each other and then videolink to eat together.

Billie's handwriting is the *Eliza Jane* font by Kimberly Geswein.

**Dietmar 'DookiDonut' Brodbeck** – Dietmar is a German Myboxxer with a huge international fanbase. After Jodie, he's the most famous MyBoxxer in the world (a fact she doesn't let him forget). He's far more shy and introverted than his loudness would suggest. His command of the English language is exceptional.

**Jodie 'Tiddlywinks' Torres** - Alongside her hairless cat Tiddlywinks, Jodie is the superstar of MyBoxx. She's used her position to change some of the policy surrounding MyBoxxer revenue as she has a sound business head as well as a love of all things glamorous and fabulous.

**Elizabeth 'FairyCake' McLennan** – Elizabeth has a popular cooking MyBoxx show, but it's a little more niche than Dooki or Jodie, so Alix feels a little less intimidated by her. She's also a little older than the others and became a MyBoxxer more by luck and happy accident than judgement, so she's less sure of her status, again giving her more in common with Alix.

**Aunt Maude** – Provides the stability in Alix's life that would otherwise be lacking, although Alix finds her and some of her twee mannerisms and preoccupations a little annoying

**Uncle Simon** – Possibly have Simon turn out to have been injured because of the degeneration of Maggie (his partner)'s powers, not a war wound as Alix assumes.

### Functionality

**Alix** - The player can control Alix's attitude towards her work, life etc. to a degree, but as they progress, their other choices will have an increasing effect, preventing some of the options from being visible/automatically triggering them. The player can choose to

what degree they uncover details about the world Alix lives in - her relationship with her mother, her mother's role as a Protector, the situation regarding the meteor etc.  
29/02/2016 - Decided on an additional variable that considers how Alix feels about the player.

25/01/2018 – The Alix variable will potentially have a large effect on how Alix addresses the reader-player directly later on.

**Annie** - Alix's mother will have her own simplified version of positivity (see below) affected by Alix's treatment of her, willingness to visit etc. This will also affect their interactions.

**Stats** - The story will track player choices and assign values to Alix's various attributes according to their choices. They may not be aware of the effect their choices are having, particularly at first. Alix's attributes will be:

    Career - Choices relating to her status as a MyBoxxer

    Dreams - Choices relating to her personal hopes, dreams and aspirations

    Family - Choices relating to her relationship with her mother (and potentially other family members)

She'll also have a score for her overall positivity.

Particularly high or low attributes and positivity will affect certain scenes, NPC dialogue etc.

**NPC Dialogue** - NPC dialogue (background characters, MyBoxx commenters, TV, Radio etc) will be player dependent - the player will be unwittingly affecting Alix's whole world and the way others perceive her and behave around her. These behaviours are in synch with player choices, e.g. lowering Alix's positivity will make the world in general a more negative place.

**Story** – In one of her stories, Alix will directly comment on the reader's choices to force them to realise the impact on her life.

## Game Structure

### Prologue

The story will open with a randomised extract of Alix's writing, although the player will not be aware that this is the case initially - it will be presented as the story's opening. They'll be asked to give the piece a rating out of ten (and potentially leave a comment). These extracts will be tantalising, outlandish openings in the manner of *If On A Winter's Night A Traveller*, themed around iconic videogames and novel openings. (10 x250 - 2500 total)

Actual Count: 2168

### Chapter One (Thursday)

The story proper will then begin, with one of three randomised scenes. Ultimately, the player will have the option to play through all three scenes, or skip on to the end of the chapter (although this won't necessarily be overt). They will also have the chance to find out a little more about the world if they choose. In each instance, the player will be able to decide whether she thinks about her career, worries about her mother, or considers her writing:

1) Alix at a MyBoxx event. Here she's known, appreciated. Fans tell her how much they love her videos. She signs merch for them.

2) Alix at a family party. Her mother's absence is noticeable and Alix is aware that in many ways, she's a poor substitute. Her relatives struggle with the concept of what she does. The excuse she gives to leave will affect whether or not she has a pet, which will become relevant in the following chapter.

3) Alix at the hospital visiting her mother. Alix struggles to find conversational topics that her mother doesn't find too frivolous or too dour.

Each scene will include up to three small choices. These will not have a major impact on the overall story at this point, but will be an opportunity for the reader to accrue points in the various attributes (described below) which *will* have a bearing. After all three scenes have played out, or the player skips forwards, Alix will check feedback on her short story:

4) This will allow the reader to see the effect their earlier input has on her. They can then encourage her to focus on her writing, her career, or her mother.

(3 x 1000, 1 x 500 - 3500 words total)  
Actual count: 6626 (Main Chapter: 5520, Rating outcome: 1106)  
Running total: 8794

### Chapter 2 (Friday)

The opening section of this chapter will focus on Alix's home life. Attribute thresholds will impact what she sees on her television, the messages left on her answer machine, the presence or absence of a pet etc. Interacting with these various things will further increase/decrease Alix's attributes. Again the player will have the option to find out more about the deeper world via further choices, or skip on.

Depending on previous choices, the main scene will be:

- 1) Alix writing something new
- 2) Alix ordering clothes for her mother
- 3) Alix making a new video.

Her feelings regarding each of these will also be dependent on attributes.

(Main chapter: 1000 words x3, world-building segment 500, 3500 total)  
Actual count: 4867  
Running total: 13661

Need another story/rating section in between, followed by a set-up for chapter 3.  
2 middling parts: 1= non-gamey, +/- according to Alix's positivity  
1= gamey = Jane Eyre (p. 174-175) & Altered Beast: negative from Beast's perspective, positive from Athena's perspective. (845 words)  
Running total: 14,506

### Chapter 3 (Saturday)

Career/dreams/family sections. In each case, there will be a false alarm with the meteor. Reader-player will only see one of these.  
Career: Myboxx awards ceremony.

Dreams: Day out with Billie.

Family: Visit to Aunt/Uncle

(7511 words total)

Will end with another ratings result interlude, followed by a false alarm for Annie's death. (1266 words)

Chapter total: 8777

Running total: 23,283

#### Chapter 4 (Still Saturday)

Will begin at the hospital with Annie having undergone a false alarm. Relative & Billie may be present. Afterwards Alix will have the option of spending more time with Annie, or speaking to Billie or relative about how she's feeling, or she can keep her feelings to herself. Alix will then attempt to avoid talking to Annie by reviewing her messages. The message will be dependent on her stats

1) Career stat highest – Low positivity: Alix will either be told she's lost sponsorship for her MyBoxx channel, High positivity: a global video platform is interested in her work.

2) Family stat highest - Family stat >75: Alix's mother will call for her to come back & speak to her, Otherwise: Alix will have only spam messages and will be forced to pay attention to Annie

3) Dreams stat highest: Rating for story >7: Alix will receive an acceptance from an online fiction magazine.

Otherwise: Alix will find that a troll has linked to one of her stories on her MyBoxx channel, prompting a string of bad reviews.

Total: 3706

The chapter will end with the hospital going into lockdown due to imminent meteor impact. (3x1000, plus additional choices/world-building- 750, 3750 total)

Another of Alix's stories will provide context and reveal the truth behind these interrupting extracts. (514)

Chapter total: 4220

Running total: 27,503

#### Chapter 5 (Sunday)

A doctor explains Annie doesn't have long left. Alix will have the option to collect her belongings and prepare for a night at the hospital. However, whether she's back at her apartment packing, or in the hospital waiting room, the four minute warning for the meteor will go off.

Meteor impact is now imminent. Depending on the player's previous willingness to investigate the world, they may or not be fully aware of what this means.

Alix may now choose to:

- 1) Document the event for her MyBoxx channel,  
25/01/2018 – This was adapted to spending time with her MyBoxx friends at Dietmar's place (career thread)
- 2) Go to witness it closer up in order to write about it later (if she has a pet, and depending on previous options, she may choose to take it with her)  
25/01/2018 – This was adapted to returning to her apartment to retrieve her dad's journal (dreams thread)

- 3) Spend the time with her mother (if she has a pet, and depending on previous options, she may choose to take it with her). Some options may not be available depending on previous choices. (family thread)

After thinking about/looking at the scarf/pet/whatever is appropriate for a moment, the asteroid announcement is made. Alix must now decide whether to try to make it back to the hospital, or join the evacuation program at her building. Either way, Alix's relationship with Annie & her positivity will affect the outcome of the asteroid. If Annie & Alix are close & Alix is positive, Annie will supernova in an attempt to destroy the asteroid & succeed. If Annie & Alix are close & Alix is negative, Annie will supernova in an attempt to destroy the asteroid & fail, but do enough damage to the asteroid to lessen the effects of its impact. If Annie & Alix are not close & Alix is positive, Annie will die quietly in the hospital & the asteroid will hit, but the damage will be relatively minor. If Annie & Alix are not close & Alix is negative, the asteroid will hit, Annie will die quietly in the hospital and whoever went to the apartment building will be killed. If it's Alix, she will supernova to escape the rubble, just about surviving.

(3 x 1000 + 500 - 3500 total)

#### Epilogue (...A Wednesday?)

Epilogues will relate to overall choices and be set some months later. Annie will either have had a funeral or a commemorative statue depending on her actions

**Career:** Alix will have set up her own vlogging company with Dietmar, Elizabeth (& Jodie if she's alive) she'll feel differently depending on her positivity etc and its function will be different depending on whether or not the asteroid hit eg. Lighthearted if asteroid deflected, serious news if they're trying to rebuild society.

**Dreams:** Alix will be out on an expedition with Billie (if Billie's alive) making notes on the impact in her dad's notebook. She'll then settle down with her laptop, and through it, converse directly with the reader. Depending on her rating with them, she might be angry, or friendly. She'll tell them what happened and how she feels they impacted it. If she's with Alix, she'll have started writing a romance novel.

**Family:** Alix will be with Aunt Maude/Uncle Simon if they're alive, the surviving one if they're dead. If the asteroid hit, she'll be helping them rebuild. If it didn't, she'll be looking through photos again, putting them in an album. Could also have given them a new dog if she already has a dog. Serita's birthday? Marked difference to the other parties.

All word counts are provisional (19,500 is the total for the bare bones of the story, leaving me with the remaining word count to flesh out characters and subplots as needed, plus investigative short stories). Additional creative sections and options for players to rate Alix's work (or even the work of her peers) may be necessary. Considering the inclusion of a writing workshop, but not sure if that'll be getting too meta!

#### **Added 07/12/18:**

Final total wordcount excluding code: 47511

Final total wordcount including code: 59871

## Prologue

Openings will take inspiration from 10 iconic videogames:

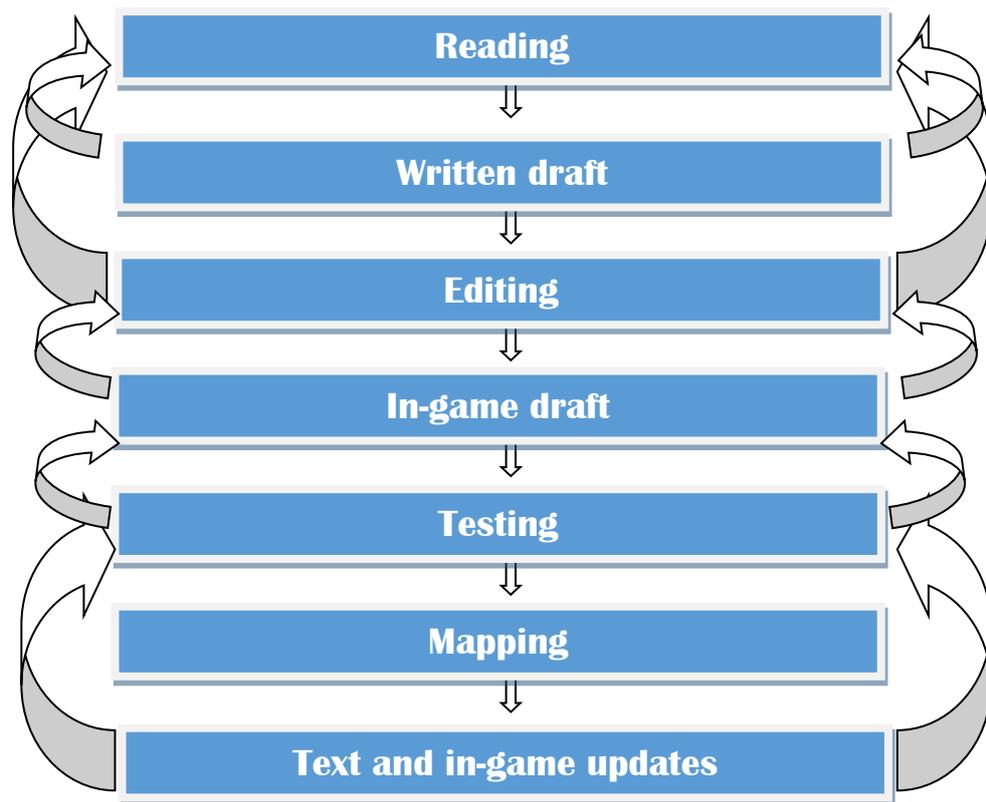
- 1) Super Mario
- 2) Sonic the Hedgehog
- 3) Space Invaders
- 4) Centipede
- 5) Tomb Raider
- 6) Street Fighter
- 7) Final Fantasy 7
- 8) Doom
- 9) GTA
- 10) COD

In the style of 10 iconic novel openings:

- 1) Pride & Prejudice - "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a fortune, must be in want of a wife."
- 2) Anna Karenina - "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."
- 3) A Tale of Two Cities - "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way."
- 4) The Crow Road - "It was the day my grandmother exploded."
- 5) The Bell Jar - "It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York."
- 6) A Confederacy of Dunces - "A green hunting cap squeezed the top of a fleshy balloon of a head."
- 7) Invisible Man - "I am an invisible man."
- 8) The Good Soldier - "This is the saddest story I have ever heard."
- 9) Metamorphosis - "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous vermin."
- 10) Middlemarch - "Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress."

Each opening will also use key themes/style of the source material.

## Workflow



## Testing

ChoiceScript's automated Quicktest and Randomtest functions test for any breaks in code. Randomtest's output also shows the number of players in each 10000 who might see any given line of code. (See **Appendix E** for this in full). I also undertook extensive testing myself, playing through repeatedly to check story coherence using the workflow model above. Bugs found were recorded in a Hansoft database and assigned an importance level from A-D. All class A & B bugs will be fixed prior to release, with C & D bugs fixed as soon as possible thereafter.

In addition, several beta testers were used giving feedback either via email or in person. The in-person feedback was received during group testing sessions where players were able to share their differing stories. This was particularly enjoyable, as I was able to see first hand their surprise at how different some of the scenes were for them, and how differently their games turned out.

### **Key feedback (notes added 12/07/18)**

Several testers commented on disliking moments where control was taken from them, but I was happy to leave these in, as my point was to make them think about how much or little control they really have in choice-based stories, and to give Alix as much autonomy as possible in certain sections. This was particularly entertaining during group discussions when some testers realised others had been able to choose a pet and they hadn't. Naturally, their feedback was that everyone should be able to choose their pet, but again, this went against the overall point I'm attempting to make with this piece, and so I left as is.

Similarly, some testers disliked the fact that they felt the text was making assumptions about them. Obviously, this is a difficult problem to solve as in many ways it's a necessary part of a stat-based interactive text, but I have attempted to adjust some thresholds and add in additional more neutral lines to some sections to avoid falling into binary 'good' or 'bad' descriptions. The ambiguity of some sections was also a problem for some testers. Again, there are some places where this is difficult to avoid in order to maintain narrative coherence, but I have taken some steps to aid in clarifying certain elements. Adding Alix's screen name to the story extracts, for example, as many testers were initially extremely confused as to why they were being asked to read the short story extracts and how they connected to the main story; and making sure the days of the week showed in chronological order (they were initially jumbled to show the confusion of time experienced by Alix due to the garbled meteor countdown, but this led to testers reading too much into this and attempting to track a clear chronology of events).

Most testers who encountered Billie became very fond of her and wanted to know more about her and where she was at all times so this was added in as far as was possible. Their dedication to Billie also meant several testers spotted previously undiscovered bugs regarding Billie's appearance in later scenes, and these were fixed. Similarly, those who encountered Jodie, Dietmar and Elizabeth also wanted to know more about them and spend more time with them, and so these characters were expanded a little more too. Interestingly, most testers displayed little to no interest in Annie, Maude or Simon, despite attempts to soften Annie in some routes through the text, and attempts to show that Annie had not always been the way she is by the start of the novella. Therefore, Annie's 'good' endings will be edited to emphasise her heroism and bravery, and hopefully counter this entirely negative view of her.

Some choices were interpreted differently than they had been intended, and therefore the underlying statistics were adjusted so players would not be unduly 'punished' for selecting them. For example, many testers interpreted Alix sending Billie away during the expo as a way to ensure they would have proper time together later, rather than as a dismissal of Billie's friendship, and so the coffee scene with Billie was added, and Billie's reaction to Alix sending her away was changed to neutral rather than negative (as she is a MyBoxx fan, inviting Billie to stay was left as the choice she responds to most favourably).

## Release

### **(Notes added 16/11/2018)**

*Writers Are Not Strangers* was released as part of IF Comp 2018 on October 1<sup>st</sup>. A variety of reviews were published by reader-players:

<https://mctreviews.video.blog/2018/10/23/writers-are-not-strangers/>

<http://www.ricordius.com/intfic/ifcomp18/writers.htm>

<https://ifcomprehensive.com/2018/11/11/writers-are-not-strangers-by-lynda-clark/>

<http://www.goodolddays.net/article/id%2C25/The+24th+Annual+Interactive+Fiction+C+ompetition.html>

<https://fumiko666.tumblr.com/post/179109122935/ifcomp-2018-notes-a-writers-are-not-strangers>

<https://www.intfiction.org/forum/viewtopic.php?f=61&t=26884#p146179>

There were a few common threads across several of the reviews:

Some reviewers assumed *Writers Are Not Strangers* contained a greater degree of randomisation than it does (the very first story is the only truly random element, although there is a degree of randomisation to the contents of the box left outside Alix's apartment.) This is likely due to the large amount of branching and delayed branching.

The use of ratings as a mechanic was inspired to some degree by the IFComp itself, but more by actual writing forums, and I had not fully considered the way this mechanic might be interpreted by audiences who were being asked to rate stories themselves. This was in some ways useful, as it added an additional layer of meaning for some reviewers, but I think it was also somewhat distracting and muddied what I was attempting to convey through these interactions (that what began as simply inputting numbers could become a different kind of process and even relationship. Although fortunately, some reviewers seem to have picked up on this regardless).

Most reviewers felt the way people's behaviour was portrayed during an impending apocalypse too muted to be realistic, although one did note the irony of calmly reviewing interactive fiction during the US midterms! My intention was for the meteor to serve as a metaphor for climate change, or just general global malaise, but this doesn't not appear to have been conveyed successfully.

Reviewers seemed to be split on the Fourth Wall breaks, with some enjoying them, and others finding them confusing or out of place with the rest of the story.

One particularly pleasing comment was that the lack of concrete goals did not affect enjoyment. This was something I had been concerned about without being able to properly articulate it until I saw it acknowledged. I felt I had to leave Alix's motivations and goals vague so that players could pursue her career, friends, or family interests without feeling they were being pushed towards one story thread or the other, yet this carries with it a risk of aimlessness. This could also have been a reason for the assumption of randomness, though – without clearly defined paths, some reader-players may have felt there was too much freedom.

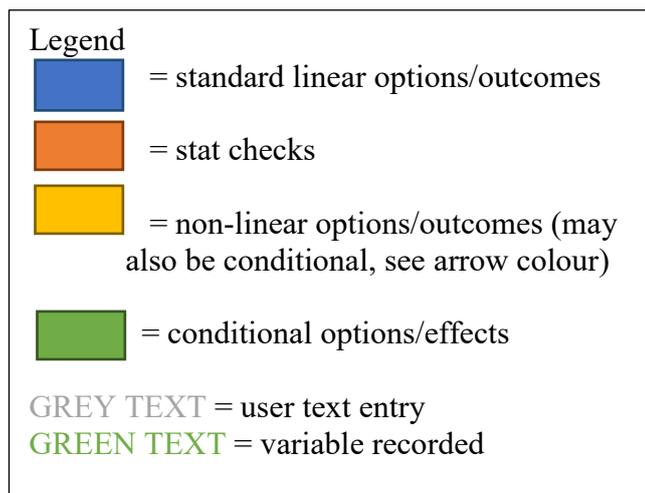
The most notable omission was Billie – no reviewers mentioned her at all, suggesting the attachment my testers felt was not repeated with a larger audience. Several reviewers also suggested a strong dislike of Alix, and I wonder if this in part arises through not encountering Billie? I feel that Alix's character is generally softened and improved by spending time with Billie, but if most reader-players missed Billie altogether, or avoided inviting her along, then Alix likely seems rather cold and distant throughout.

Appendix C – *Writers Are Not  
Strangers* Design Maps

## Appendix C – *Writers Are Not Strangers* Design Maps

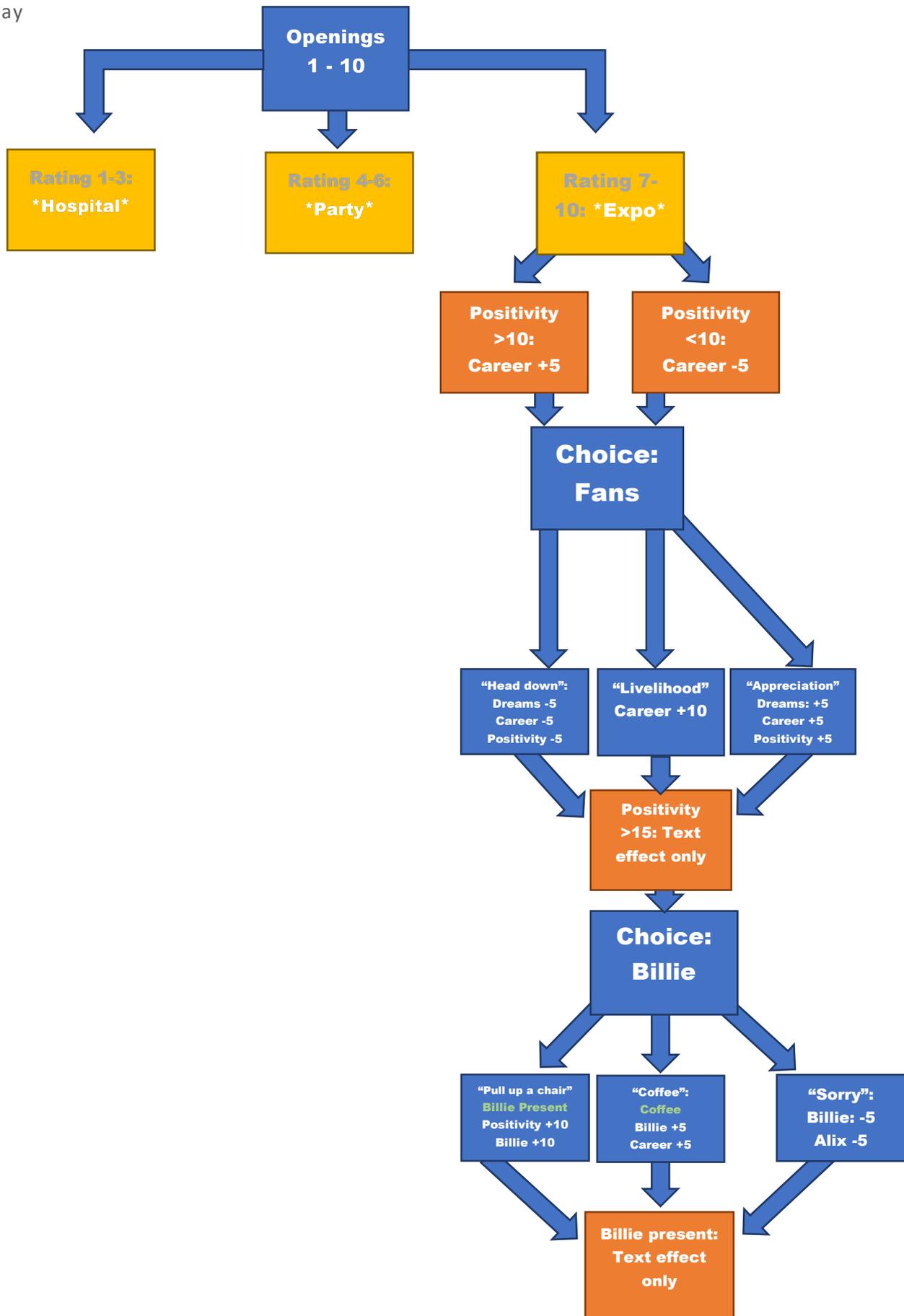
These maps were created during the creation of *Writers Are Not Strangers*. With the exception of Chapter 5, they were created as part of the editing process, rather than as initial reference documents. (Given the complexity of Chapter 5, it was decided more in-depth planning would be necessary before undertaking the writing stage).

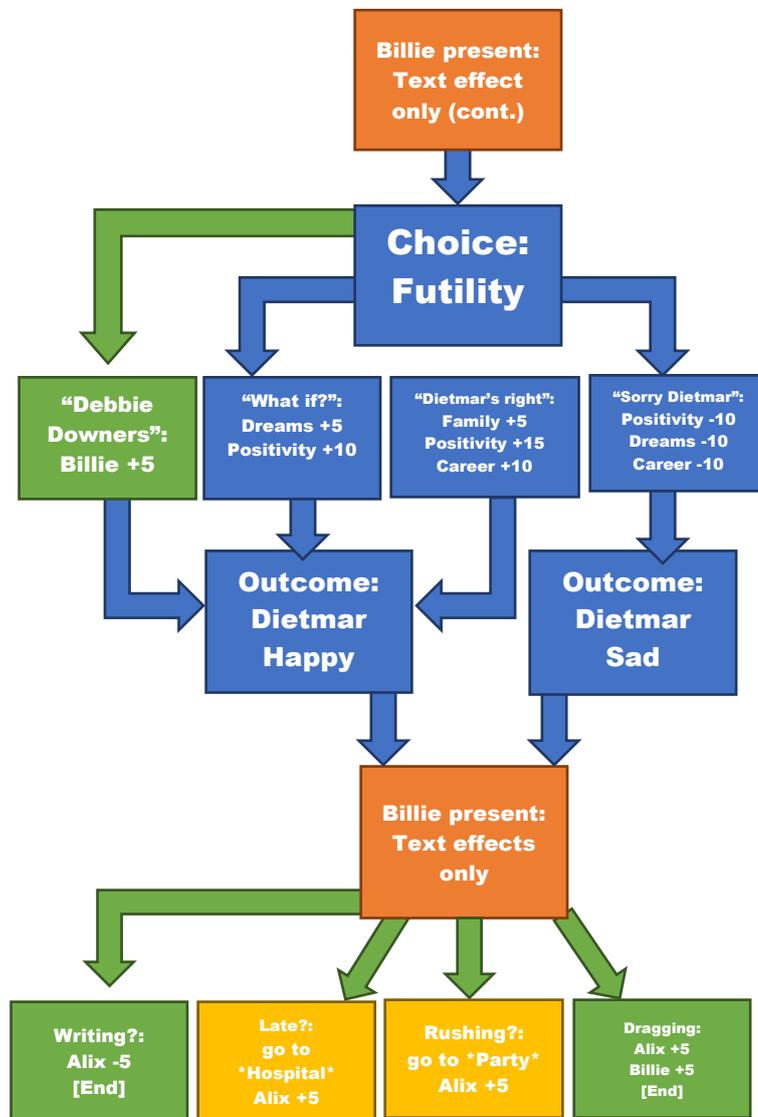
Please note, these maps are intended to give a general indication of the branches and statistical changes occurring during a play session. Some sections have been shortened or simplified for clarity, and do not necessarily contain every branching point, choice or statistical amendment. Please see **Appendix E – Full code documentation for *Writers Are Not Strangers*** to see all possible branches, choices and variables.



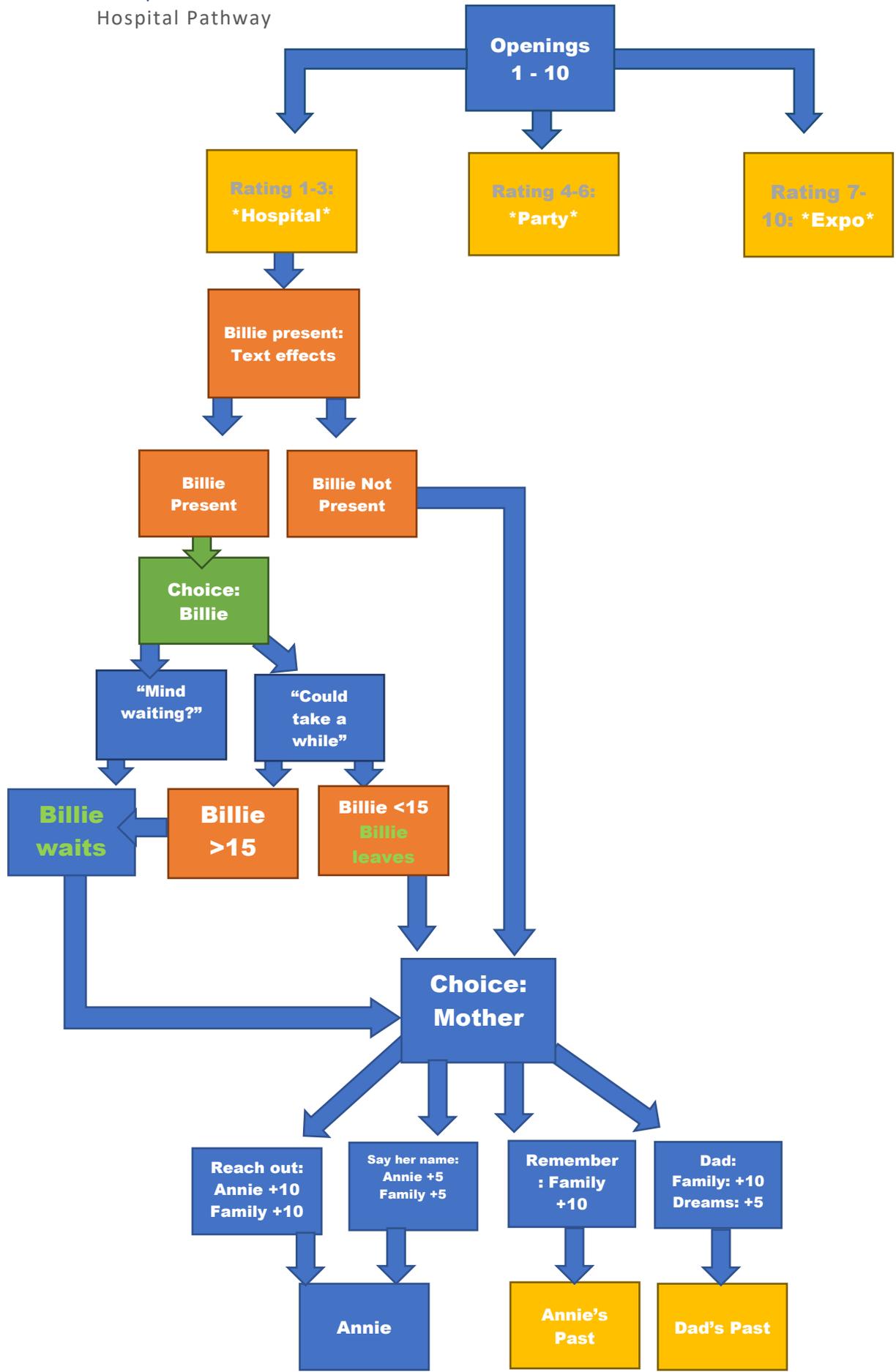
# Chapter One

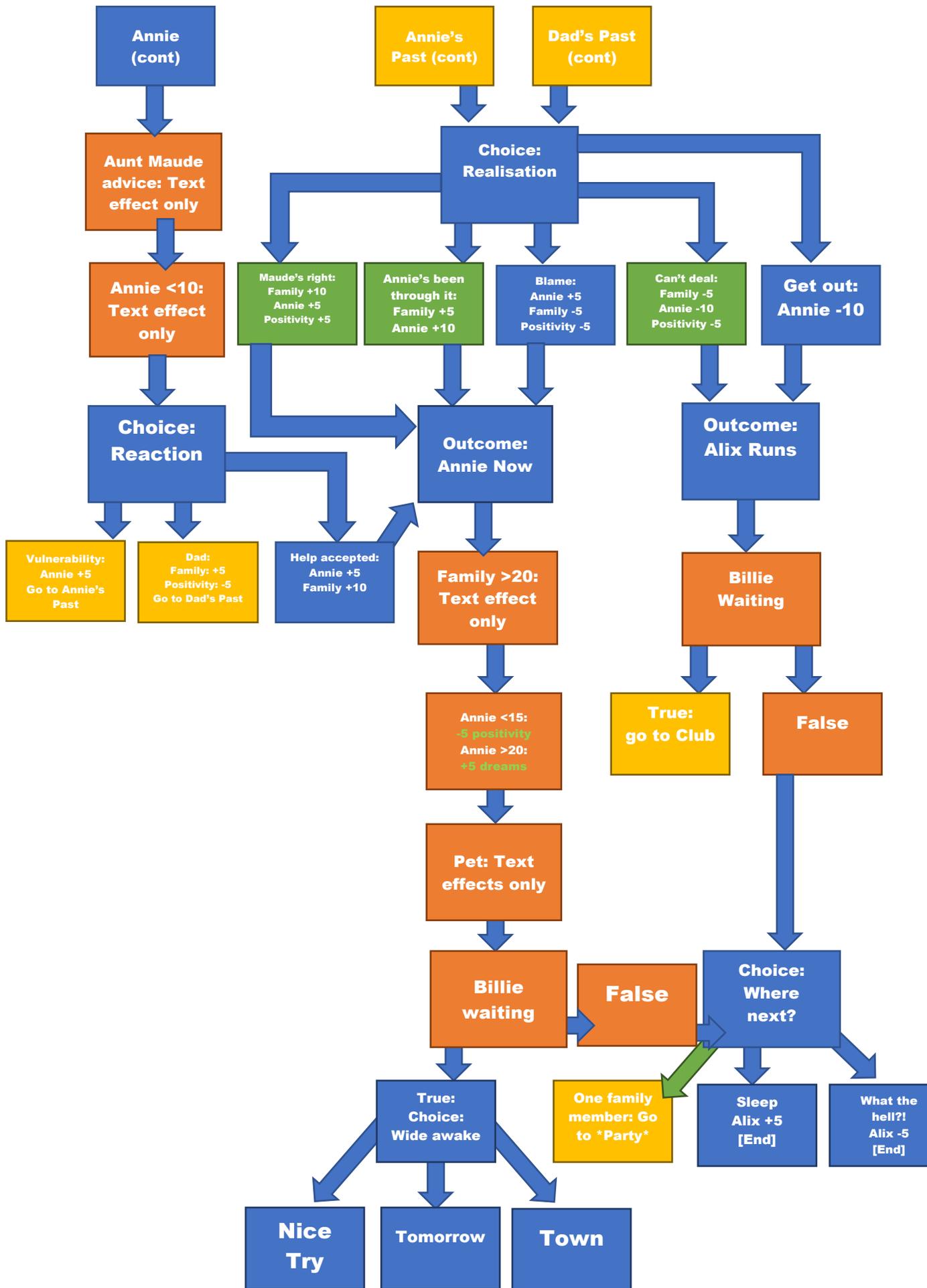
## Expo Pathway





Chapter One  
Hospital Pathway

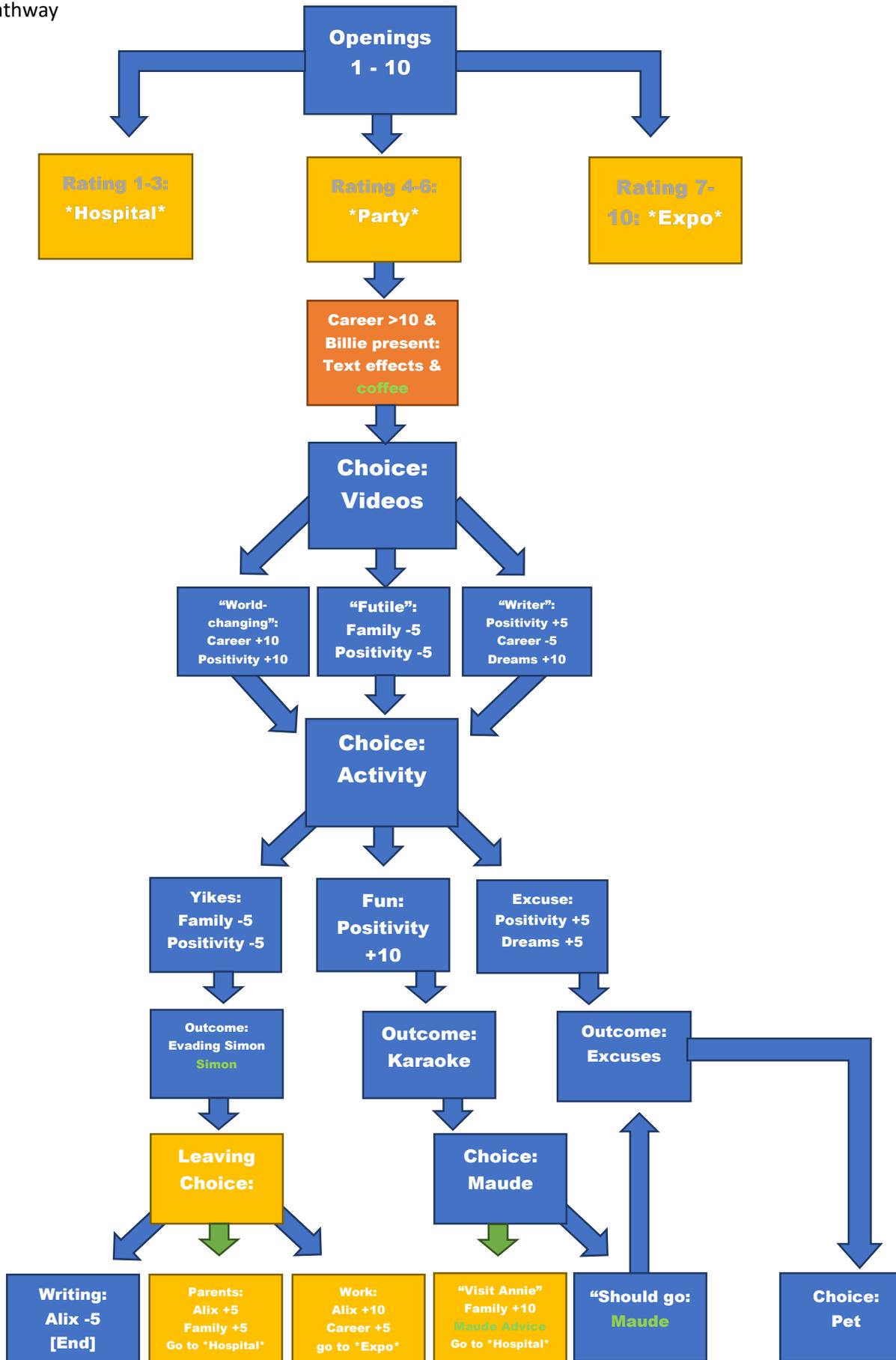


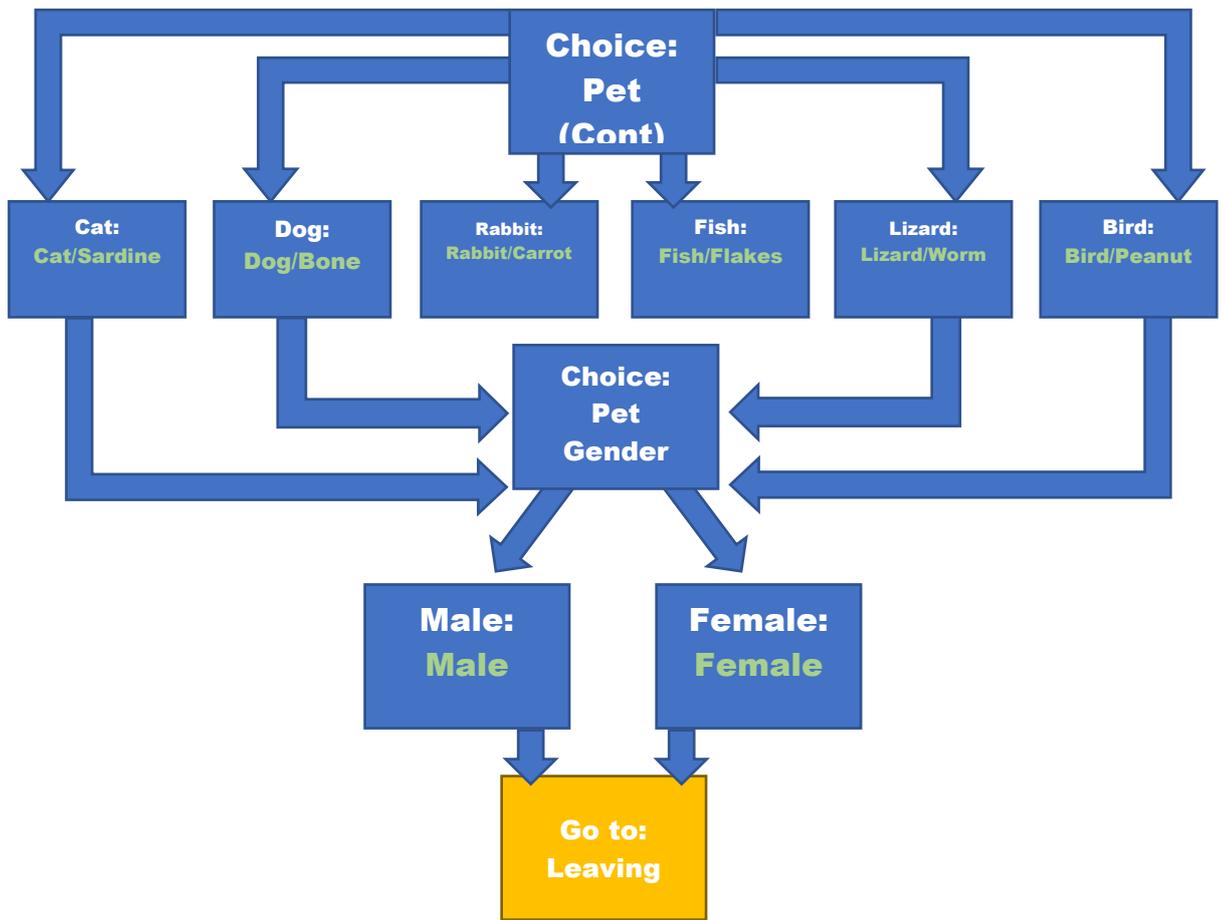




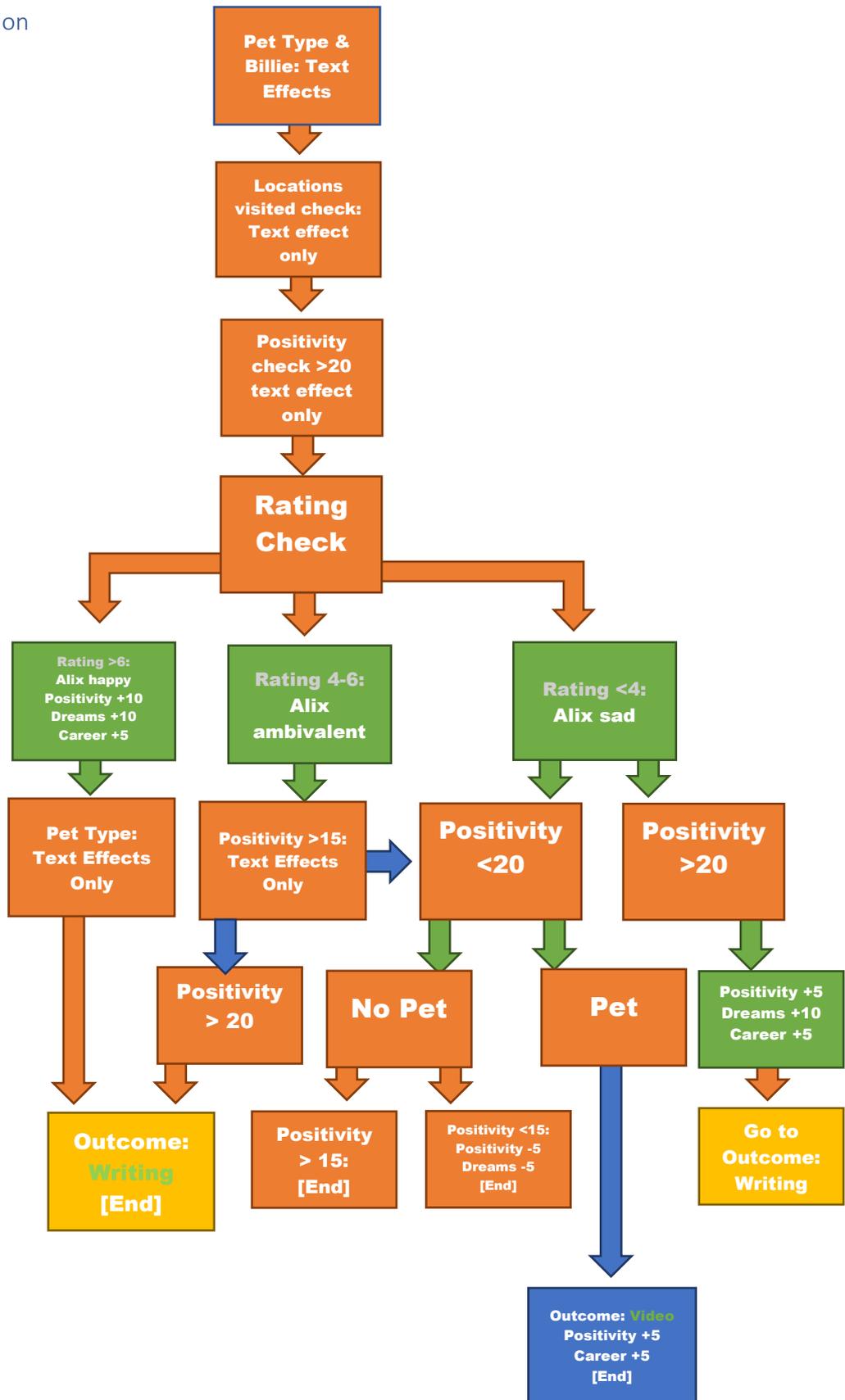
# Chapter One

## Party Pathway

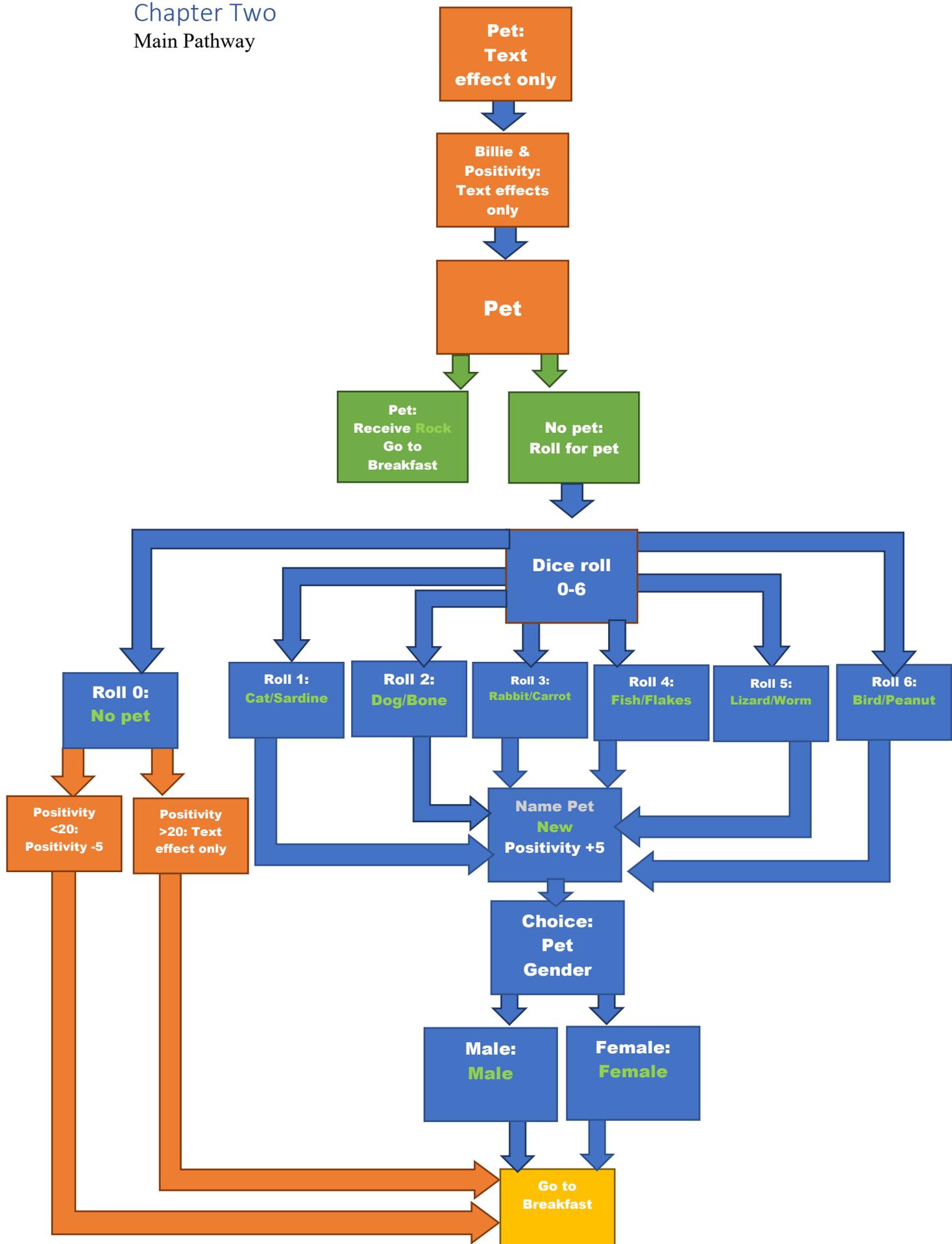


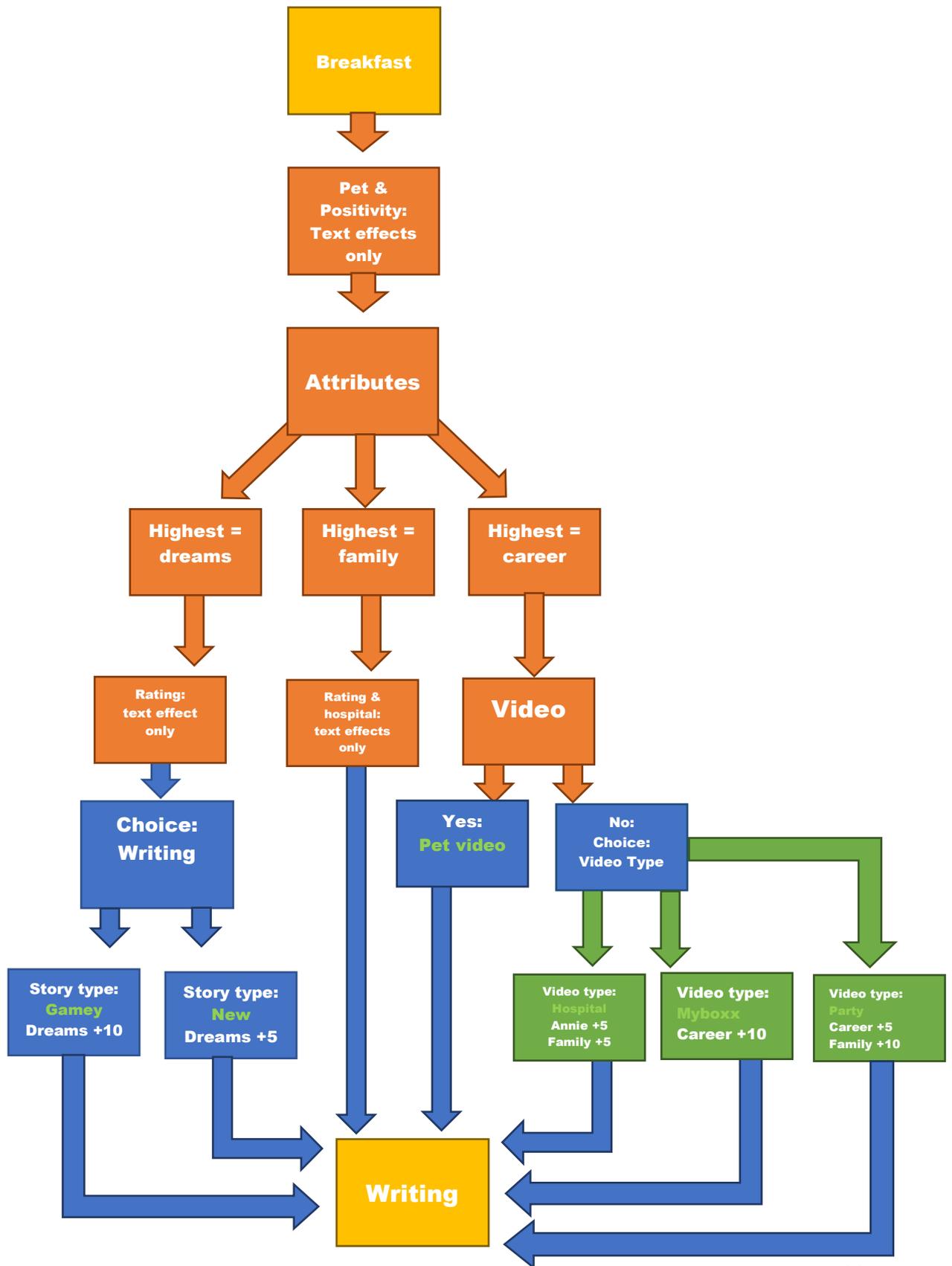


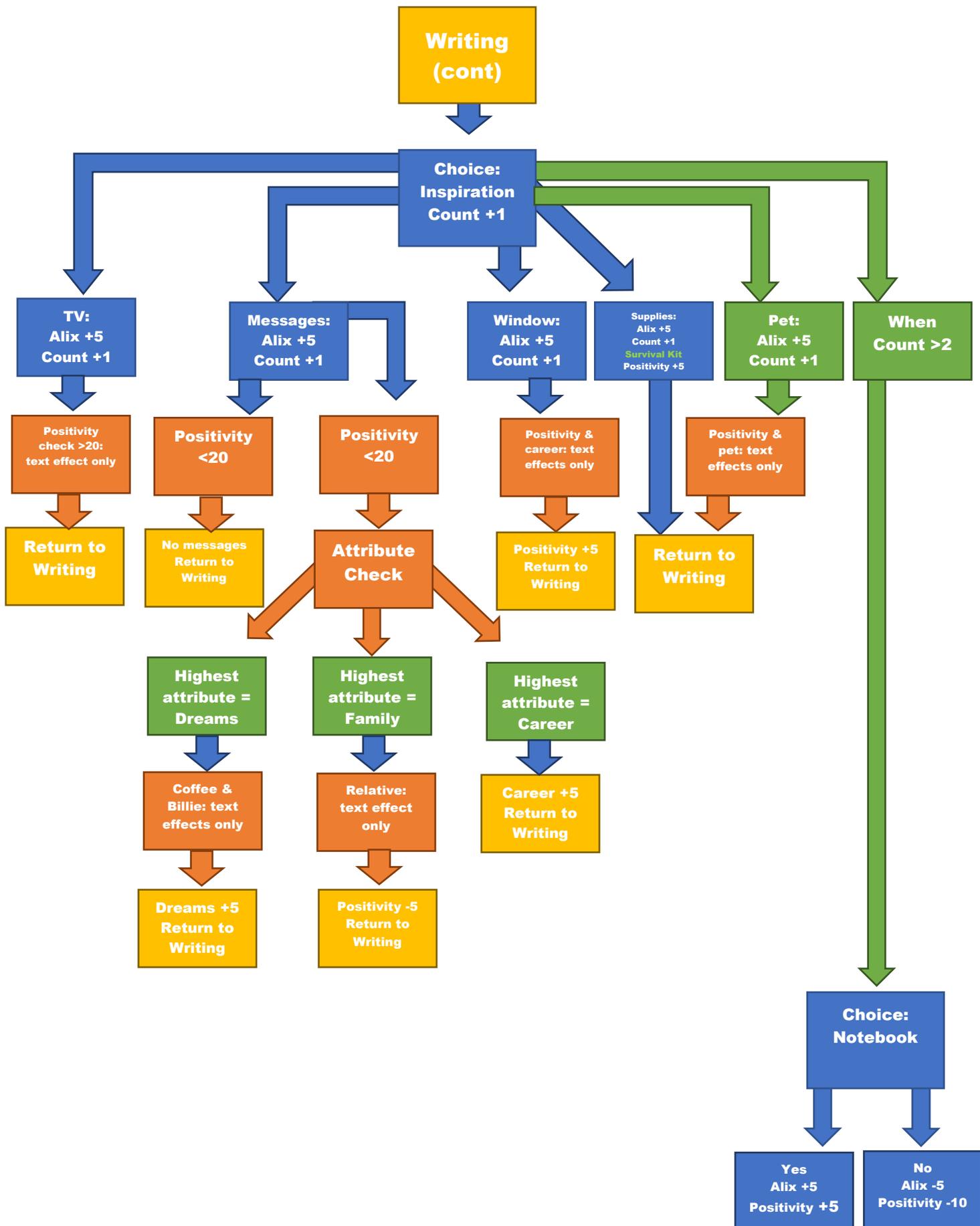
Chapter One  
Conclusion



Chapter Two  
Main Pathway

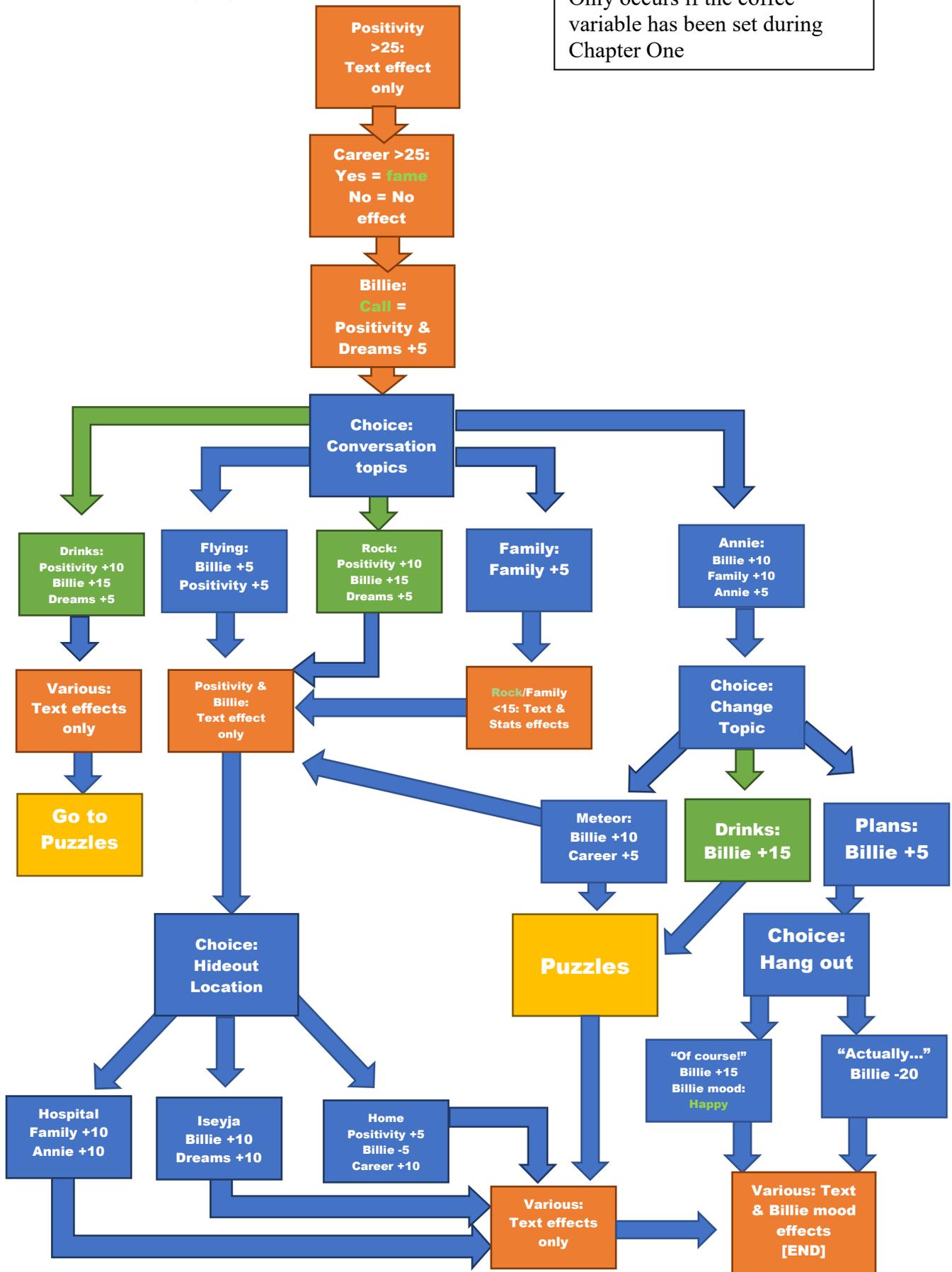






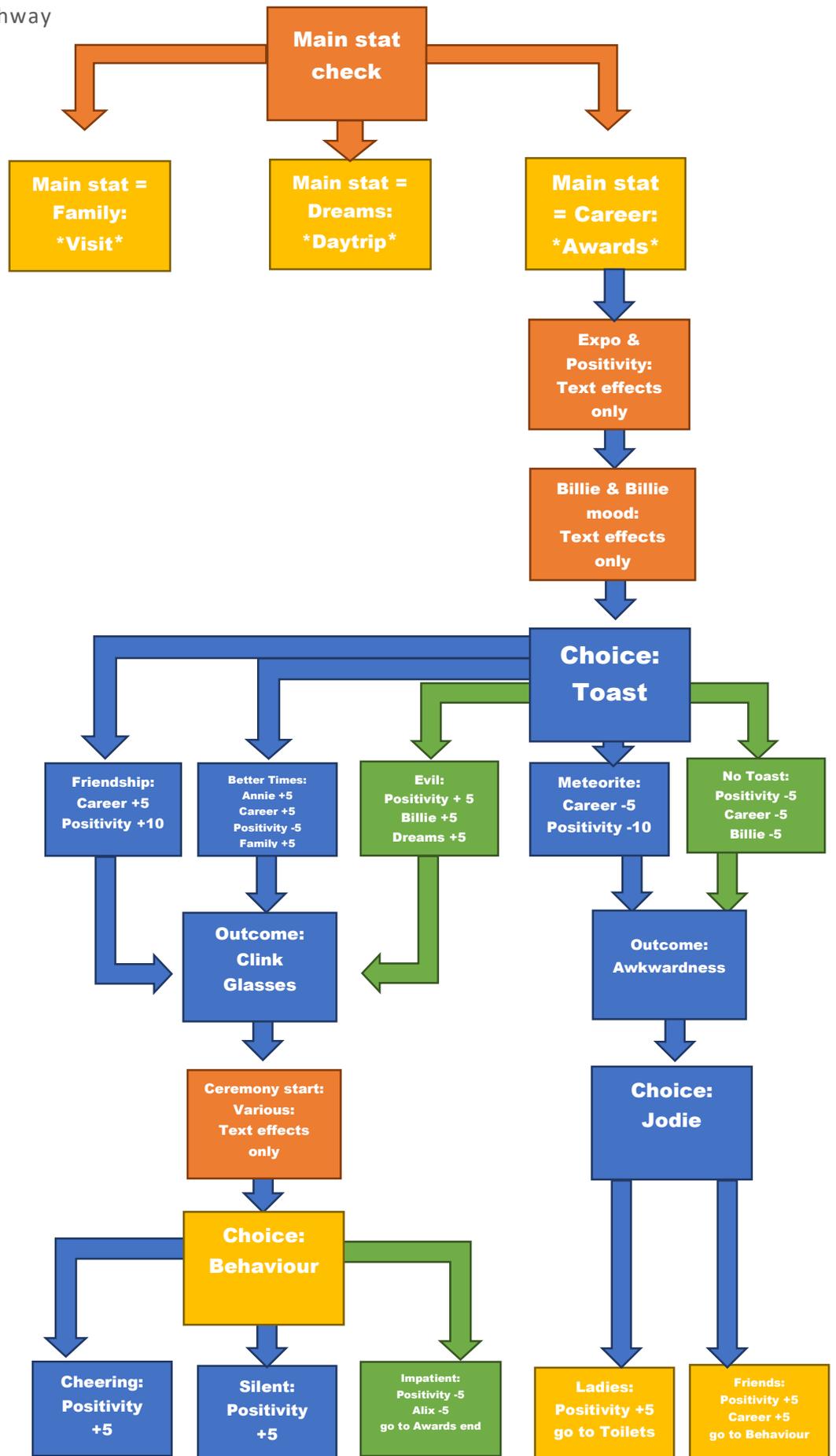
Chapter Two  
Billie Epilogue

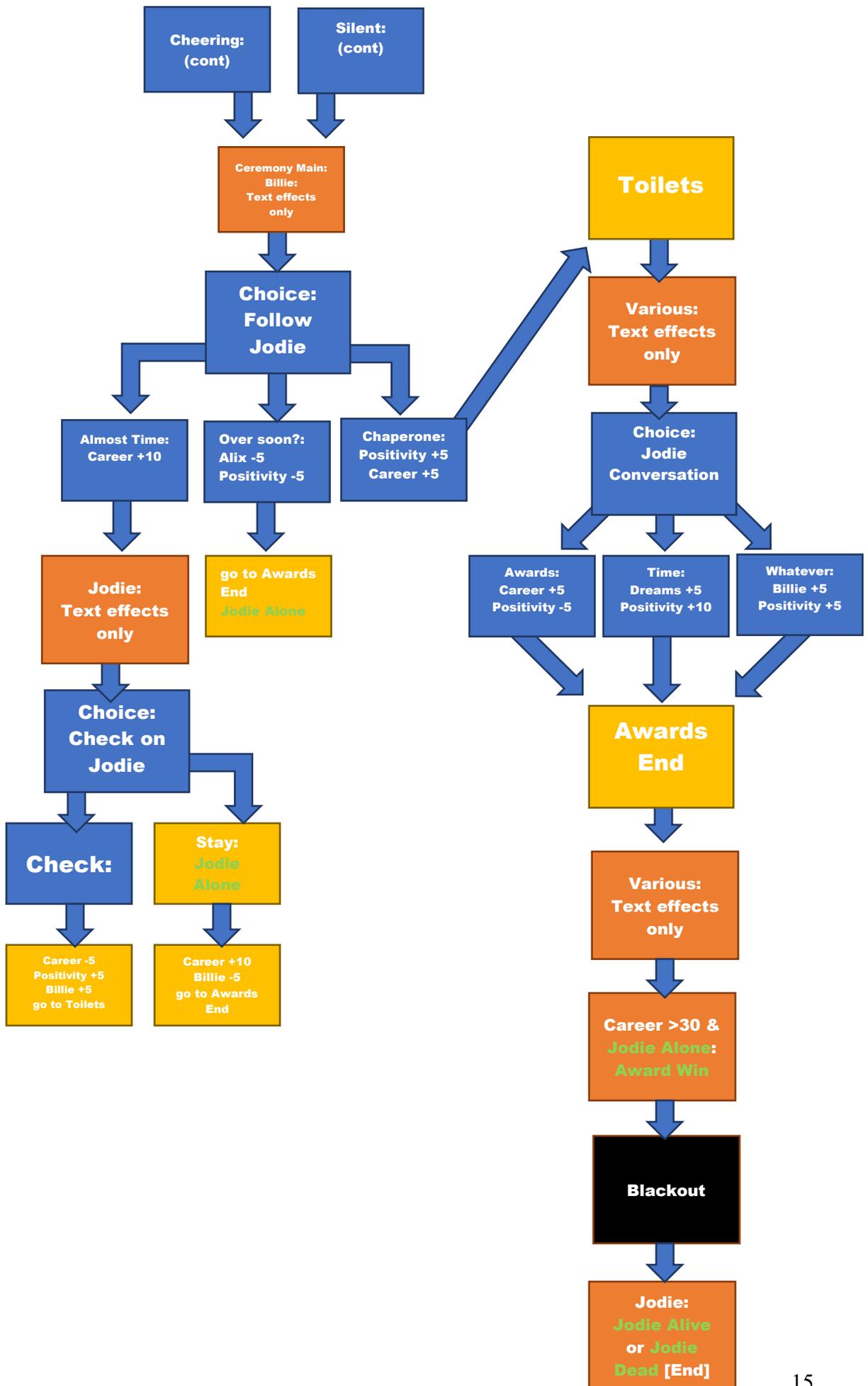
Only occurs if the coffee variable has been set during Chapter One



# Chapter Three

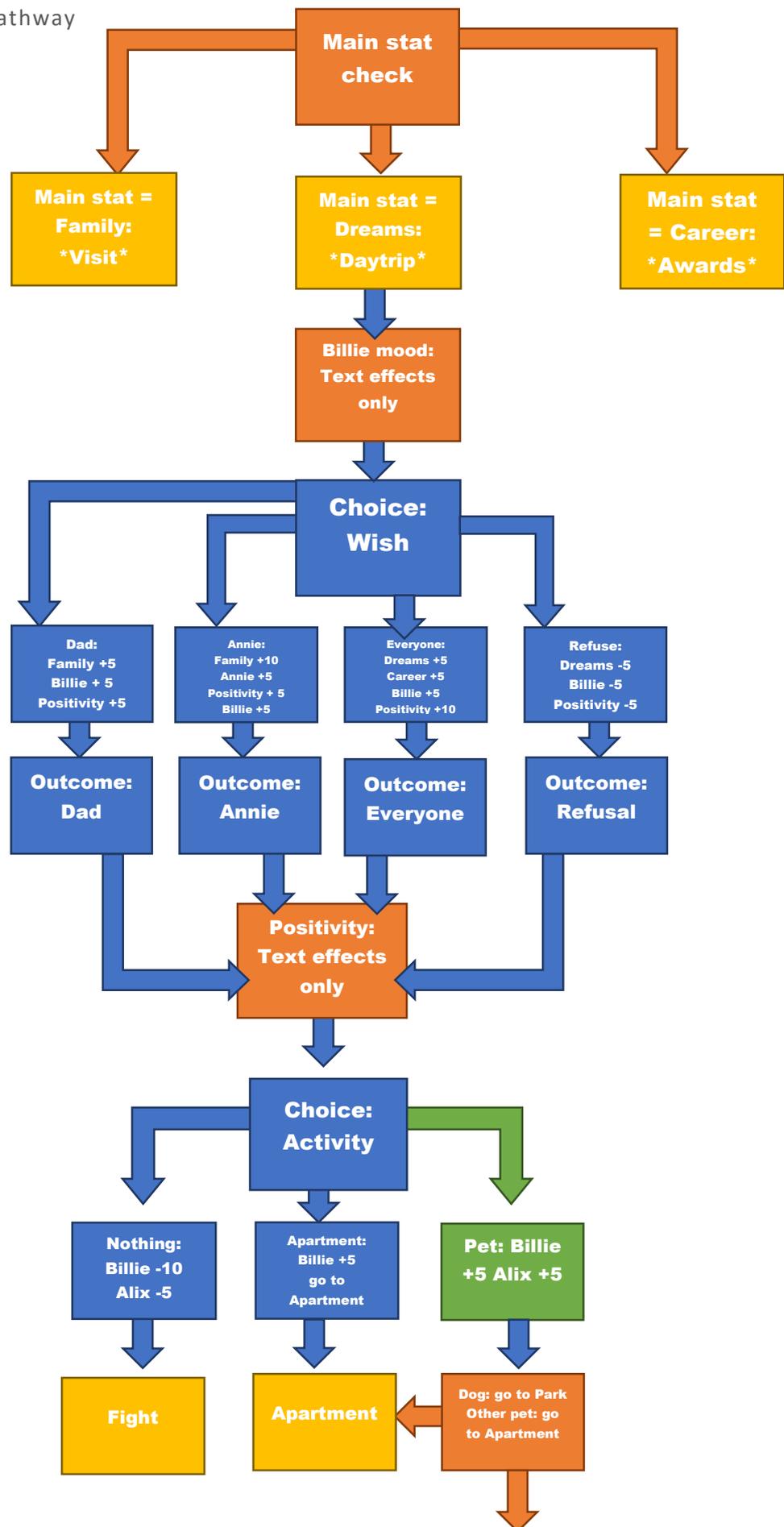
## Awards Pathway

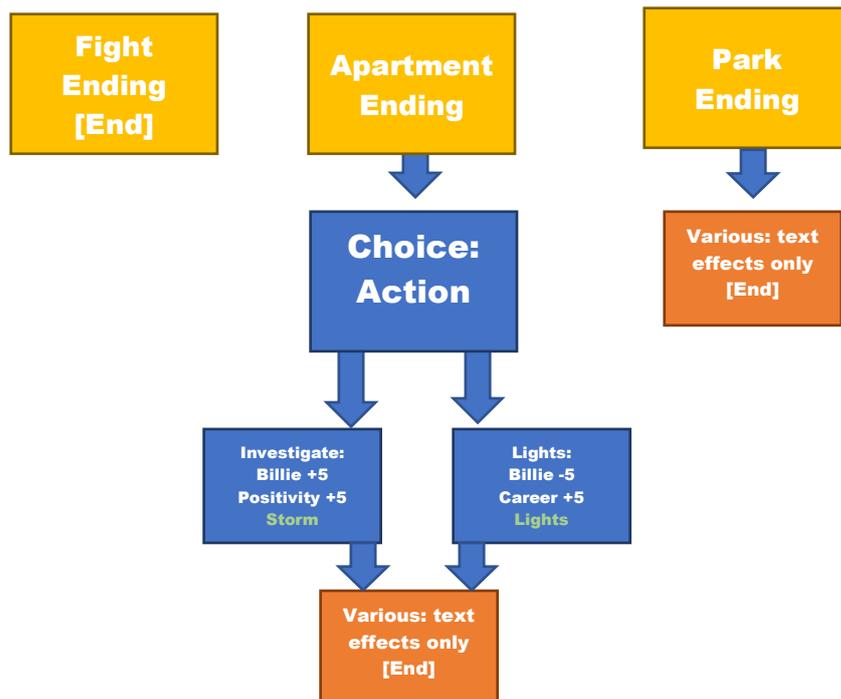
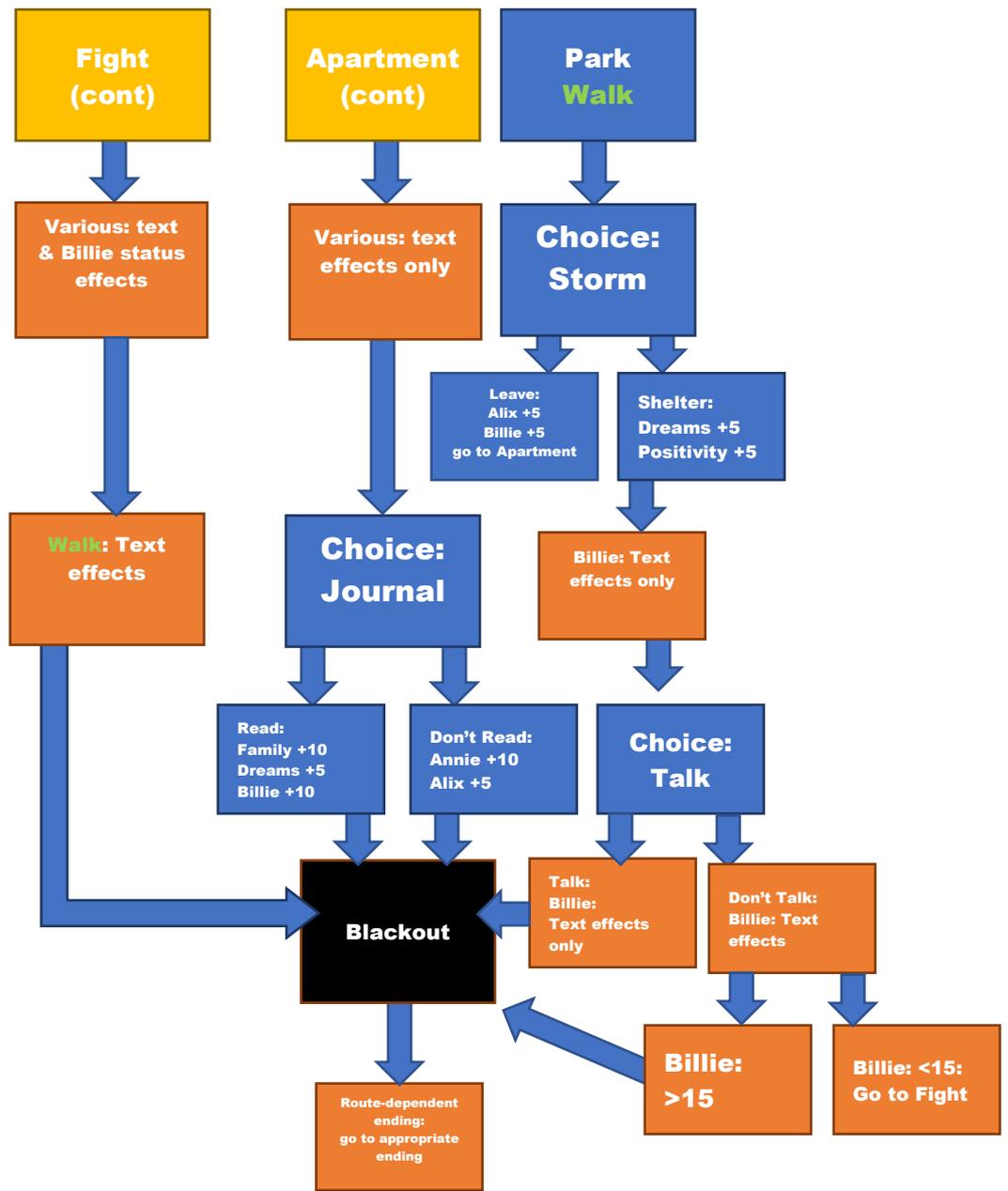




# Chapter Three

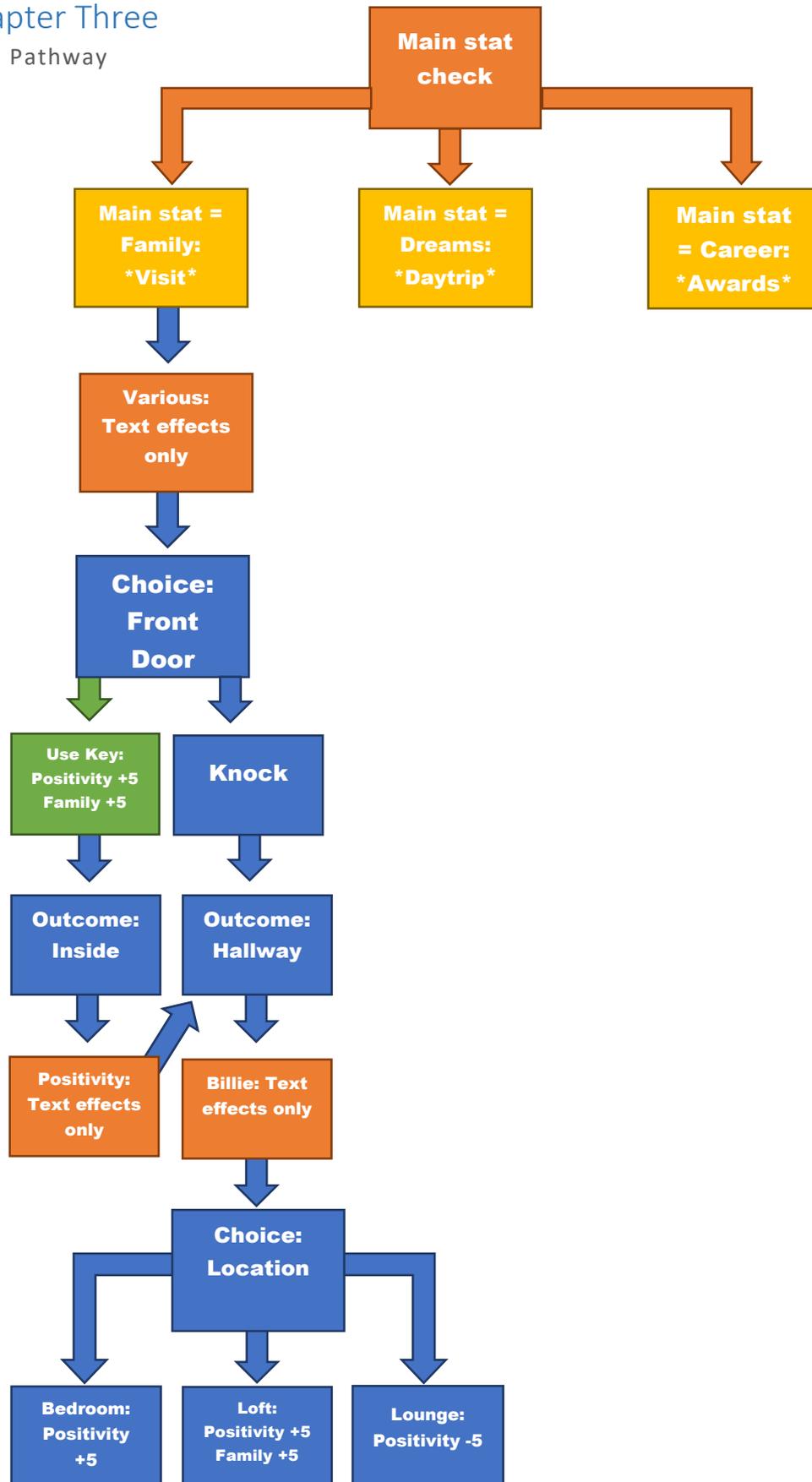
## Daytrip Pathway

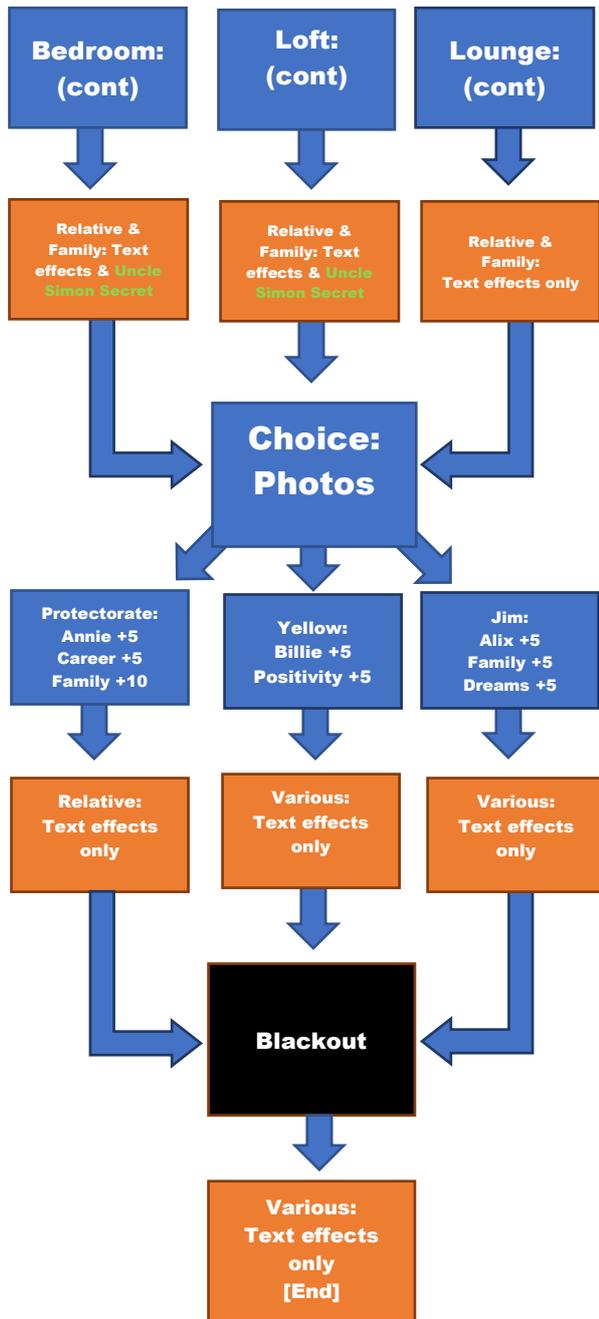




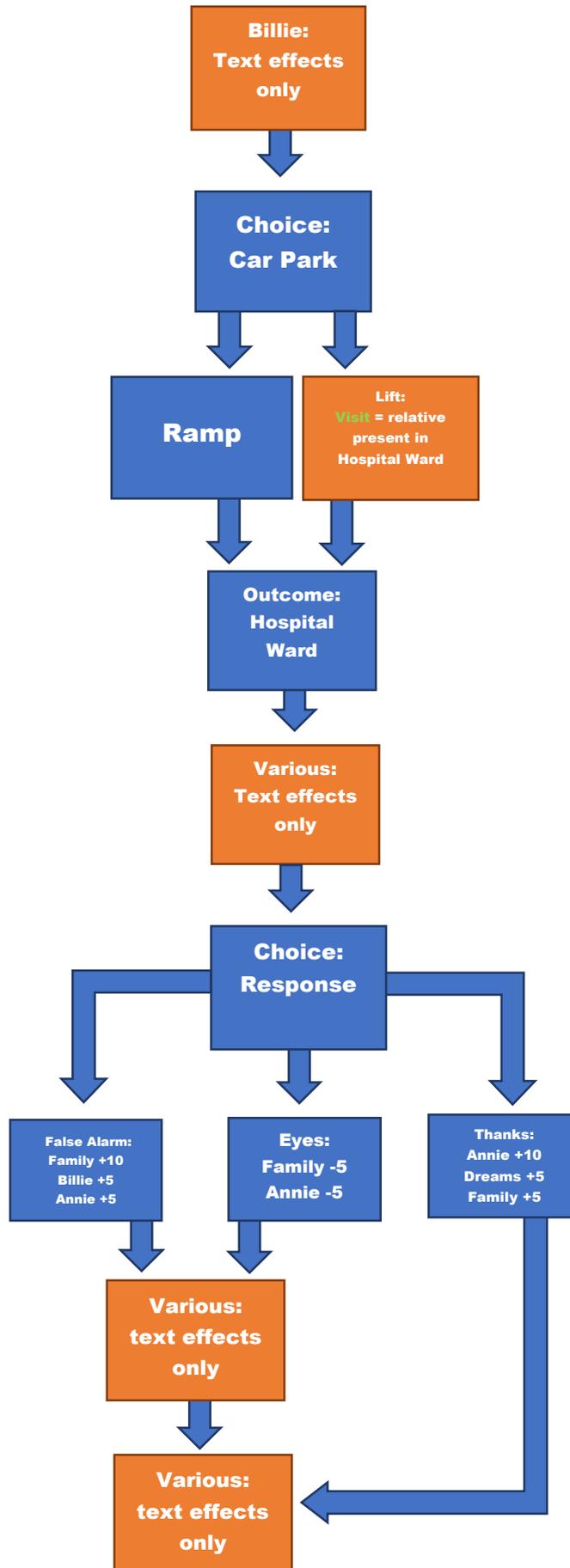
# Chapter Three

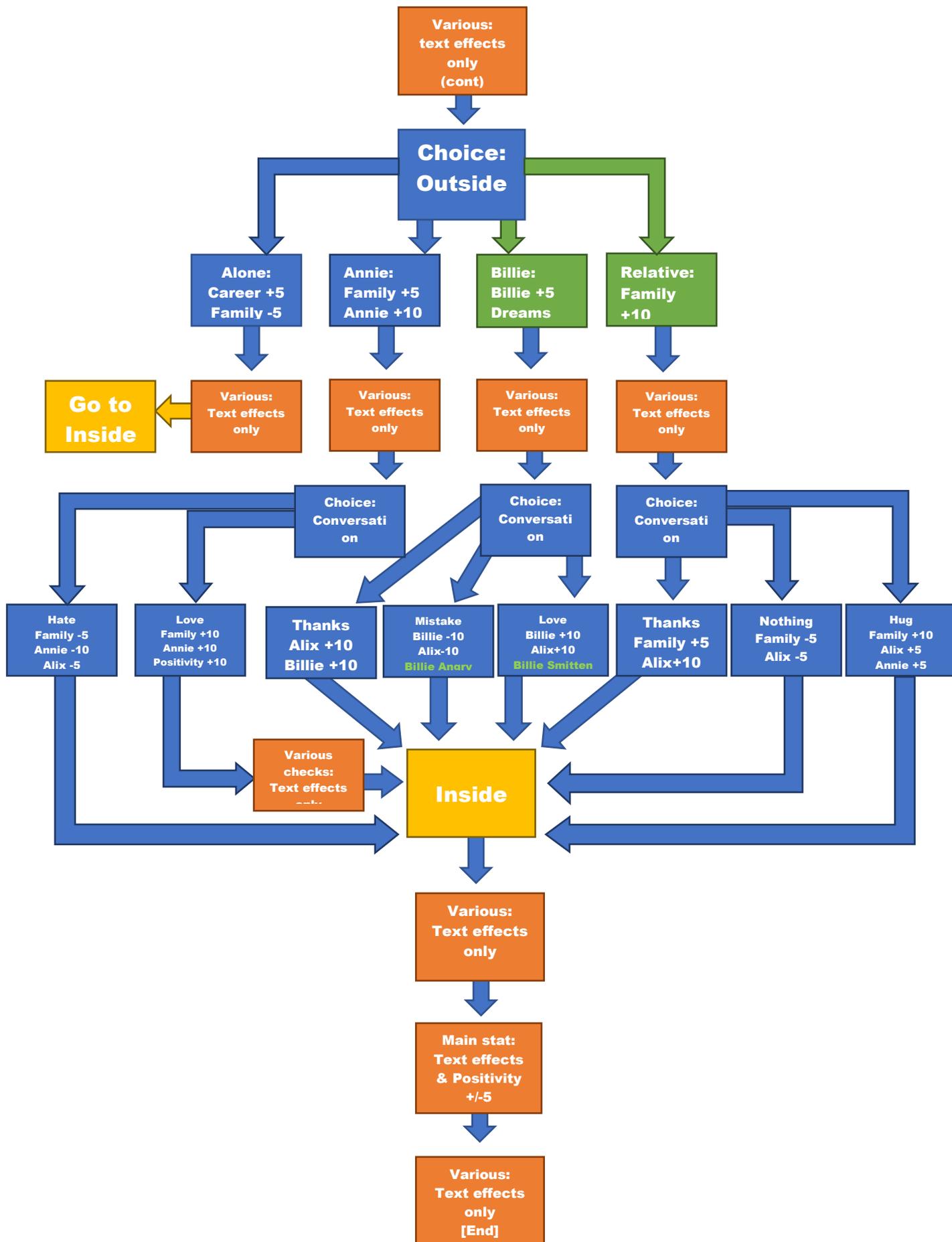
## Visit Pathway



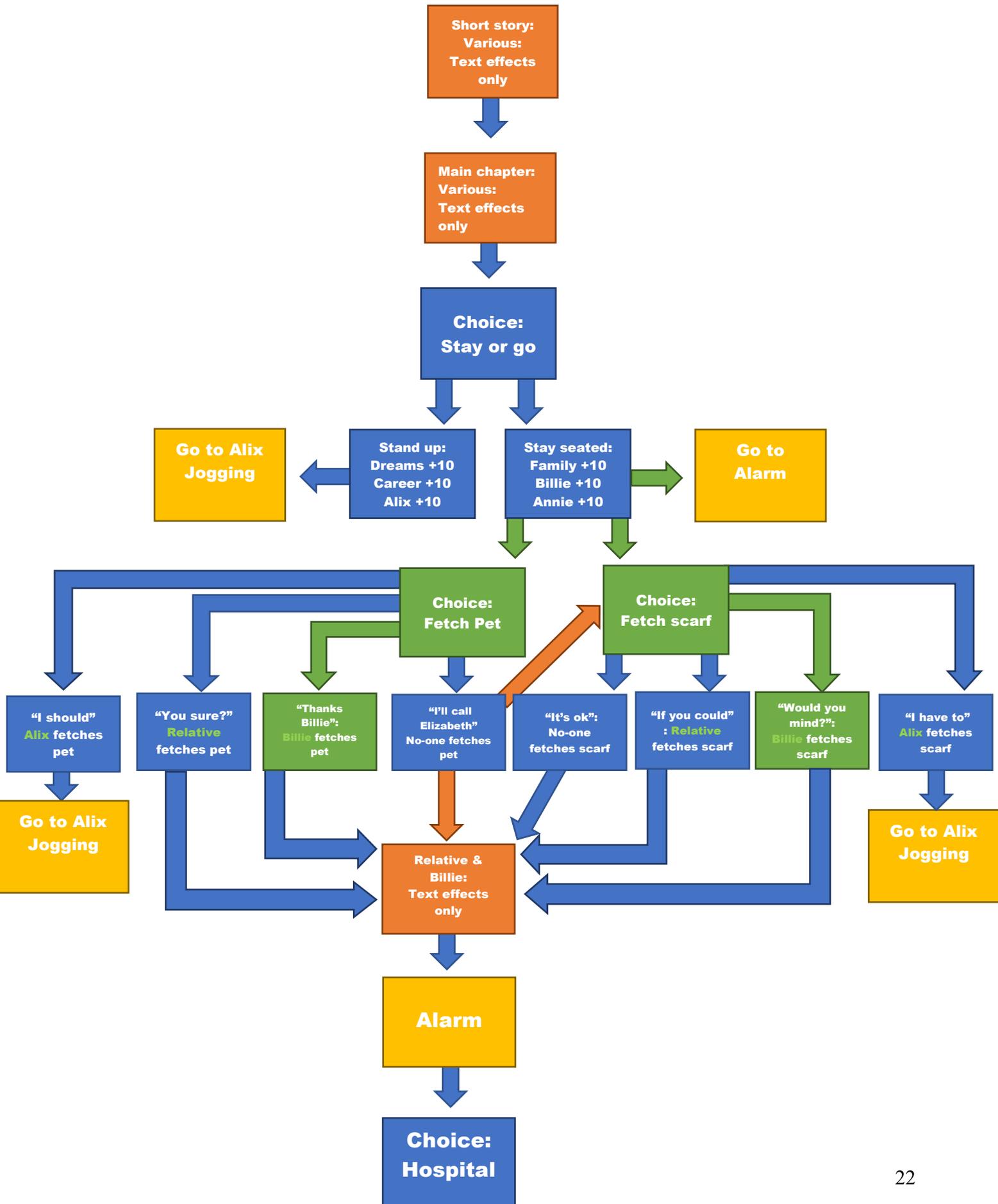


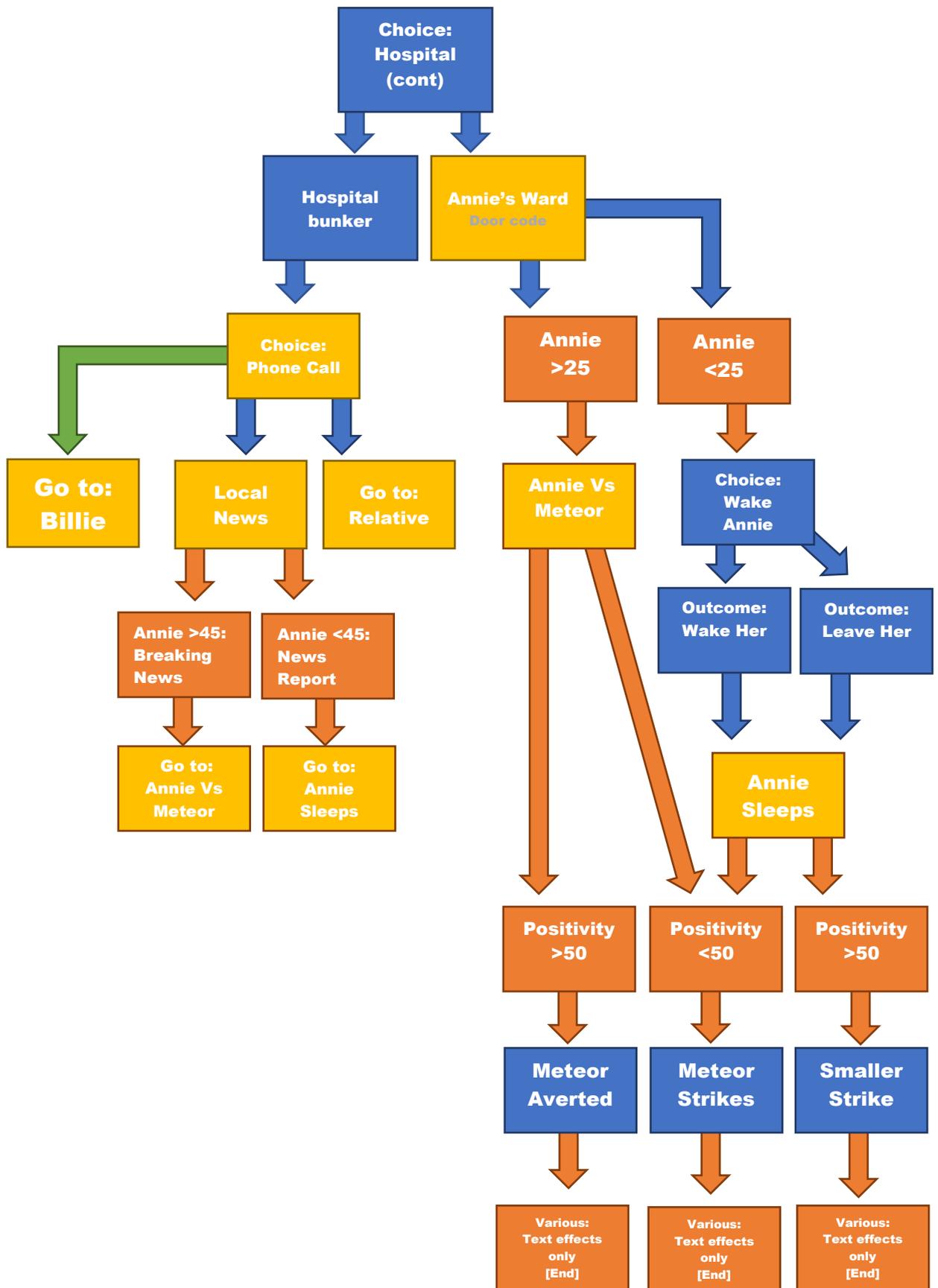
Chapter Four  
Hospital

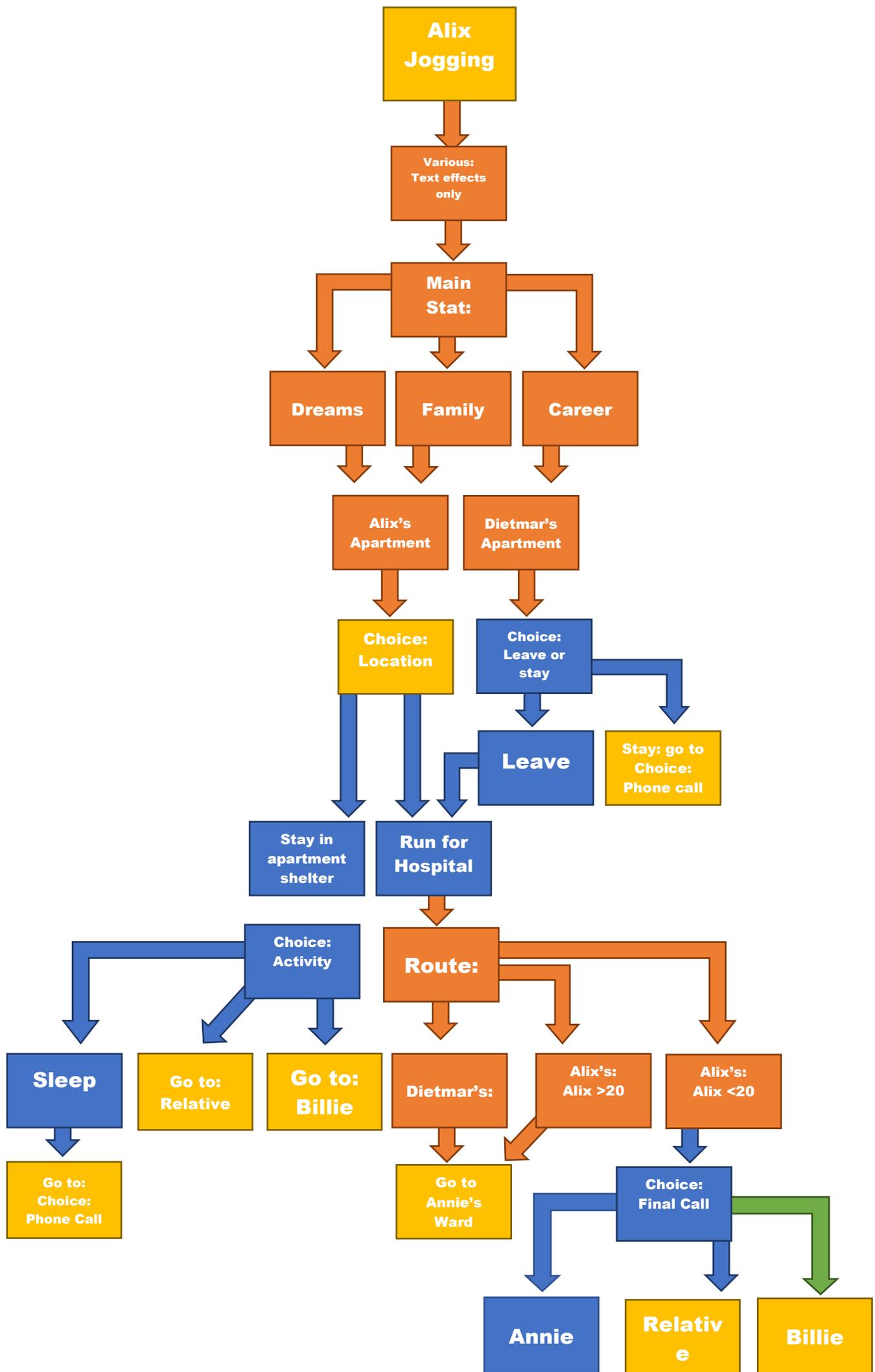


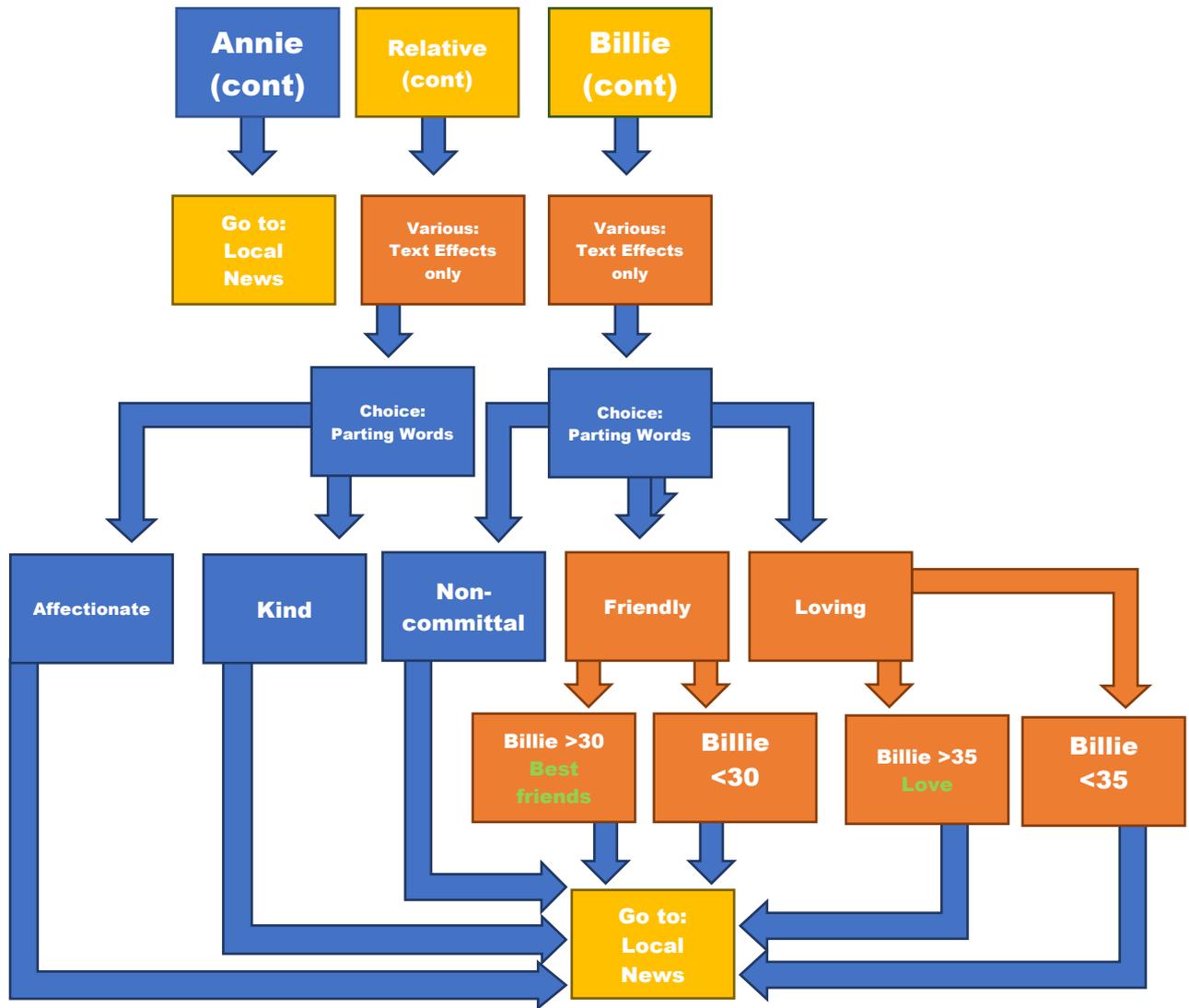


Chapter Five



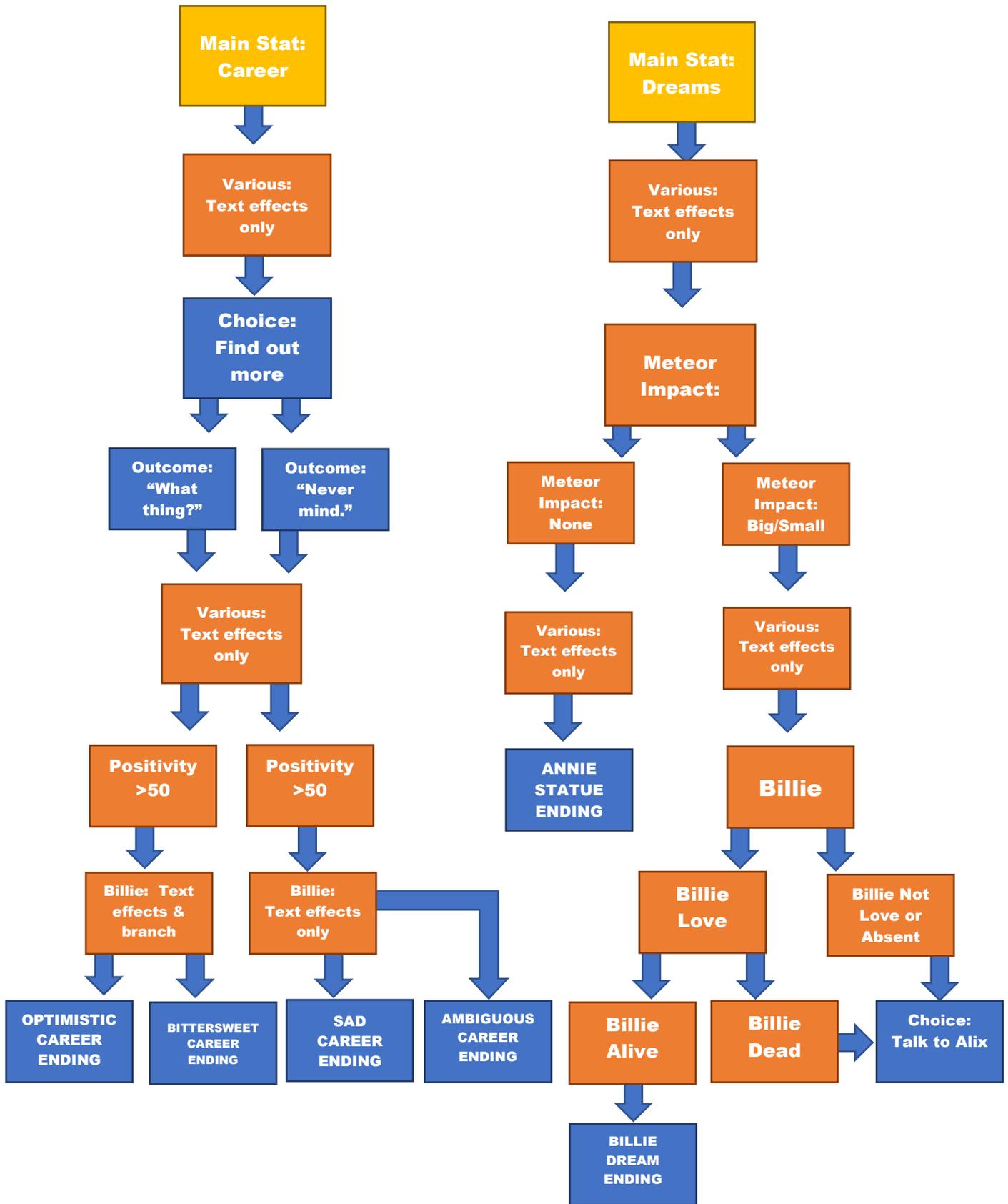


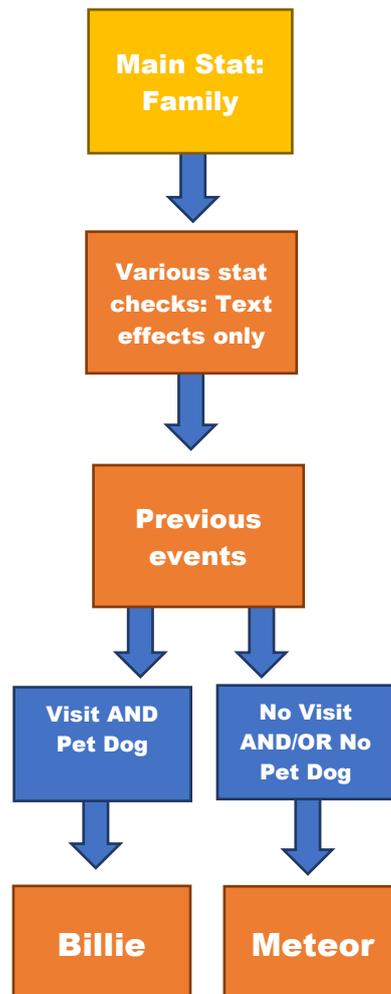
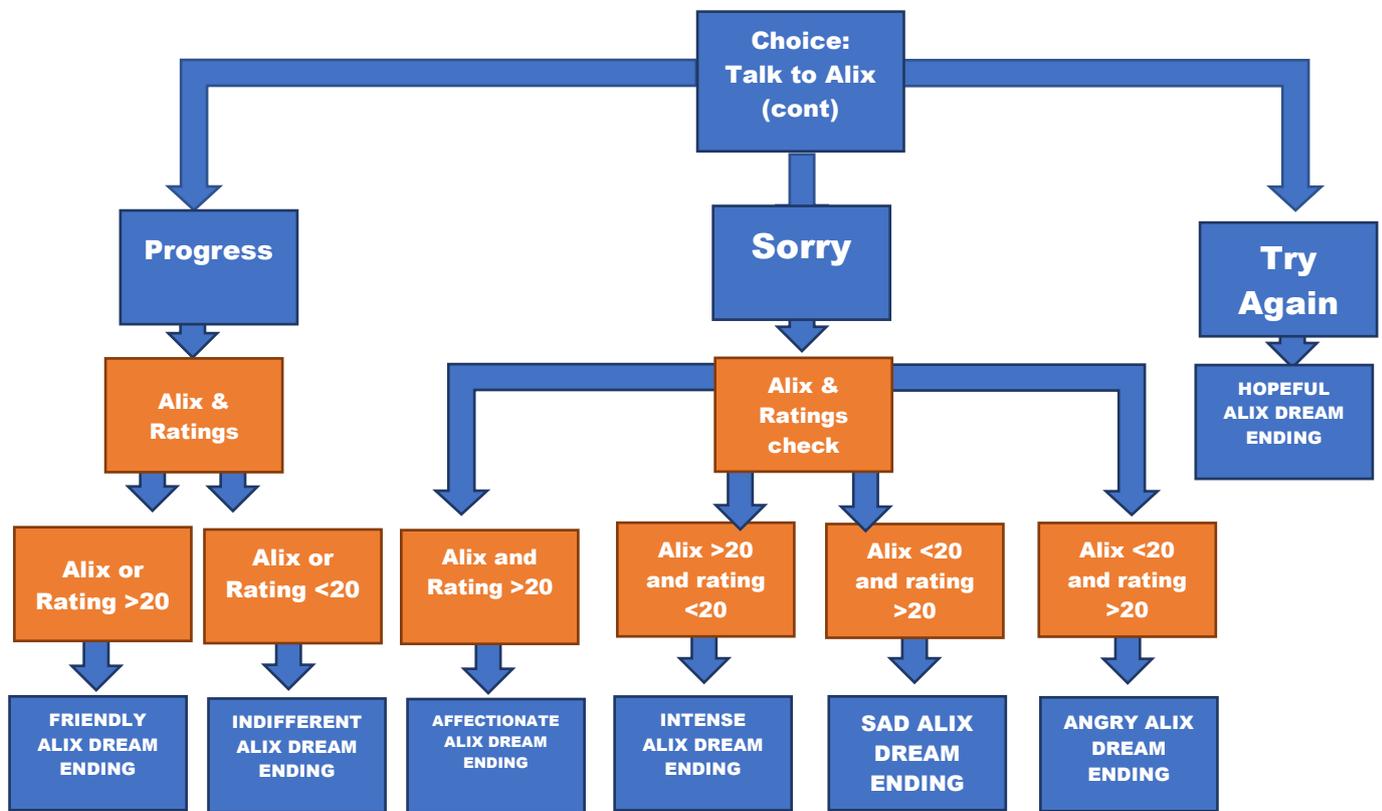


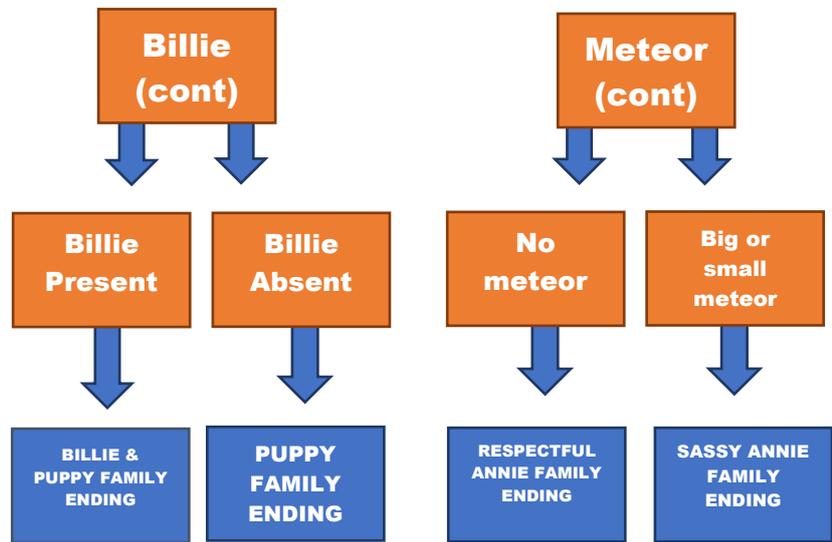


Epilogues

Main Stat







Appendix D – Offline Version of  
*Writers Are Not Strangers*

## Appendix D: Offline version of Writers Are Not Strangers

*Writers Are Not Strangers* is an interactive text intended to be enjoyed online. In the first instance, please head to: <https://dashingdon.com/play/lclark10000/writers-are-not-strangers-alpha/mygame/> to play. (Recommended browser: Firefox. Recommended device: laptop or desktop computer). If you wish to continue playing this offline version, please be aware that some sections have been shortened, re-ordered or simplified for clarity. Full text (including code) is available in Appendix E, while a visual overview is available in Appendix C.

Please use the STATUS SHEET overleaf to record important information. Starting statistics are given for some variables, but you will need a pen or pencil to adjust the statistics and record other information as you progress. You will need to refer to your statistics sheet frequently, therefore, making a copy is advisable.

Some words and phrases are in pale grey. In these instances, choose the appropriate option from those listed using the <sup>superscript</sup> guidelines and write the appropriate option in over the pale grey text. Some words and phrases are in different colours, read only black and pale grey text unless you have been specifically instructed to read other colours.

Instructions in pale grey text override instructions in black text. Instructions in coloured text override instructions in pale grey or black text. You may wish to use the page footers to note which colours you are currently reading. Do not read sections consecutively unless instructed to do so – turn to the appropriate section as directed by the text. You will also need two dice as there are some occasions where dice rolls are required. A dice app may be used in place of physical dice. Each time there is an indented list of options followed by ‘Go to x’ you may choose which section to go to.

## STATUS SHEET

Please note: All values may go into negative figures.

ALIX's STATISTICS:			
CAREER points: 5	DREAM points: 5	FAMILY points: 5	POSITIVITY points:5
ALIX points: 5 Storm: <input type="checkbox"/> Lights: <input type="checkbox"/> Escaped: <input type="checkbox"/> Lost job: <input type="checkbox"/> Award win: <input type="checkbox"/> Survival kit: <input type="checkbox"/>	RATINGS: Rating 1: /10 Rating 2: /10 Rating 3: /10 Rating 4: /10	LOCATIONS VISITED: Expo: <input type="checkbox"/> Home: <input type="checkbox"/> Hospital: <input type="checkbox"/> Party: <input type="checkbox"/> Park: <input type="checkbox"/> Awards: <input type="checkbox"/> Relative's House: <input type="checkbox"/> Mall: <input type="checkbox"/> Dietmar's: <input type="checkbox"/>	PROJECT: Short Story: _____ Video: _____ Scarf: _____
OTHER CHARACTER'S STATISTICS			
PET: NAME: _____ SEX: Male: <input type="checkbox"/> Female: <input type="checkbox"/> TYPE: Bird: <input type="checkbox"/> Cat: <input type="checkbox"/> Dog: <input type="checkbox"/> Fish: <input type="checkbox"/> Lizard: <input type="checkbox"/> Rabbit: <input type="checkbox"/> FAVOURITE TREAT: _____ DEAD: <input type="checkbox"/> MESSY: <input type="checkbox"/> WARD: <input type="checkbox"/>		BILLIE: 5 PRESENT: <input type="checkbox"/> MOOD: Angry: <input type="checkbox"/> Best Friend: <input type="checkbox"/> Happy: <input type="checkbox"/> Love: <input type="checkbox"/> Not Love: <input type="checkbox"/> Smitten: <input type="checkbox"/> ACTIVITIES: Coffee: <input type="checkbox"/> Walk: <input type="checkbox"/> Drinks: <input type="checkbox"/> STATUS: Dead: <input type="checkbox"/> Gone: <input type="checkbox"/> Waiting: <input type="checkbox"/>	
ANNIE: 5  Scarf: <input type="checkbox"/> Scarf Fetcher: _____ Joker: <input type="checkbox"/> Blaze of Glory: <input type="checkbox"/>			
RELATIVE: Aunt Maude: <input type="checkbox"/> Uncle Simon: <input type="checkbox"/>  Dead: <input type="checkbox"/> Advice Received: <input type="checkbox"/> Secret Discovered: <input type="checkbox"/>		METEOR IMPACT: Big: <input type="checkbox"/> Small: <input type="checkbox"/> None: <input type="checkbox"/> OTHER: Jodie - Toilet: <input type="checkbox"/> Pet Rescuer: Jodie - Dead: <input type="checkbox"/> _____ Jodie - Saved: <input type="checkbox"/> Shelter: Rock Received: <input type="checkbox"/> _____ Story Read: <input type="checkbox"/>	

## 1

*Welcome to wiff.net, the Writers' Independent Fiction Forum.*

*The following extract was submitted by **Lixxil**. We thank you for taking the time to read it.*

Roll two dice now. Turn to the appropriate section according to the result of the dice roll:

**2:** Go to **2**

**3:** Go to **3**

**4:** Go to **4**

**5:** Go to **5**

**6:** Go to **6**

**7:** Go to **7**

**8:** Go to **8**

**9:** Go to **9**

**10:** Go to **10**

**11 or 12:** Go to **11**

## 2

As Ogilvie Maurice awoke one morning from overcast dreams, he found he'd transformed in his bed into a monstrous hedgehog. He was lying on his spiked, as it were spiny, back and when he lifted his head a little he could see his smooth, pale cream belly which the bed quilt had partially slid off. His legs were pitifully thin compared to his upper body, and he wore bright red running shoes he had no recollection of purchasing.

What has happened to me? he thought. Unsure whether it was a dream, he considered tucking his nose into his belly, sleeping a little longer and forgetting this nonsensical situation, but found it could not be done. His quills were stuck fast in his mattress and however violently he attempted to roll into a more comfortable sleeping position, he remained impaled in place. He tried over and over, clenching his teeth in frustration, convinced such a move must be possible and eventually his efforts were rewarded. His body rolled in on itself in a way he had never experienced before and he thought he heard a high-pitched whirring as somehow he built up an incredible momentum, spun out of his bed, out of the bedroom door and down the stairs at high speed.

Go to **12**

## 3

It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they disintegrated the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in the city. I'm stupid about invasions. The idea of being disintegrated makes me sick, and that's all there was to read about in the papers. It had nothing to do with me at that point, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves.

I thought it must be the worst thing in the world.

Perhaps that is why I became so committed to quelling the invasion. My involvement was cursory at first. I would make suggestions to Buddy, a young fighter pilot tasked with pushing back the waves that hovered ominously above the city like swarms of

misshapen flies, about strategies he might consider employing. My proposal to attack the mystery ship that swooped above their ranks, seemingly unconnected to their murderous endeavours, resulted in a huge and unexpected tactical advantage, which in turn led to the military taking me on as a civilian advisor. I still rarely piloted the fighter jets myself, but devised the now universally-recognised tactic of blasting a small hole in the roofs of the stationary defence bunkers that they may afford cunning pilots with both shelter and an opportunity for attack.

Go to **12**

#### 4

Antennae protruded from the top of the fleshy balloon of a head. Behind followed similarly bulbous segmentations, each one making a satisfying stomping sound as the stick-like legs made contact with what was presumably the ground, although the surrounding blackness made that difficult to determine. The centipede's small supercilious bright eyes looked out through the field of mushrooms at the prospective hunter, studying them for any signs of discernible strategy. Several of their shots, the centipede noticed, were wild enough and misplaced enough to be considered offences against aim and technique. Plugging shots randomly into surrounding mushrooms only reflected a person's lack of tactics and geometry; it could even cast doubts upon one's soul.

The centipede moved lazily from one mushroom to the next, slivers of the fungus still caught in his mandibles, idly watching as the hunter strafed uselessly at passing fleas and scorpions, apparently oblivious to his own encroachment. It looked as if today he wouldn't even need to rely on his ability to deputise to a secondary head.

Go to **12**

#### 5

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a wealthy globetrotting archaeologist must be in want of a husband.

"But my dear," said her father to her one morning, "you must be aware that the Earl has now been waiting for a considerable period. It is most unseemly."

Engaged as she was in securing a selection of short knives in her hiking socks, she had neither the will nor the inclination to give this statement the contempt it truly deserved.

"Father," returned she, lowering her foot from the chaise longue. "You know as well as the Earl does that I have an important expedition scheduled in C\_\_\_\_\_ and I leave on the hour. T\_P\_\_\_\_ may crumble to dust if I don't get to exploring it post-haste, the Earl, however, will not." Unfortunately, she thought, but did not say.

"I wish you would not persist in squandering our fortune for foreign trinkets you dig out of dirty holes."

"Those 'dirty holes' contain sights you would not believe."

"Quite right. I would not believe in yetis and dinosaurs and the reanimated remains of mummified cats."

She turned on her heel and left the drawing room. At times, she detested her father and dreamed of an arrangement whereby she could have access to his money without having to endure his endless wittering.

Go to **12**

#### 6

She had the kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by a spinning bird kick. Her upper arm musculature was so finely formed that she could not wear sleeves; and though small in stature, gained the more dignity from her ferocious fighting style, which

by the side of provincial fighters gave her the impressiveness of an ancient kempo expert, - or one of the day's leading wushu practitioners, - demonstrating the power of a hundred rending legs. She was usually spoken of as being remarkably clever, but with the addition that she could punch through the engine block of a Ford Cortina.

She had long feared that street fighting and law enforcement could not be brought into accordance with one another. Her attempts to balance a career built around pursuing the criminal gangs involved in her father's demise with pummelling a misshapen Brazilian for the pleasure of a bunch of chicken-choking shop-workers had proved exhausting. She worried she could not reconcile the anxieties of a righteous life involving legal consequences, with a keen interest in combat and violent demonstrations of supremacy. Perhaps some day she could retire to a normal life and a normal occupation, teaching young children martial arts - or a desk job, shuffling papers while the rookies attend to crime syndicates and narcotics dealers - something safe and sedentary. In her heart, she knew that if this happened at all, it would not happen for many, many years.

Go to **12**

## 7

It was the day the city exploded. I sat in the church nursing my aching head and I reflected that it always seemed to be recovering from terrible injuries that put me back on the right path. The flower girl was there again, kneeling beside me, plucking large, fragrant blooms from the flowerbed that broke my fall. She didn't seem too concerned about the fact I just crashed through the roof of her church, or that I should probably be suffering from more than mild concussion, or even that I fell at the exact moment there was an enormous, city-shattering explosion on the plate overhead. In fact, she seemed more interested in showing me some trinket her mum gave her and securing my services as a bodyguard.

As she lay dying in my arms a week later... or was it five years ago... were they my arms at all?... I remembered that time in the church, those heavy white and pink blooms she loved so much, the way the sunlight fell through the broken stained glass windows to illuminate the flower beds she tended so lovingly. It was the flowers she loved most of all, I remembered, as I gave her to the water and returned to my friends.

Go to **12**

## 8

This is the baddest-assest story you have ever heard. We had known the demons of Mars for fourteen cycles with a detached intimacy--or, rather with an acquaintanceship as distant and cautious and yet as potentially desirous as with a grenade. My chaingun and I knew spectres and cacodemons as well as it was possible to know any enemy, and yet, in another sense, we knew nothing at all about them. Six months ago I had never been to Phobos, and, certainly, I had never sounded the depths of a Hell dimension. I had known only the shallows.

I don't mean to say that we were not acquainted with many hellspawn. Living, as we perforce lived, in a Martian military base, and being, as we perforce were, hardened marines, or at least, I was, (it is hard to say how far a chaingun may be considered a member of the marine corps, even if he is the only other remaining 'soldier'), we were thrown very much into the path of the lesser hellspawn. Mars, you see, was our home, or the only home remaining to us following the betrayal of our fellow marines and destruction of all communications arrays. Thank goodness for chaingun. Chaingun I could trust. Go to **12**

9

I am an essential man. No, I am not throw-away fodder like those who cross the battlefield, answering the call of duty; nor am I one of those ethereal, formless, androgynous avatars, a blank slate for you to draw on as you please, even if it pleases you to draw a woman. I am a man of substance, of manliness and machismo, testosterone and y-chromosomes--and I might even be said to possess a beard. I am essential, understand, simply because people refuse to do without me. Like the mirrored mazes you see sometimes in seaside attractions, it is as though I have been surrounded by sheets of bright, reflective glass. When they approach me they see only my image, themselves, or figments of their imagination--indeed, everything and anything but women.

My story is the key, a huge, phallic, throbbing, three-pronged key that opens a door women may only scratch at with their manicured nails. I am irreplaceable, eternal, because without me, whole worlds would crumble. The mirrored funhouse would collapse in on itself, leaving only jagged shards of the patriarchy, and my reflected selves would make everyone bleed for the injustice of it. Enjoy my presence then, relish it, and together we will steal cars and run over women of the night and pretend that all of this is inescapable and right.

Go to **12**

10

It was the best of wars, it was the worst of wars, it was the age of intelligence, it was the age of massacre, it was the epoch of aborted missile strikes, it was the epoch of detonated nuclear warheads, it was the season of freedom fighters, it was the season of terrorists, it was the Arab spring, it was the nuclear winter, we had the use of a Sikorsky MH-53, we had nothing but our bare hands, we were all getting evaced to safety, we were all left to die in the field.

On your headset, some fifteen-year-old in a foreign country called you a 'noob whore bitch'; on your headset you told some fifty-year-old in your own country to 'go straight to Hell and then die'. In both countries it was clearer than crystal that online gamers in general were fucking shitheads. Hidden behind a screen, hefting a virtual gun, all national borders dissolved into a multicultural Babel-babble of profanity and abuse. Strange to relate, but it seems these exchanges come closer to Biblical notions of global unity than anything NATO or the UN could have conceived.

Go to **12**

11

All happy plumbing families are alike; each unhappy plumbing family is unhappy in its own way. Everything was in confusion in the plumbers' house. The younger brother had discovered that the older brother was carrying on with a princess, a real peach, by all accounts. This position of affairs was some step up from his previous girlfriend, Pauline, and the younger brother, still a bachelor, was painfully conscious of it. Even the term 'younger brother' seemed somewhat risible to him. He was younger by a mere two minutes and yet that two minutes may as well have been an eternity. Two minutes away from having his name grace the family business, two minutes away from being the one to fix a princess's piping and win her enduring affections. Little did he realise, though, that these two minutes were a blessing in disguise. For truly, he was two minutes away from a life spent chasing after a woman kidnapped with suspicious frequency, a woman who likely preferred the thrill of a commoner's attention to the

banal reality of settling down with a man who spent the majority of his life elbow-deep in u-bends.

Go to **12**

## 12

*Thank you for reading. Please now rate the piece on a scale of 1-10. (With 1 representing 'What the hell is going on?!' up to 10 'The finest creative work since time immemorial.')*

Write your RATING on your STATUS SHEET in 'Rating 1'

# THURSDAY

If your 'Rating 1' is 1-3, go to **61**; if it is 4-6, go to **33**; if it is 7 or higher, go to **13**

## 13

Tick 'Expo' in LOCATIONS VISITED on your STATUS SHEET

The air-conditioning blew blasts of icy air down the back of Alix's neck. It seemed a little overboard given the time of year, although the seasons had been erratic for some time now. The convention centre staff had obviously cranked it up even further to combat the rising heat emitted by the jostling throng of fans. Alix watched them with their Boxxpo caps and their Boxxpo t-shirts. Teams of merchandisers lay in wait at the convention centre entrance, hundreds of over-priced t-shirts sealed in plastic cases like insect eggs, numbers dwindling like their real world counterparts. They'd be a quarter of the price come the end of the day. She couldn't blame them though, those eager kids. She'd fallen for it too, back when the platform was MySoapBoxx and the expo was Soapex, and the t-shirt eggs were in their thousands.

MySoapBoxx and Soapex had become MyBoxx and Boxxpo. Essentially the same platform, but without the archaic name and the fan convention that sounded like a cleaning product. Most of the Boxxers from the Soap days now had proper jobs in global communication corporations, their glib wit and slick presentation skills applied to soothing the public's concerns. But some went the distance, their subscribers up into the multi-millions, and that was something, wasn't it? Being 'true' to their 'art'.

Jodie Tiddlywinks, FairyCake and DookiDonut. The make-up artist, the chef and the gamer. Their signatures were on her first Boxxpo program, now framed above her desk at home. She hadn't actually known who Fairy was, but had been too shy to say anything, accepting the cartoon smiley cupcake joyously anyway, because to be noticed was novel and wonderful.

Five years later and she was on the other side of the signing table. Jodie and Fairy and Dooki at her elbow, scrawling thousands of those same signatures that had once seemed like gold dust. It still felt weird. Calling them Jodie, Elizabeth and Dietmar felt weirder still. Five years and so many things had changed. For her, for the world.

Numbers had dropped of course, [if CAREER is <10] but their queues were still far longer than hers [if CAREER is 10≥] her queue was still the longest by far.

[if POSITIVITY is >10] Not that it mattered to her anyway. The important thing was the kind of people her videos attracted. Wonderful, warm, funny people who baked her cookies iced like meteors and made cross-stitch pictures of her channel logo. [CAREER +5]/[if POSITIVITY is ≤10] She hadn't really expected anything else. Her viewers were obsessive weirdos, nihilists who mistook her comedy and satire for a genuine desire to see the world end. Seeing any number of them together made her doubt her career choices. [CAREER -5]

Swallowing her nerves, Alix pasted a bright smile on her face. The first girl in line had a shock of bright green hair the exact same shade as Alix's logo, the same as the streaks running through Alix's own hair. The girl held out a piece of paper, flapping violently from her fearful juddering. A painstaking drawing of Alix, mouth open, hands spread wide. Alix supposed from the hard hat that it was drawn from a still of the Bunker Song video, so she grinned and wrote: "Let's hunker in that bunker!" and drew a smiley with a hard hat on the girl's program.

As the girl stammered her thanks, Alix wondered if she should maybe have asked her name, tried to personalise it more.

Sometimes the best thing to do was just keep your head down. Go to **14**

These people were her livelihood, after all. Go to **15**

Appreciation was always welcome. Go to **16**

**14**

Adjust your STATUS SHEET as follows:

DREAMS -5

CAREER - 5

POSITIVITY - 5

Go to **17**

**15**

Adjust your STATUS SHEET as follows:

CAREER +10

Go to **17**

**16**

Adjust your STATUS SHEET as follows:

CAREER +5

POSITIVITY +5

DREAMS +5

Go to **17**

**17**

As it turned out, she didn't need to ask the name of the next person waiting to see her.

"Billie!" she stood, wanting to throw her arms around her friend, but ending up just patting her awkwardly. "Why the hell did you queue?!"

[if POSITIVITY > 15] "I didn't want to be the jerk who cuts the line claiming to know the star.

And I wanted to surprise you."/[if POSITIVITY < 15 AND CAREER >15] "You're kind of a big deal. I wasn't sure you'd even remember me."/[OTHERWISE] Billie shrugged.

Alix felt her cheeks colouring. She felt like there was an accusation in there somewhere, but maybe that was just paranoia. These weren't the circumstances she'd imagined for

their first meeting in the flesh. Billie was as smiley and friendly as she always looked during their video chats. She was a little shorter than Alix had imagined and her hair was wilder. Alix guessed some of the stray frizz was usually masked by the screen's lack of graphical fidelity.

She glanced around Billie to the queue behind, where the waiting fans shuffled their feet and rustled their Boxxpo goodie bags. She couldn't just leave them waiting there while she caught up with Billie. She wasn't sure what to say.

"Pull up a chair, Billie." Go to **18**

"We should meet for a coffee sometime soon." Go to **19**

"Sorry, I have to get back to this." Go to **20**

### **18**

Billie didn't need asking twice. Beaming, she threw her rucksack under the signing table and grabbed a spare folding chair from the hands of a nearby steward.

"I'll be your pen caddy."

She took a pack of coloured gel pens out of her pocket and flipped it open. Alix laughed.

"You came all the way here to sit handing me pens?"

"What do you think?"

"I think I'd better get signing!"

BILLIE +10

POSITIVITY +10

Tick the PRESENT box in the BILLIE section of your STATUS SHEET. From now on, read **green** text in addition to any other colours you may have been instructed to read.

Go to **21**

### **19**

Billie smiled.

"Sure, that'd be great, I know just the place. I'll call you later."

Alix nodded, smiling sheepishly as she took the proffered notebook from a guy with braces and a hard hat.

These were her fans.

Sixty signatures later...

BILLIE +5

CAREER +5

Tick the COFFEE box in the BILLIE section of your STATUS SHEET. From now on, read **red** text in addition to any other colours you may have been instructed to read.

Go to **21**

### **20**

Alix focussed on the notebook shoved under her nose by a guy with braces and a hard hat. She preferred not to see Billie's expression. Would it be sadness, or relief? Sure, Billie was a friend, but an online friend. Maybe things were different in the flesh. Maybe Alix was a disappointment. Again.

Sixty signatures later...

BILLIE -5

ALIX -5

Go to **21**

## 21

The queues had all died down and security were encouraging the last few hangers on to find another place to be. Alix leaned back in her chair and looked around the convention centre. Soon their chairs and tables would be cleared and the stage would be erected for tomorrow's closing event, the Boxxpo Awards. Last year she'd won Best Newcomer. She wondered if they'd be awarding Best Newcomer this year. It hardly seemed to matter now, if the scientists were right. Not that most people believed that. It seemed like huge swathes of the world were in denial about what was happening. At first Alix admired that optimism, shared it. Now she wondered if the tabloids were right - they were naive and foolish and wasting time when they could be making preparations.

"Can you believe these kids?!" Dietmar asked loudly, intruding on her thoughts. "I can't. I can't believe them. I thought no-one would come this year. They're, like, so inspirational, y'know?"

"No more inspirational than us!" said Jodie. "We're here too aren't we?"

"I know, but," Dietmar shrugged. "We're getting paid, I guess."

"For all the difference that makes." Elizabeth shook her head and her cupcake deely-boppers bounced around until she took them off in annoyance. "What good is money now, really, to anyone?"

Dietmar looked down at his hands.

Billie had carefully arranged all the gel pens into the order of the rainbow. She seemed less sure of herself here than on Alix's vid screen. Alix supposed she'd have to be the one to say something.

Alix made up her mind and spoke up.

"What if this isn't the end? They've been wrong about things before..." Go to **22**

"Dietmar's right. People coming together like this should be celebrated, now more than ever." Go to **23**

"Sorry Dietmar, the reality is, we're all just wasting our time with this." Go to **24**

"Well, aren't you a bunch of Debbie Downers?" Go to **25**

## 22

Make the following adjustments to your STATUS SHEET:

POSITIVITY +10

DREAMS +5

Go to **26**

## 23

Make the following adjustments to your STATUS SHEET:

POSITIVITY +15

FAMILY +5

CAREER +10

Go to **26**

## 24

Make the following adjustments to your STATUS SHEET:

POSITIVITY -10

DREAMS -10

CAREER -10

Go to **27**

## 25

Make the following adjustments to your STATUS SHEET:

BILLIE +5

Go to **26**

## 26

Dietmar, looking faintly surprised, sat up straighter in his chair.

"Exactly! Alix gets it."

Jodie rolled her eyes. "Didn't have you down as a dreamer, Alix," she said. "Thought you were into, y'know, reality."

Alix shuffled uncomfortably in her seat. She couldn't tell them that secretly, madly, she still thought her dad might save them all. Swooping in wearing his Protectorate uniform, giving them an ironic salute, telling them it would all be okay, he was here now, he'd handle everything.

"Are you ok?" Billie touched her arm, bringing her out of her reverie.

Alix shook her head. "Sorry. Can't help being hopeful."

"There is no hope," Elizabeth said gravely. "Fairy cake?" She thrust a tray under Alix's nose. It had mostly been picked clean by her fans, eager to sample that famous baking. There was one cake left, the icing of its smiley mouth a little smooshed, so it looked uncertain. Alix smiled and reached for it. As she did so, the bright numerals of her tracker glowed at her from her wrist.

"Shit look at the time. We should go."

"Is it something bad?" Billie looked worried.

"Not really," said Alix, already feeling guilty for what was sure to be a thankless trip across town for Billie. She'd planned on doing this alone...

They could talk on the way, at least.

Go to **28**

"Shit. It's later than I thought."

Time to go...

Go to **28**

**27**

Dietmar sank down in his seat. Alix almost wished she could take it back, but there were more important things she'd take back first if she had the power. Instead she rose, brushing crumbs from Elizabeth's fairy cakes onto the floor.

"I should be going."

"Can I come with?" asked Billie. Oblivious,

Alix stared round at the blank, hopeless faces of her fellow Boxxers. A lone cleaner pushed a single discarded program across the floor with a mop. This would probably be the last expo. It could even be the last time they were all together. Alix couldn't stand long goodbyes.

"Sure," said Alix. Then, to the others:

"Later."

A lie.

Go to **28**

**28**

Wait...

You may ask any one of the following provided the necessary criteria are met:

If the PRESENT box is NOT ticked in the BILLIE section of your STATUS SHEET:

‘What did all that have to do with the writing I rated?’ Go to **29**

If the ‘Hospital’ box is NOT ticked in the LOCATIONS VISITED section of your STATUS SHEET:

‘If Alix has a hi-tech tracker, how come she's always late?’ Go to **30**

If the ‘Party’ box is NOT ticked in the LOCATIONS VISITED section of your STATUS SHEET:

‘Where's Alix rushing off to?’ Go to **31**

If the Hospital and Party boxes in the LOCATIONS VISITED section of your STATUS SHEET are BOTH ticked:

‘Where's Alix dragging Billie off to?’ Go to **32**

**29**

Make the following adjustment to your STATUS SHEET:

ALIX -5

Go to **114**

**30**

Make the following adjustment to your STATUS SHEET:

ALIX +5

Go to **61**

**31**

Make the following adjustment to your STATUS SHEET:

ALIX +5  
Go to **33**

### 32

Make the following adjustment to your STATUS SHEET:

ALIX +5  
BILLIE +5  
Go to **113**

### 33

Tick 'Party' in LOCATIONS VISITED on your STATUS SHEET

Everything was awful. The food was something from another era. Misshapen foil-wrapped lumps sprouted little wooden spines, each cocktail stick skewer bedecked with lumps of hard cheese, chunks of soggy pineapple and greasy olives. The music veered between sentimental nostalgic caterwauling and cliched 'uplifting' power ballads. Her relatives were the ones who organised this, who wanted it, and yet they seemed just as dispirited about the whole thing as she was.

Worst of all was the enormous hole in proceedings left by her parents, a gaping portal of nothing everyone viewed her through. She could tell by their expressions they found her lacking.

Tick 'Coffee' in the BILLIE section of your STATUS SHEET. From now on, read red text AS WELL AS green.

Alix wished she'd been able to bring Billie along, that they'd been able to spend more time together, but she wasn't about to subject her to this, not yet. She'd told Billie more than most about her family, and everything else was common knowledge, but knowing it and seeing it, or rather, its aftermath, were two different things. Instead they'd parted at Billie's hotel with promises of coffee and cake tomorrow, once Alix had performed her familial duties.

Uncle Simon sidled over. He wasn't a real uncle, just someone Annie and Dad knew from the military. He'd been discharged early and Alix always suspected he'd done terrible things, no matter how much Dad assured her it was just PTSD. His hair was slicked into a severe side parting, exposing a thin line of shiny red scalp, like the blood channel in a sacrificial altar.

"Good to have everyone together again, eh?" he asked, rocking back on his heels. Alix made a non-committal noise, hoping he'd go away.

[IF CAREER > 10] "How are your little videos going? Still doing those?"/[OTHERWISE] "What are you doing these days? For work?"

Always the implication that her videos weren't proper work. That they were something small and inconsequential.

"Still making videos that might change the world someday." Go to **34**  
"Just small, inconsequential videos that are essentially futile." Go to **35**  
"Oh, y'know, kind of... but really I'm a writer." Go to **36**

### 34

Make the following adjustments to your STATUS SHEET:

CAREER +10

POSITIVITY +10

Go to **37**

### 35

Make the following adjustments to your STATUS SHEET:

POSITIVITY -5

FAMILY -5

Go to **37**

### 36

Make the following adjustments to your STATUS SHEET:

POSITIVITY +5

CAREER -5

DREAMS +10

Go to **37**

### 37

Simon smiled indulgently, but it didn't really matter what Alix said to him. People who thought every day might be their last weren't as liberated as motivational posters might have you believe. Everyone, or everyone in Alix's family, at least, walked constantly on egg shells, fearful their last words might be ones of anger or unkindness. No-one wanted to part on bad terms. Perhaps that was why no-one visited Annie any more.

Besides, Alix already knew what everyone here thought of her career choices. Ad revenue wasn't wages in her family's eyes. Two million views were just two million wasters who should be doing something more productive with their final days. Like organising endless family parties to have conversations about nothing so no-one missed out when the day came. FOMO times a million.

As if to prove her point, Simon made his excuses and slipped away to peruse the buffet table, not that there was anything unmissable on there.

Alix leaned back against a wall and wished fervently for the power of camouflage, or invisibility, or even incendiary vision so she could ignite Aunt Serita's pot plant and set the hazard foam dispensers off. She revelled for a moment in the idea of everyone running around with the protective, but foul-smelling foam thickly coating their hair and eyes, bumping into doorways, wondering if this is it, if this is the day. She could make a decent video out of that. Dietmar's building had a foam dispenser, she was sure of it, and he was so rich they'd let him set it off if he wanted to, emergency or not. She dug into the pocket of her jeans for her stylus and made a quick airnote.

Alix pocketed the stylus again and stepped away from the wall. Had she endured this long enough? Could she slip away? She had other places to be, other people to eke out time with. And last she'd seen, Aunt Serita was heading up to the attic to look for the karaoke mics, because that 'Might be fun.' Uncle Simon was on his way back, eyes fixed on her, so she couldn't even slip out unseen.

'Singing in front of people. Yikes.' Go to **38**

'It actually might be fun. Maybe.' Go to **39**

'There must be some appropriate excuse...' Go to **40**

### 38

Make the following adjustments to your STATUS SHEET:

FAMILY -5

POSITIVITY -5

Go to **41**

### 39

Make the following adjustments to your STATUS SHEET:

POSITIVITY +10

Go to **42**

### 40

Make the following adjustments to your STATUS SHEET:

DREAMS +5

POSITIVITY +5

In the RELATIVE section, tick the 'Uncle Simon' box. From now on, write in 'Uncle Simon' wherever Maude/Simon appears in the text. Write 'his' over his/her in sections relating to Alix's relative.

Go to **45**

### 41

Worse still, Simon was on his way back, a fistful of olives dripping oil onto the carpet. He was casting around for someone to bore with his reminiscences of the sky when it was colours other than green, and Alix didn't want to be that someone. Simon didn't have the monopoly on midday blue, or twilight mauve, or sunset orange. Alix remembered those too, sitting under grandma's kitchen table and looking out the patio doors, staring up at the heavens, waiting for Annie and Dad to come home.

That nailed it. She'd served her time. Before Simon could reach her, she was out of the door of Aunt Serita's apartment, striding down the hallway, looking to all intents and purposes like she was going somewhere.

Freedom!

Go to **57**

### 42

Fun wasn't really the word. Watching Simon scream the chorus to a falsetto power ballad with a mouthful of half-chewed cheese lumps was stomach-churning, but joining the whole family in a rousing rendition of a rock classic, well, that was cathartic if nothing else.

As they reached the closing lines, Aunt Maude leaned hard on Alix's shoulder, and Alix was surprised by the density of that little bird-body. Glancing at her Aunt, Alix wondered if Maude ever thought of her brother, ever regretted not joining him in the program, or perhaps dissuading him from joining. Alix wondered if Maude resented Annie. Without Annie, he might never have joined up.

Maybe that was why they gave Alix sidelong glances at these gatherings, not because of her own failings, but because of Annie's. Maybe subconsciously Alix dressed the way she did in an attempt to deny their shared DNA. And there was always a question mark over Alix's DNA anyway, thanks to the program.

The final notes died in the speaker and Alix was left gripping her Aunt's slight waist with both arms. Maude looked surprised and then pleased. She stroked Alix's arm.

"There, there, petal," she said.

Alix's tracker beeped.

"I should go." Go to **43**

If the 'hospital' box in the LOCATIONS VISITED section of your STATUS SHEET has NOT been ticked, you may also choose:

"I have to visit Ann- ...Mother." Go to **44**

### **43**

In the RELATIVE section of your STATUS SHEET, tick the 'Aunt Maude' box. From now on, write 'Maude' wherever Maude/Simon appears in the text. Write 'her' wherever his/her appears in sections relating to Alix's relative.

Go to **45**

### **44**

Make the following adjustments to your STATUS SHEET:

FAMILY +10

Go to **56**

### **45**

"So," Alix rubbed the back of her neck, trying to act casual. "My...

"...cat..." go to **46**

"...dog..." go to **47**

"...rabbit..." go to **48**

"...fish..." go to **49**

"..."lizard..." go to **50**

"...bird..." go to **51**

### **46**

In the PET section of your STATUS SHEET, tick the 'Cat' pet type box. You should now write in 'cat' wherever pet appears within the text. Fill in a name for your pet. This should now be used wherever petname appears within the text. Choose a sex for your pet. This should now be used whenever it says 'he/she' 'his/hers' etc in passages associated with your pet. Choose a treat your pet likes. This should now be used whenever pettreat appears within the text. Go to **52**

### **47**

In the PET section of your STATUS SHEET, tick the 'Dog' pet type box. You should now write in 'dog' wherever pet appears within the text. Fill in a name for your pet. This should now be used wherever petname appears within the text. Choose a sex for your pet. This should now be used whenever it says 'he/she' 'his/hers' etc in passages associated with your pet. Choose a treat your pet likes. This should now be used whenever pettreat appears within the text.

Go to **52**

### **48**

In the PET section of your STATUS SHEET, tick the 'Rabbit' pet type box. You should now write in 'rabbit' wherever pet appears within the text. Fill in a name for your pet. This should now be used wherever petname appears within the text. Choose a sex for

your pet. This should now be used whenever it says 'he/she' 'his/hers' etc in passages associated with your pet. Choose a treat your pet likes. This should now be used whenever **pettreat** appears within the text.

Go to **52**

#### 49

In the PET section of your STATUS SHEET, tick the 'Fish' pet type box. You should now write in 'fish' wherever **pet** appears within the text. Fill in a name for your pet. This should now be used wherever **petname** appears within the text. Choose a sex for your pet. This should now be used whenever it says 'he/she' 'his/hers' etc in passages associated with your pet. Choose a treat your pet likes. This should now be used whenever **pettreat** appears within the text.

Go to **52**

#### 50

In the PET section of your STATUS SHEET, tick the 'Lizard' pet type box. You should now write in 'lizard' wherever **pet** appears within the text. Fill in a name for your pet. This should now be used wherever **petname** appears within the text. Choose a sex for your pet. This should now be used whenever it says 'he/she' 'his/hers' etc in passages associated with your pet. Choose a treat your pet likes. This should now be used whenever **pettreat** appears within the text.

Go to **52**

#### 51

In the PET section of your STATUS SHEET, tick the 'Bird' pet type box. You should now write in 'bird' wherever **pet** appears within the text. Fill in a name for your pet. This should now be used wherever **petname** appears within the text. Choose a sex for your pet. This should now be used whenever it says 'he/she' 'his/hers' etc in passages associated with your pet. Choose a treat your pet likes. This should now be used whenever **pettreat** appears within the text.

Go to **52**

#### 52

"...I should really get home to... **him/her**."

If no box is ticked in the RELATIVE section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Aunt Maude' now. From now on, write in 'Aunt Maude' wherever **Maude/Simon** appears in the text. Write 'her' over **his/her** in sections relating to Alix's relative.

"You have a pet?" **Maude/Simon** asked, glancing behind **him/her** to the clock, no doubt trying to ensure **he/she** spent an appropriate amount of time with each family member.

"Yeah," Alix smiled, **he/she's** called... **petname**."

If your pet is a lizard or a fish, go to **53**

Otherwise, go to **54**

#### 53

"...**He/she** has a horrible habit of leaping out of **his/her** tank."

**petname** had literally never done that.

Go to **55**

#### 54

"...**He/she's** only a baby, so..."

Alix had owned *petname* for two years.

"He/she gets anxious when left alone too long."

If anything *petname* was more at home in the apartment than Alix.

Go to **55**

**55**

"Oh, yes, yes of course," said Maude/Simon absently, eyes already darting around the room for someone else to pass time with.

"You run along. Take good care of *petname*."

And just like that, Alix was free, with none of the awkwardness that would have undoubtedly arisen if she'd told the truth about her destination. She'd have to remember to pick up some *pettreats* on the way back. They were *petname*'s favourite.

Go to **57**

**56**

Expressions flashed across Aunt Maude's face, difficult to make out, like green fireworks exploding in a bright green sky. Pity? For Alix, or for Annie? Regret? Alix couldn't be sure, so she waited it out until Maude said: "Of course dear, give her my..." Maude looked uncomfortably across at the buffet table. "Tell her I said..." Her gaze alighted on the music system. "...Try not to upset her," she finished, striding over and turning the volume dial until any thoughts or protests were lost in a maelstrom of song. Old lyrics about not needing another hero that were as untrue now as they'd doubtless been back then.

In the RELATIVE section of your STATUS SHEET, tick the 'Advice received' box. Read **blue** text in addition to any other colours from now on.

Alix zipped up her jacket and left the party.

Go to **61**

**57**

Hold on...

You may choose ONE of the following provided the criteria are met:

'I still don't know what the deal is with the writing I rated.' Go to **58**

If the 'hospital' box has NOT been checked in the LOCATIONS VISITED section of your STATUS SHEET:

What's going on with Alix's parents? Go to **59**

If the 'expo' box has NOT been checked in the LOCATIONS VISITED section of your STATUS SHEET:

What *does* Alix do for work? Go to **60**

**58**

Adjust your STATUS SHEET as follows:

ALIX -5  
Go to **114**

**59**

Adjust your STATUS SHEET as follows:  
ALIX +5  
FAMILY +5  
Go to **61**

**60**

Adjust your STATUS SHEET as follows:  
ALIX +10  
CAREER +5  
Go to **13**

**61**

Tick 'Hospital' in LOCATIONS VISITED on your STATUS SHEET

The David Jones Memorial Hospital had an unremarkable exterior. As if in acknowledgement of this fact, the grass traffic roundabout out front sported a huge bronze modern art sculpture. Alix always puzzled over it. It resembled a pelvis, but the plaque beneath said 'Hope' so she supposed it must be something else. The hospital was the tallest building for miles around, apart from the multi-storey car park nestled alongside it like a conspirator. The grounds were all purple gravel and stunted palm trees unsuited to the climate. If you could call intermittent monsoons, freezing hail and periods of drought a climate.

It was one of the few hospitals that stayed lit at night, but even here they were on emergency lighting from a back-up generator, giving the whole building an eerie greenness. Couldn't the emergency lights have been some other colour?

If 'Coffee' is ticked in the BILLIE section of your STATUS SHEET, read **red** **INSTEAD OF** green from now on until instructed otherwise.

Alix crunched across the gravel, **barely listening as Billie chattered excitedly about the expo, worrying.**

Late for visiting hours again. The nurses were nice about it to her face. They knew Annie didn't have a lot of time, and she could tell from their forced smiles that they felt Alix *did* and she should be spending it here rather than making daft videos.

Annie was never nice about it. Alix wondered which approach it would be this time. The soft, sarcastic sighs of:

'Well, I know you're busy...' head turned away, ever the martyr, or the narrowed eyes and shrill fury of: 'You'd think a girl could find the time to see her dying mother!'

If you're only reading black and pale grey text at present, go to **66**; otherwise, **read on.**

**Alix had been close to calling Billie, but she felt like she'd already messed her friend around enough. A little of Billie's cheerful noise would have been really welcome right now, though. Go to 66**

**"You okay?" Billie asked. "You look worried." She'd been great about this whole thing - dragged to the hospital when they should be sharing stories over drinks in some dive bar.**

"Yeah," Alix said. She stopped, watching a cleaner shine the corridor's floor with a buffing machine. The man came out from behind the machine for a moment to clean under a row of seating with a grey mop that stank of disinfectant. The machine didn't seem to notice his absence. The whir of the circular cleaning pad faded into the distance before she spoke again.

"Would you mind waiting here?" Go to: **62**

"This could take a while." Go to **63**

**62**

"Annie, that is, my mother, can be a little-"

Billie clearly expected Alix to finish the thought. When she didn't, Billie gave her a lopsided smile. "Sure," she took a seat and rifled through the pile of ancient paper magazines on the neighbouring coffee table. "Old articles about paternity tests are my jam." She held up a piece entitled 'WHO'S THE FATHER?!' accompanied by a picture of a shocked couple with outdated clothes and hairstyles.

Alix smiled.

Billie was the greatest.

In the BILLIE section of your STATUS SHEET, tick the 'Waiting' box. From now on, read **orange** text in addition to the other colours

Go to **67**

**63**

"I really appreciate you coming here with me, but I don't expect you to wait around. Why don't we meet tomorrow for coffee?"

If BILLIE <15, go to **64**

Otherwise, go to **65**

**64**

Billie zipped up her coat and smiled.

"Of course. I'm pretty tired anyway." She stifled a yawn Alix was pretty sure was fake. "Note me a good coffee place, yeah?"

Alix nodded, sincerely hoping she remembered. *Try to remember.*

In the BILLIE section of your STATUS SHEET, tick the 'Coffee' box. Read **red text** instead of green from now on.

Go to **67**

**65**

"Alix, will you quit worrying about me all the time?" She indicated the pile of magazines on a nearby table. "I have some ancient relics to explore." They were so old, they were paper. There wasn't even a newsagent installed in the table. It was just a regular wooden table.

"I mean, if you're sure..."

Billie held up a magazine called *Natter* with the lead story 'MY SISTER WAS MY MOTHER!' "One hundred percent. I'll take you up on that coffee later, though."

Billie was so great.

In the BILLIE section of your STATUS SHEET, tick the 'Waiting' box and the 'Coffee' box. From now on, read orange text in addition to any other colours.

Go to **67**

## 66

The only sounds were the drone of a distant buffing machine erasing dirty footprints from corridor floors and the soft background hum of the lighting's power supply. A single nurse was at the reception desk, eyes locked on a tablet. Alix read the top line before she looked up.

*... urgently Stasia caressed his throbbing...*

Yikes. The nurse smiled and Alix worried for a moment that she'd said that aloud, but it turned out she was just pre-empting the inevitable apology.

"It's okay Alix," she said. "Go on through." Alix felt bad that she couldn't remember the nurse's name. Maybe Betty? Jackie? Who was she kidding, she couldn't even remember the face, so she just said: "Thank you, Sister," feeling even more awkward than if she'd just said 'Nurse'.

Go to **67**

## 67

Alix's mother was on a private ward in a special wing of the hospital. She hurried past the sign, not wanting to see the name of it. It had been initially dedicated to the care of the ex-Protectors, but now there was just Annie, her ward-neighbours politicians and minor celebrities.

Alix swiped her fob at the base of the keypad and slipped into the room. Annie was facing away from her, breathing soft. Sleeping.

Thank whoever!

Alix slid into the leather armchair at her mother's bedside as silently as possible. Her mother's skin was mottled, her hair thinning. She looked fragile. Impossibly so.

The lights on the medical AI unit above Annie's bed flashed blue. It was probably greeting her, but Annie always kept it muted.

Alix

'reached out and stroked the faded chestnut locks.' Go to **68**

'uttered Annie's name.' Go to **69**

'remembered the woman Annie had once been.' Go to **70**

'thought about Dad.' Go to **71**

## 68

Adjust your STATUS SHEET as follows:

ANNIE +10

FAMILY +10

Go to **72**

## 69

Adjust your STATUS SHEET as follows:  
ANNIE +5  
FAMILY +5  
Go to **72**

**70**

Adjust your STATUS SHEET as follows:  
FAMILY +10  
Go to **78**

**71**

Adjust your STATUS SHEET as follows:  
FAMILY +10  
DREAMS +5  
Go to **79**

**72**

Annie rolled towards Alix with a swiftness that made her gasp. Not sleeping after all. Her green eyes snapped open, and just like that, any fragility was banished.

"So, you haven't just left me here to rot, then?"

Alix sighed.

[What was it Aunt Maude had said? 'Try not to upset her.' How was that even possible when upset was her default?](#)

She was trying, she really was. But even when Annie had been well, and Alix had lived at home and seen her every day, Annie always expected more.

If ANNIE <15, go to **73**

Otherwise, go to **74**

**73**

"Haven't you got a tongue in your head, girl?"  
Go to **74**

**74**

Annie tried to sit up and winced. She was so acerbic it was easy to forget her poison masked her pain.

"Let me help you, Mother." Alix gently lifted her upwards and forwards, plumped her pillows and settled her back down at a more upright angle. Annie protested, not at the assistance, but at being referred to via a parental label. Alix wasn't sure why she'd said it. Maybe just to needle Annie.

It was shocking

to see the great Annie Akerman looking so vulnerable. Go to **75**

to have her help accepted. Go to **76**

to think Dad would've ended up like this too. Go to **77**

**75**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

ANNIE +5

Go to **78**

**76**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

ANNIE +5

FAMILY +10

Go to **86**

**77**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

FAMILY +5

POSITIVITY -5

Go to **79**

**78**

"Your mum is so fit," this lad at school, Ryan Bellows, always used to say. Annie would pick Alix up from school with an open trenchcoat over her protectorate uniform and her hair flowing past her shoulders. It was embarrassing. Yes, the protectorate uniform was close fitting, but she didn't have to wear it like that, with the thigh-high boots and all the bangles in various shades of purple and a matching headband. Nona's mum didn't dress like that. She paired her uniform with trainers and an over-sized leather jacket and did her daughter the courtesy of putting jeans on over it when she did the school run.

And sometimes they'd be walking home and just as Alix was in the middle of telling Annie about her day, Annie'd put her finger to her ear in that way that meant she was getting directives into her earpiece and she'd nod even though the controller couldn't see her, and she'd say: "Sorry chicken, something's come up at work," and they'd jog over to Aunt Maude's and Alix wouldn't see her mother again for hours, sometimes days.

Go to **80**

**79**

As a child, Alix was convinced her dad was a superhero. He'd come to the dinner table, deep purple uniform still dusty from the war zone. When Alix was very little, she'd point to the dust and ask: "What's that?" and her father would smile and his eyes would crinkle and he'd say: "Flour. I've been baking bread all day!" and fold her into a tight hug, and she'd run her fingers over the raised carbon fibre Protectorate emblem on his chest.

When she was a little bigger, she'd ask:

"Where did you get that on you?" And he'd look grave and say: "A building collapsed. I was dragging survivors clear." And she'd fold him into a hug, and smell the ashes and gunpowder in his hair.

When she was almost an adult, she'd ask: "What happened?" and he'd say: "More killing, more dying," and avoid her eyes and she couldn't hug him no matter how much she wanted to.

Go to **80**.

**80**

Looking at her mother lying in that bed, Alix realised

Aunt Maude was right. Go to **81**

she couldn't deal with this right now. Go to **82**

she had to get out of there. Go to **84**

she had always blamed Annie. Go to **85**

If your FAMILY score is HIGHER THAN 20, you may choose the option:

'Annie had really been through it.' Go to **83**

**81**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

FAMILY +10

ANNIE +5

POSITIVITY +5

Go to **86**

**82**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

FAMILY -5

ANNIE -10

POSITIVITY -5

Go to **111**

**83**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

FAMILY +5

ANNIE +10

Go to **86**

**84**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

ANNIE -10. Go to **111**

**85**

Update your status sheet as follows:

ANNIE +5

FAMILY -5

POSITIVITY -5

Go to **86**

**86**

Maybe it was time to put aside the old resentments and festering blame. She'd never had chance to say goodbye to Dad, but Annie was right there in front of her.

If your FAMILY score is HIGHER THAN 20, go to **87**

Otherwise, go to **90**

**87**

She reached across and squeezed Annie's hand.

If ANNIE's stat is HIGHER THAN 15, go to **88**

Otherwise, go to **89**

**88**

Annie looked faintly surprised.

Go to **90**

**89**

Annie grimaced and moved her hand out of Alix's reach. Another small rejection. Alix wondered how many more of those she could take.

POSTIVITY -5

Go to **90**

**90**

If you DO NOT have a pet, write in 'my friend, Dietmar' over petname and select male pronouns UNTIL ALIX LEAVES THE HOSPITAL.

"...so, petname did the funniest thing yesterday!"

"Doesn't surprise me. He/She's an absolute idiot."

Alix quickly related the most recent bout of silliness.

After all that uncomfortable small talk...

She drew to a close, fidgeting in her seat, aware Billie had better things to do than sit around in a hospital waiting room. If your PET is a fish, go to **91**; otherwise, go to **92**, eager to be out of there. If your PET is a fish, go to **91**; otherwise, go to **92**

**91**

"...I guess maybe I'd be frightened by something that big looming over my tank, though," she finished lamely.

Go to **93**

**92**

"He/she ended up covered in cake mix," she finished lamely.

Go to **93**

**93**

She wanted to make these visits better, less excruciating, more meaningful, but she didn't know how.

If ANNIE's score is LESS THAN 15, go to **94**

Otherwise, go to **95**

**94**

Annie barely seemed to care whether she visited or not anyway.

Go to **96**

**95**

Annie co-operated, in her way, but it was hard.

Go to **96**

**96**

"What've you been up to?" Alix asked, after Annie's breathing had evened out a little, and it seemed she might be capable of answering.

"Lying around dying, mostly. You?"

"Oh, you know. Same old cycle of shit parties, shit videos and hanging around this place."

Annie's eyes narrowed. "But mostly the first two."

Alix sighed. "Yes, I suppose. Mostly the first two."

Annie closed her eyes and settled her head back against her pillow.

If ANNIE's score is HIGHER THAN 20, go to **97**

If ANNIE's score is HIGHER THAN 15 AND POSITIVITY <20, go to **98**

Otherwise, go to **99**

**97**

DREAMS +5

"What about your writing? Do you still write?"

"...I," Alix was completely wrong-footed. She felt her cheeks colouring, ridiculous as that was. "Oh, you know, this and that, nothing good, really."

"You should let me read it sometime. It'll give me something else to do besides staring at the ceiling and trying to guess what the porter's had for dinner from his farts."

"Yeah, yeah, sure I guess."

Once all conversational topics were exhausted...

Go to **102**

**98**

"What about petname? How's he/she getting on?" Trying not to let the shock show in her face, Alix settled down in her chair and related his/her antics again, slower this time.

IF BILLIE's score is HIGHER THAN 15, go to **99**; otherwise, go to **100**.

Go to **101**

**99**

Billie wouldn't mind waiting a little longer.

Go to **103**

**100**

Billie would have to go on waiting.

Go to **103**

**101**

As if that made a difference.

Go to **103**

**102**

Annie's responses came slower and fewer, until eventually she was silent.

Go to **103**

### 103

Alix waited until she was certain Annie had fallen back into a deep sleep, then slipped away, duty done for another day.

Billie had fallen asleep in the waiting room, one of the trashy magazines draped across her lap. Alix tapped her gently and she jerked in her seat. The magazine dropped to the floor.

"I'm awake!" she said quickly, stretching. "Totally awake. Raring to go."

"Nice try." Go to **104**

"Tomorrow, one hundred percent." Go to **107**

"Great! Let's hit the town!" Go to **108**

Sleep looked inviting to Alix too. Go to **109**

What the hell does this have to do with that writing I rated?! Go to **110**

If the 'Party' box in the LOCATIONS VISITED section of your STATUS SHEET is NOT ticked, you may also choose this option:

One family member taken care of, fifty more to go. Go to **33**

### 104

"I think we'd both better call it a night, don't you?" said Alix. "But I'll walk you back to your hotel. It's on my way back. And tomorrow's another story!"

If BILLIE's score is HIGHER THAN 15, go to **105**

Otherwise, go to **106**

### 105

"Sounds good," said Billie. "I *am* pretty beat. We can get coffee tomorrow instead." Roll on tomorrow.

In the BILLIE section of your STATUS SHEET, +5 to BILLIE's score and tick the 'Coffee' box. Read red instead of green from now on. Go to **114**

### 106

"I can see myself back, thanks," said Billie flatly. "I hope your mum gets better soon."

There was no getting better for Annie, but Billie didn't seem in the mood to hear about it, and Alix wasn't in the mood to tell it anyway, so she just nodded weakly and watched Billie's retreating back for a moment before starting back herself.

Alone.

In the BILLIE section of your STATUS SHEET, -5 from BILLIE's SCORE, and tick the 'Angry' box under MOOD. Go to **114**

### 107

Alix was worried Billie would be cross at her for flaking yet again. Not that Billie could say anything with Annie's impending death ticking between them like the clicking of a metronome. Whatever she felt about it, Billie just smiled and gave Alix thumbs up.

"One hundred percent," she echoed. 99.9% at least.

In the BILLIE section of your STATUS SHEET, +5 to BILLIE's score. Tick the 'Coffee' box under ACTIVITIES. Go to **114**

### 108

Calling it a town was perhaps overly generous.

BILLIE +5  
Go to **113**

**109**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:  
ALIX +10  
Go to **114**

**110**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:  
ALIX -5  
Go to **114**

**111**

Alix rose quickly, the leather armchair screeching back behind her. "I'm sorry," she blurted, hurriedly looking towards the door as her eyes grew hot and wet. "There's somebody waiting for me. I have to-" she was out of the door and running down the corridor before she had time to think about it, her mother's pitiful croaks for her to come back receding into the distance. Annie Akerman was easier to ignore these days. If you haven't been told to read green text, or have been told to stop reading it, go to **112** now. Otherwise, **read on.**

Billie looked up as Alix came thudding down the corridor. She threw her magazine back onto the stack, and rose.

"What happened?"

Alix shook her head, clenching her eyes in that way she'd developed to stop the tears falling.

"Let's just go somewhere, okay?" Alix asked. Anywhere but here.  
Go to **113**

**112**

Alix ran past the sign saying 'Protectorate Pledge Wing' that someone had gouged and scratched with a knife or a screwdriver. She ran past the nurse whose name she should know but didn't, past the cleaner who had moved on to cleaning the glass panels by the door with a spray that smelled of chemical lavender. She ran past the stupid purple gravel and the ugly deformed palm trees and over the small road that led to the colossal car park and she dropped to her knees in front of that ridiculous bronze pelvis and cried until she could stand.

Which was a long time.  
Go to **114**

**113**

In the BILLIE section of your STATUS SHEET, tick the 'Drinks' box in the ACTIVITIES section and +5 to BILLIE's score.

Moribund High Street wasn't exactly known for its buzzing nightlife, but now plenty of people were trying to drink away the apocalypse, so there was always some wine bar or cocktail place ready to cash in.

"The Cat's Whiskies or Vinotage?" asked Alix, looking up at the glowing signs, unchanged since her youth.

"Anywhere you'd recommend?" Billie had already brought up both on her tracker, seen that neither had particularly good ratings.

"You won't find anything above two stars in Moribund," said Alix. "People here don't like anything, and even if they did, there's not much to like."

"Oh, we'll find something to like," said Billie with a grin. "There's always something to like!"

And she grabbed Alix's hand and tugged her through a nearby doorway Alix had taken for a disused fire exit, but that was apparently the entrance to an underground club. Inside was decorated with fairylights and guys their age served drinks in pitchers with flower petals floating on the surface. The petals seemed oddly muted against the unnatural glow of the brightly coloured cocktails.

Drink, dance, forget.

Go to **114**

#### 114

By the time Alix got back to her apartment, it was dark. There were no streetlights anymore, but the green glow of the sky meant it no longer got pitch black anyway.

If the 'Angry' box in the MOOD list of BILLIE's section on your STATUS SHEET IS ticked, go to **115**; otherwise, go to **116**

If the 'Angry' box in the MOOD list of BILLIE's section on your STATUS SHEET IS ticked, go to **115**; otherwise, go to **116**

Go to **117**

#### 115

Billie hadn't messaged to say she'd made it back to her hotel safely, but perhaps that wasn't so surprising given the way they'd spent their brief time together.

Go to **117**

#### 116

On the walk back to her hotel, Billie had said it reminded her of home. Perhaps the meteorite's effects were less scary for the Iseyjans with their long days and aurora borealis.

Go to **117**

#### 117

Alix checked the news ticker on her tracker. The latest estimate was fourteen months. That seemed both forever and nothing. A small band of vocal meteor deniers insisted it wouldn't hit at all. Most experts were agreed the threat was real, but calculating the speed and trajectory was incredibly difficult and when parts broke off, everything changed and had to be recalculated.

She turned the ticker off. More than enough of that.

[If the HOSPITAL box of the LOCATIONS section of your STATUS SHEET has NOT been ticked] She had a nagging feeling there was somewhere else she should have gone. Her tracker was set for something, something important, and yet she hadn't acted on it. It was weird.

If the PET section of your STATUS SHEET is NOT filled in, go to **119**; otherwise, **read on**.

As she threw her fob onto the table, petname <sup>[Cat]</sup>meowed/<sup>[Dog]</sup>barked/<sup>[Rabbit]</sup>hopped over to Alix's desk and chewed on the base of her wheelychair/<sup>[Fish]</sup>blew gravel against the side of his/her tank/<sup>[Lizard]</sup>scrabbled at the front of his/her vivarium/<sup>[Bird]</sup>squawked, eager to be fed.

If your pet is a Fish, go to **118** now; otherwise, **read on**.

Alix went over and scratched her adorable pet's head affectionately.

Go to **118**

### 118

"Later, greedy guts," Alix reassured him/her. "With extra treats for being such a good baby." Petname continued to clamour for food regardless.

Go to **120**

### 119

As she threw her fob onto the table, the loudness of it emphasised the apartment's silence. Alix shuddered. Times like this, she wished she had a pet of some kind for company. Some little sign of life to come home to.

Go to **120**

### 120

Check the LOCATIONS VISITED and 'Activities' sections of your STATUS SHEET to fill in this section.

Alix felt drained from <sup>[Party]</sup>the party... <sup>[Expo]</sup> the expo... <sup>[Hospital]</sup> the hospital... <sup>[Drinks]</sup> drinks with Billie...

**[If the HOSPITAL box of the LOCATIONS section of your STATUS SHEET has NOT been ticked]** Shit! Visiting hours! That was where she was meant to be. Well, it was too late now, and she was too tired for the apologetic vid call. ANNIE -5

Exhausted, but her brain was buzzing. She needed a distraction. Her gaze came to rest on the drawer where she stowed her laptop when she wasn't home. Probably not the most relaxing diversion, but...

She unlocked the drawer, and lifted the laptop out onto the desk, lowering the blind against the relentless greenness as it whirred to life.

Logging in...

A message flashed in her WIFF.net inbox. A rating! Someone had read and rated her work. She hovered her mouse over the weird little rectangular symbol that represented an unread message. She had to open it, but...

What if they didn't like her stuff?

What if they'd left a comment, telling her how childish and stupid her writing was? <sup>[POSITIVITY >20]</sup> No, no, it'd be fine. It wasn't the best story in the world, but it had its merits.

Open message.

Check 'Rating 1' in the RATINGS section of your STATUS SHEET.

If 'Rating 1' is 7 or HIGHER, go to **121**

If 'Rating 1' is 3 or LOWER, go to **124**

If 'Rating 1' is 4-6, go to **129**

### 121

Alix felt a flush of relief. They liked it. Not enough to leave a comment, but enough to give it a good rating.

POSITIVITY +10

DREAMS +10

CAREER +5

If the PET section of your STATUS SHEET is blank, or you have a pet Fish, go to **122** now; otherwise **read on**

She ran across to **petname**, scooped **him/her** up, and waltzed around the lounge with **him/her** until **he/she** wriggled free from Alix's grasp and returned to sit pointedly by his/her food bowl. Alix hastily filled it, gave **petname** an absentminded pat, then raced back to her desk.

Go to **122**

### 122

She stared again at the number on the screen, expecting it to have morphed into some lower figure. Happily, it hadn't. Some distant person she didn't even know and would likely never meet liked her writing! They'd liked it enough to read it, and then think about it, and then assign it a numerical value! Alix's cheeks hurt from smiling.

If your pet is a Fish, **read on**; otherwise, go to **123** now.

She threw a handful of fish flakes in for **petname** without taking her eyes from the screen.

Go to **123**

### 123

All other cares forgotten, she sat and wrote until the early hours of the morning. Bliss. In the PROJECT section of ALIX's STATISTICS on your STATUS SHEET, write 'New' next to 'Short Story'.

Go to **133**

### 124

Oh. Well. As she blinked away tears, the number remained seared into her mind's eye. It floated in front of her, taunting.

They hated it. Hours of her life, of her work, pondering the right word, the right phrase, and this person, whoever and wherever they were, thought it worthless. She spent less time deliberating over the content of her videos and they had tens of thousands of views and upvotes.

If POSITIVITY is HIGHER than 20, go to **125**

Otherwise, go to **126**

### 125

It hadn't always been that way, though. The first videos had a few hundred views, and more downvotes than upvotes. But she kept going, because a few hundred people had watched. And a handful even upvoted. She'd kept going for them, and for herself and her videos had gotten better, and so had her viewcounts. She dried her eyes on the back of her hand.

She'd start something new, something better than before, something they just couldn't help but rate highly.

POSITIVITY +5

DREAMS +10

CAREER +5

Go to **123**

### 126

Slowly, she closed the laptop lid. Maybe she'd upload one of her other stories later, see if they liked that any better. For now, she was done. That was all her heart could take right now.

If the PET section of your STATUS SHEET is blank, go to **131**; if your pet is a Fish, go to **127**; otherwise **read on**.

Petname [Cat/Dog/Rabbit/Lizard] clambered/ [Bird] flew onto Alix's [Cat/Dog/Rabbit/Lizard] lap/ [Bird] shoulder forcing Alix to stroke him/her. She smiled in spite of herself. "Hey lovely," she said, running her fingers over the soft [Cat/Dog/Rabbit] fur/ [Lizard] scales/ [Bird] feathers. "Why don't we make a video together instead? Might be fun, huh?" [Dog] petname wagged his/her tail. Everything's fun to a pupper/ [Cat] petname's purr thrummed deep in his/her chest. Alix took that as agreement./ [Bird] petname made a scraping noise with his/her beak, then nibbled Alix's earlobe./ [Rabbit] petname stopped with his/her incessant nose-twitching for a moment, which Alix took as agreement./ [Lizard] petname's eyes half-closed in contentment, enjoying having his/her neck scales scratched.

Go to **128**

### 127

She glanced over at petname, still plucking hopefully at the surface of the water as if there might be more flakes invisible to the naked eye. He/She wasn't exactly the most thrilling viral video star, but Alix could do a funny voiceover or something.

Go to **128**

### 128

Alix got to work setting up her video camera. It was clunky, but the audio quality was better than on her tracker. Cute pet vlogs were always popular, even with non-subscribers. If she was going to have something entertaining to upload by morning, she had a lot of work to do.

In the PROJECT section of ALIX's STATISTICS on your STATUS SHEET, write 'Pet' next to 'Video'.

POSITIVITY +5

CAREER +5

Go to **133**

### 129

She stared at the rating, trying to marshal her feelings.

If POSITIVITY is HIGHER THAN 15, **read on**. Otherwise, go to **130**.

It wasn't so bad. Room for improvement, but not horrible. And they'd thought enough of it to finish reading it and give it a rating, that was something.

If POSITIVITY is HIGHER THAN 20, **read on**. Otherwise, go to **126**.

Deep breath. Okay.

She sat down at her desk, mind made up, filled with a sense of purpose. She'd write something new to keep her enthusiasm up, and then go back to the offending story and polish it up.

Go to **123**

### 130

In the stillness and silence of her apartment, Alix put on her pyjamas. She knew she should probably eat something but her appetite had deserted her.

Go to **131**

### 131

If POSITIVITY is LOWER than 15, go to **132**; otherwise, **read on.**

She sat up in bed a while, mind churning. Maybe tomorrow would bring something better. Her eyes grew heavier, and when sleep finally claimed her, she dreamt of flames and ashes.

Go to **133**

### 132

She sat up in bed for a long time, thinking about nothing but her own emptiness and sadness, until eventually sleep claimed her.

POSITIVITY -5

DREAMS -5

Go to **133**

### 133

# FRIDAY

A knock at the door woke Alix from a fitful sleep. The bedsheet had wrapped around her legs during the night and she struggled to free them, expecting the knocking to intensify, to disturb the neighbours. It didn't.

If the PET section of your STATUS SHEET is blank, go to **134** now. Otherwise, **read on.**

Petname wasn't about to let her go back to sleep though, even if this mystery visitor was. He/she <sup>[Cat]</sup>mewed/<sup>[Dog]</sup>barked/<sup>[Rabbit]</sup>pounded his/her hind feet against the floorboards/<sup>[Fish]</sup> jumped clear of the surface of the water, splashing back down into his/her tank again and again/<sup>[Lizard]</sup> dug furiously at the corner of his/her vivarium/<sup>[Bird]</sup> whistled a decent imitation of Alix's tracker alarm over and over until Alix left the bedroom.

Go to **134**

### 134

Alix rubbed her eyes.

[IF PROJECT = Video] Filming all night had left them dry and crunchy/ [IF POSITIVITY <15 AND Rating 1

<5] Crying all night had left them puffy and raw.

[If BILLIE ACTIVITY 'Drinks'] Her head was spinning from the night before. And her knees hurt. Why did her knees hurt?/[if POSITIVITY >15] She should really get an early night at some point this century./[OTHERWISE] She wished she could snap out of this funk. When she reached the front door, she could see from the entry screen there was no-one outside, just a cardboard box.

"Great work, delivery guy," Alix muttered, opening the front door.

If the PET section of your STATUS sheet is blank, go to **135** now. Otherwise, **read on.** [Cat/Dog/Rabbit] Petname tried to run out into the corridor, but Alix swung her leg over him/her keeping him/her inside with one foot/[Bird] Petname escalated his/her trilling into a thousand decibel screech, yet made no effort to flutter off his/her perch, let alone out into the hall with Alix/[Lizard] Petname forced him/herself up onto his/her back legs against the side of the vivarium, threatening to clamber out/[Fish] Petname leapt higher than ever, creating a mini tidal wave that surged over the edge of his/her tank, dripping onto Alix's dresser and the carpet below.

"All right, petname, I get it, you're agitated," Alix yelled over her shoulder. "Give it a rest!"

Go to **135**

### 135

She crouched in her hallway, paused, her hand on top of the box. Dietmar'd had trouble before, with the online hate group who thought he made too much money from his videos. Jodie and Elizabeth had both received threats. They came to nothing, but they were scary, online fury seeping offline, a non-lethal contaminant. What if this was her turn? A pig's head, a dog turd?

[if POSITIVITY <20] ...There had been a lot of downvotes on that last video./[OTHERWISE] ... More likely she'd just ordered something and forgotten about it.

If the PET section of your STATUS SHEET is blank, go to **136**  
Otherwise, go to **137**

### 136

The box moved. Didn't it? Now it was still and Alix wondered if she'd just kicked it as she adjusted her crouching position. That was it, she had to open it. Inside the box, nestled among the foam packing peanuts was  
Roll 2 dice.

If you roll 2, go to **138**

If you roll 3 or 4, go to **139**

If you roll 5 or 6, go to **140**

If you roll 7 or 8, go to **141**

If your roll 9 or 10, go to **142**

If you roll 11, go to **143**

If you roll 12, go to **144**

### 137

She suddenly recognised the large, childlike handwriting on the address label. The little hearts instead of dots over 'i's and 'j's. That was it, she had to open it.

Inside was a strange lump of rock, black and pockmarked. For one crazed moment, Alix thought it was a lump of meteor, that she had slept through everything and by some fluke her apartment building was left standing, while the surrounding neighbourhood was nothing but a smoking crater. As she stared, her brain slowly dragged itself out of

slumber mode and acknowledged that if all her neighbours had been obliterated, the likelihood of someone chipping off and gift-wrapping a chunk was close to zero. She lifted the rock out and hefted it in her hand, ignoring petname's best efforts to <sup>[Bird]</sup> pierce her eardrums./<sup>[Fish or Lizard]</sup> draw her attention with his/her escape attempts. Alix hadn't thought him/her capable, but he/she seemed determined to prove Alix wrong. Clearly there was a first time for everything./<sup>[Cat, Dog or Rabbit]</sup> dob his/her nose all over it. Underneath was a note, also in Billie's cute, loopy handwriting.

*This is a rock from the base of Thrihnukagigur. I picked it up after your dad made everything safe again. Volcano, meteor, they're no match for the Akermans. (Akermen?)  
♥♥♥♥ Billie*

Alix blinked. Checked the date on the label. Billie had signed it over a week ago. Perhaps she'd expected the package to arrive before she did. Alix clasped the rock in both hands for a moment.

Did this mean Billie didn't hold Dad responsible? Maybe the local press were wrong. Maybe the whole of Iseyja wasn't baying for protector blood after what happened. In the OTHER section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Rock'. Go to **145**

### 138

A cute little kitten and a tin of sardines.

In the PET section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Cat' and write 'Sardines' next to FAVOURITE TREAT. You should now write in 'cat' wherever pet appears within the text and 'sardines' wherever pettreat appears. Fill in a name for your pet. This should now be used wherever petname appears within the text. Choose a sex for your pet. This should now be used whenever it says 'he/she' 'his/hers' etc in passages associated with your pet.

Go to **145**

### 139

A cute little puppy and a box of bone biscuits.

In the PET section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Dog' and write 'Bone Biscuits' next to FAVOURITE TREAT. You should now write in 'dog' wherever pet appears within the text and 'bone biscuits' wherever pettreat appears. Fill in a name for your pet. This should now be used wherever petname appears within the text. Choose a sex for your pet. This should now be used whenever it says 'he/she' 'his/hers' etc in passages associated with your pet.

Go to **145**

### 140

A cute little rabbit and a small bag of baby carrots.

In the PET section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Rabbit' and write 'Carrots' next to FAVOURITE TREAT. You should now write in 'rabbit' wherever pet appears within

the text and 'carrot' wherever `pettreat` appears. Fill in a name for your pet. This should now be used wherever `petname` appears within the text. Choose a sex for your pet. This should now be used whenever it says 'he/she' 'his/hers' etc in passages associated with your pet.

Go to **145**

### 141

A bowl with a fish in it and a tub of fish flakes.

In the PET section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Fish' and write 'Fish Flakes' next to FAVOURITE TREAT. You should now write in 'fish' wherever `pet` appears within the text and 'fish flakes' wherever `pettreat` appears. Fill in a name for your pet. This should now be used wherever `petname` appears within the text. Choose a sex for your pet. This should now be used whenever it says 'he/she' 'his/hers' etc in passages associated with your pet.

Go to **145**

### 142

A lizard in a vivarium and a tightly sealed tub of meal worms.

In the PET section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Lizard' and write 'Meal Worms' next to FAVOURITE TREAT. You should now write in 'lizard' wherever `pet` appears within the text and 'meal worms' wherever `pettreat` appears. Fill in a name for your pet. This should now be used wherever `petname` appears within the text. Choose a sex for your pet. This should now be used whenever it says 'he/she' 'his/hers' etc in passages associated with your pet.

Go to **145**

### 143

A small cage with a bird in it and a packet of sunflower seeds.

In the PET section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Bird' and write 'Sunflower Seeds' next to FAVOURITE TREAT. You should now write in 'bird' wherever `pet` appears within the text and 'sunflower seeds' wherever `pettreat` appears. Fill in a name for your pet. This should now be used wherever `petname` appears within the text. Choose a sex for your pet. This should now be used whenever it says 'he/she' 'his/hers' etc in passages associated with your pet.

Go to **145**

### 144

Nothing.

[if POSITIVITY <20] Another cruel trick from the universe.[POSITIVITY -5]/[OTHERWISE]

Whatever.

Thanks universe. Thanks a lot.

Go to **146**

### 145

Update your STATUS SHEET: POSITIVITY +5

"Well," said Alix. "That was unexpected."

Alix took her new treasure into her apartment, leaving the box outside in the hall.

Go to **146**

### 146

After slurping the last mouthful of chocotreets from her spoon, Alix drank the chocolatey milk from the bowl. Annie hated it when she did that, hated chocotreets full stop, said they were for grubby little kids. Now she had her own place, Alix's cupboard was filled exclusively with children's cereal.

If the PET section on your STATUS SHEET is blank, go to **148** now. Otherwise, **read on.**

She glanced at petname. Her pet was <sup>[Fish]</sup>subdued for now, contenting him/herself with sucking on gravel and spitting it noisily against the side of the tank. <sup>[Lizard]</sup>reclining languidly under his/her heat lamp, blinking slowly. <sup>[Bird/Cat/Dog/Rabbit]</sup>under the table, obsessing over a tiny patch of the rug that clearly had an interesting smell or taste.

If 'Rock' is ticked in the OTHER section of your STATUS SHEET, go to **147** now. Otherwise, **read on.**

Alix supposed she'd have to get used to that kind of thing. She was a pettype owner now.

Turned out she was <sup>[if POSITIVITY >5]</sup>right to wish for a pet. <sup>[OTHERWISE]</sup>wrong to wish for a pet. Go to **147**

### 147

Having petname around made her feel <sup>[if POSITIVITY >5]</sup>better. Someone else to worry about, a distraction from Annie and Myboxx and... all that other stuff. POSITIVITY +5/<sup>[OTHERWISE]</sup>worse than ever. Another little life she couldn't shield from the horrors of the world.

Go to **148**

### 148

She wiped her mouth on her dressing gown.

Compare your scores for the FAMILY, CAREER and DREAMS statistics under ALIX's STATISTICS on your STATUS SHEET. If the HIGHEST SCORE IS FAMILY, go to **150**; if the HIGHEST SCORE is CAREER, go to **151**; if the HIGHEST SCORE IS DREAMS, go to **149**. If two or more scores are the same, you may choose which section to go to.

### 149

<sup>[if Rating 1 <4]</sup>Despite last night's rating horror show, <sup>[if Rating 1 >6]</sup>Thanks to last night's rating, <sup>[OTHERWISE]</sup>Mediocre as last night's rating was,

Alix was itching to get back to her writing. But what to write? She sat down at her desk.

Maybe she should develop her early ideas further? Go to **157**

Probably best to start something completely new. Go to **158**

### 150

Maybe it was that <sup>[if Rating 1 >6]</sup>good/<sup>[if Rating 1 <3]</sup>terrible/<sup>[OTHERWISE]</sup>mediocre

review score, but for some reason, Alix felt she should do something nice for Annie.

Maybe buy her something? Annie was meticulous about her appearance, got frustrated that she couldn't primp and preen to her heart's content in the hospital. Alix couldn't do

much about that, but maybe she could order some small accessory, something to help Annie feel more like her old self?

[If 'Hospital' is NOT ticked in LOCATIONS VISITED] And, if Alix was being completely honest with herself, something to assuage the guilt of not visiting.

She sat down at her desk. Their tastes were so different, and Annie was so particular about the things she liked. This was going to take time, effort, research.

In the ANNIE section of your STATUS SHEET, tick the 'Scarf' box.

Go to **159**

### 151

Alix sat down at her desk.

If the PROJECT section of ALIX'S STATISTICS on your STATUS SHEET already says 'Pet' under Video, go to **152**. Otherwise, read on.

She'd seen and done a lot over these past few days, surely there was something she could turn into a video idea?

You may choose any one of the following provided the necessary criteria are met:

If 'Hospital' is ticked in the LOCATIONS VISITED section of your STATUS SHEET:

Perhaps she could get clearance to film something at DJ Memorial? Go to **153**

If 'Expo' is ticked in the LOCATIONS VISITED section of your STATUS SHEET:

Maybe she could go meta - do something about being a Boxxer? Go to **154**

If 'Party' is ticked in the LOCATIONS VISITED section of your STATUS SHEET:

Perhaps she could draw inspiration from Maude's parties? Go to **155**

### 152

She'd got some great footage of **petname** last night. It shouldn't take too much to edit it into something decent. She just needed to come up with a script for the voiceover to make it really awesome.

Go to **159**

### 153

It might be hard to be funny around IV drips and catheters, but maybe the nurses would appreciate the chance for some levity.

Make the following updates to your STATUS SHEET: In the PROJECT section of ALIX's STATISTICS, write 'Hospital' next to 'Video'; ANNIE +5; FAMILY +5

Go to **156**

### 154

The fans always loved to see themselves reflected in her videos, she could get them to send in their expo footage, get something collaborative going.

Make the following updates to your STATUS SHEET: In the PROJECT section of ALIX's STATISTICS, write 'Expo' next to 'Video'; CAREER +10

Go to **156**

### 155

Her family were so mad and embarrassing, her fans would surely get a kick out of that.

Make the following updates to your STATUS SHEET: In the PROJECT section of ALIX's STATISTICS, write 'Party' next to 'Video'; FAMILY +10; CAREER +5  
Go to **156**

### 156

Okay, so she had a very basic premise. Now she needed to flesh it out, brainstorm, start working up a script.

Alix sat down at her desk.

Go to **159**

### 157

Make the following updates to your STATUS SHEET: In the PROJECT section of ALIX's STATISTICS, write 'Game' next to 'Short Story'; DREAMS +10

Go to **159**

### 158

Make the following updates to your STATUS SHEET: In the PROJECT section of ALIX's STATISTICS, write 'New' next to 'Short Story'; DREAMS +5

Go to **159**

### 159

Alix got up from her desk. Inspiration, that was what she needed. Good, old fashioned inspiration. She looked around her small apartment.

You may visit each of the below choices a maximum of ONCE. Tick them off as you visit. If you return here and they are ticked off, choose a different choice.

Perhaps there was something on TV? Go to **160**

She could check her messages, see if inspiration struck naturally? Go to **163**

Looking out of the window? An interesting passer-by might spark something.

Go to **172**

She should gather supplies for her stash in the basement. Being prepared was important. Go to **178**

If the PET section of your STATUS SHEET IS FILLED IN, you may also choose:

Playing with petname could be just the thing. Go to **173**

JUST GET ON WITH IT! Go to **180**

### 160

ALIX +5

Alix twisted her stylus and the large black screen made a low-pitched sound, a bright pinprick of colour appearing at its centre and expanding outwards until the image filled the screen. The news channel. It was hard to get away from infographics of the predicted impact zone, trajectory projections. *Six thousand square miles... nineteen major cities... seven months until...*

If your POSITIVITY score is HIGHER THAN 15, go to **161**

Otherwise, go to **162**

### 161

The human interest stories, they were the ones that mattered. They were the ones with the power to hurt and inspire. She flicked through the channels until she found people being interviewed, regular people, not scientists or politicians. A woman saying via subtitles that borders had been closed to prevent any more refugees leaving the impact zone. The neighbouring countries couldn't cope, and couldn't say with any certainty that they'd be unaffected anyway. She sat back down at her desk and made some quick notes

while her stomach twisted at the realisation that this woman could be her, could be Billie, could be Annie, if not for a trick of time and geography.  
Go to **159**

### 162

How could she be expected to come up with anything against this background radiation of predicted death tolls and best case scenarios and aftermath simulations? She knew what a collapsed school looked like, had seen enough in the news reports about Dad, she didn't need them blasted into her eyeballs every five minutes. Did people really have so little imagination?

Alix turned off the screen and returned to her desk.  
Go to **159**

### 163

ALIX +5

Alix pressed the message button on her tracker. Oju's soothing simulated voice oozed out of the speaker.

If POSITIVITY IS HIGHER THAN 20, **read on**. Otherwise, go to **167** now.

“You have one. New. Message. Left. Today. At. Ten AY-em:” That brief hiss of static they never managed to eliminate, no matter how hi-tech the recording device, and then: Compare your scores for the FAMILY, CAREER and DREAMS statistics under ALIX’s STATISTICS on your STATUS SHEET. If the HIGHEST SCORE IS FAMILY, go to **166**; if the HIGHEST SCORE is CAREER, go to **165**; if the HIGHEST SCORE IS DREAMS, go to **164**. If two or more scores are the same, you may choose which section to go to.

### 164

“Hey, it’s Billie. **So, I’m getting ready to meet you at the coffee shop and** I just read your latest short story, and... Alix, it’s really good. Really, really good. And I just wanted to tell you that, regardless of... of anything else. That’s all.”

[if BILLIE >5 and ‘Coffee’ is NOT already ticked] Tick ‘Coffee’ in the ACTIVITIES section of BILLIE’S section of your STATUS SHEET. Read **red** text in addition to other colours from now on.

[if ‘Present’ is NOT ticked in the BILLIE section of your STATUS SHEET] Alix felt a little guilty that she hadn’t made an effort to catch up with Billie yet. She’d come a long way, and at a time when not many people were travelling.

**Alix was glad they’d be getting together soon.**

DREAMS +5

In the OTHER section of your STATUS SHEET, tick ‘Story Read’.

Go to **169**

### 165

One long scream that made the speakers ripple, followed by hysterical laughter.

“That was Dietmar screaming, I just want to make that clear,” Elizabeth’s voice was mock serious. “Can you believe we’re going up against each other at the MBVAs? Jodie’s getting pissy because she wasn’t nominated this year, but personally, I think it’s greedy of her wanting to win again.” There was more giggling in the background, and sounds of a tussle, which Elizabeth evidently won, because she came back on the line, louder and more breathless than before. “Dietmar’s going to wipe the floor with us anyway, but we’ll be downing all the free champagne so we won’t give a shit, will we chick?!” All three cheered until it seemed they’d bust their tracker mic and the recording abruptly fell silent.

CAREER +5

Go to **169**

### 166

If the RELATIVE section of your STATUS SHEET is blank: tick the ‘Aunt Maude’ box, and from now on, write in ‘Aunt Maude’ wherever Maude/Simon appears in the text, write ‘her’ over his/her in sections relating to Alix’s relative, and so on for other pronouns as appropriate.

“Is this even recording? I hate these things. The microphone’s so small, I don’t know how you can possibly hear anything I say into it.” Maude/Simon’s mouth was so close to the mic, Alix had to really concentrate to make out what he/she was saying. There was a breathy burr on every voiceless sound.

“We’re taking a break from the family parties for a while. My carpet’s had enough hummus trodden into it for the time being.” He/She laughed, but it was forced. “Maybe you could come around and just... look at some photos with your old Aunt/Uncle?”

“Share some memories of Jim and Annie before... before? I hope you went to see your mother, and took my advice. I know she can be difficult, but...”

There was a long pause, but he/she didn’t say anything further and eventually the line went dead.

Go to **170**

### 167

"You have no. New. Messages."

Alix stared at her tracker, wondering how that was possible. She knew people, she had friends, family. In this modern switched on age, everyone messaged everyone on their trackers more than they spoke face to face.

If the PET section of your STATUS SHEET is blank, go to **168** now. Otherwise, **read on.**

"Everyone except me," Alix told petname. Petname stared at Alix and

[Cat]mewed/[Dog]barked/[Rabbit]pounded his/her hind feet against the floorboards/[Fish] jumped clear of the surface of the water, splashing back down into his/her tank again and again/[Lizard] dug furiously at the corner of his/her vivarium/[Bird]whistled a decent imitation of Alix's tracker alarm over and over

"You would say that," said Alix.

Go to **171**

### 168

"Everyone except me," Alix told the empty apartment.

Go to **170**

### 169

Alix smiled. That was nice to hear. No use to her present situation, but nice.  
Back to the desk.  
POSITIVITY +5  
Go to 171

170

Alix sighed. How depressing.  
POSITIVITY -5  
Go to 171

171

Okay, so maybe... Alix picked up her stylus, traced the beginnings of words that wouldn't come. Nope. Nothing. So much for that idea as a source of inspiration.  
Go to 159

172

ALIX +5

It was a flat, really. The estate agent called it an apartment to give it greater cache and the term had stuck, even though Alix knew it to be a lie. The 'compact and bijoux' part was almost true.

She pulled back the curtains.

[if POSTIVITY >20] A grey drizzle was falling, making the sky look almost normal. The alpine shrubs in the decorative troughs across the street were no doubt grateful of the rare drink.[OTHERWISE] It was dry and humid but windy. The wind only intensified the dryness, whipping up clouds of dusty debris from the gutters. Even the scrubby alpine shrubs the council had planted in decorative troughs were wilting.

A man on a bike wobbled down the street, his collar pulled up against the weather.

[if career >15] As he neared, he caught sight of Alix, and stared up at her as she stared down. Maybe he recognised her from one of her videos, maybe he was just a perve, maybe he was another lost soul starved of human contact, whatever the case,[OTHERWISE] She wondered where he was going. Most major industries were limiting their production now, running with skeleton crews, biding their time until things were more certain. A lot of people had been laid off, but maybe he was one of the lucky ones, something deemed high priority like food or education or government. Whichever it was made no difference to his cycling ability - he lost concentration, his handlebars veered away from him, and his front tyre connected with one of the heavy concrete troughs, pitching him off the saddle and into the street. Alix let out a loud laugh, then clapped her hand over her mouth and dropped to her knees in case he heard or saw her.

Peeping over the windowsill, she saw him get to his feet, brushing off his knees and looking around, pride more hurt than he was.

Not necessarily inspirational, but she was glad she'd seen it. Once he was safely off down the street, she straightened and returned to her desk.

POSITIVITY +5  
Go to 159

173

ALIX +5

POSITIVITY +5

Petname seemed surprised by the attention, (as far as a pettype could look surprised, at least) and that made Alix feel bad.

If 'Rock' is ticked in the OTHER section of your STATUS SHEET, **read on**.

Otherwise, go to **174** now.

She supposed that between keeping her relatives happy, and her fans happy and herself [if POSITIVITY >25]happy, [if POSITIVITY <5]going, [OTHERWISE]adequate, there hadn't been a whole lot of time for petname.

Go to **175**

#### 174

Who knew what kind of life he/she'd had up til now? He/she could have ended up anywhere. Lucky his/her loser former owner dumped him/her outside Alix's apartment.

Go to **175**

#### 175

Alix used the laser pointer feature on her stylus to keep petname entertained. She shone it on the wall behind petname and watched as the silly pettype

[Cat/Dog/Rabbit/Lizard]chased/[Bird]fluttered/[Fish]swam after it, back and forth, trying to get it in his/her [Cat/Dog/Rabbit/Lizard/Fish]mouth/[Bird]beak but never quite managing.

If 'Rock' is ticked in the OTHER section of your STATUS SHEET, **read on**.

Otherwise, go to **176**.

Petname had been a surprise gift from Annie, of all people. Alix picked his/her name of course, but Annie picked him/her.

Go to **177**

#### 176

The tracker was a gift from Annie, a heavy hint to be better at staying in touch.

Go to **177**

#### 177

She wasn't sick back then, still spent hours teasing her hair into the desired style. It was one of Annie's many gripes that she wasn't permitted her hair sprays, clays or waxes in the hospital. Nothing flammable, just in case. Anyway, it was when Alix hadn't long moved in to the apartment, was just getting settled, still finding a place for every knickknack and doodad, and there was a knock at the door.

Alix had expected Maude/Simon with the customary house-warming pot plant, but there was Annie, totally out of place in the drab hallway, like a glorious parakeet in a concrete multi-storey carpark. She'd touched her hair, and if it had been anyone other than Annie, Alix would have said she seemed nervous.

Annie didn't get nervous. Alix supposed Annie had probably just been preoccupied by the smell of damp in the corridor.

They'd exchanged pleasantries like strangers, and then Annie had handed over the cardboard box. She'd looked around the apartment, never meeting Alix's eye as she said: "I don't really know why I picked it up. I felt like it was something Jim would've bought you." And then she'd strode over to Alix's desk, picked up her paperweight and sneered: "Oh, who even uses these anymore!"

Typical Annie.

Petname suddenly gave up on the laser and made a playful lunge for Alix's fingers <sup>[Fish]</sup>as they trailed too close to the water, <sup>[Lizard]</sup>leaping half out of the vivarium and nearly snatching them into his/her <sup>[Cat/Dog/Fish/Rabbit/Lizard]</sup>mouth/<sup>[Bird]</sup>beak. Alix laughed despite the interruption to her reverie.

"All right, buddy, you win!" She fed petname a handful of pettreats as a reward, and returned to her desk.

Go to **159**

## 178

ALIX +5

In the ALIX section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Survival Kit'

Alix retrieved an assortment of tins from her cupboards, some bottles of water, a blanket and a small bag of toiletries.

If the PET section of your STATUS SHEET is blank, go to **179**. Otherwise, **read on**.

She even remembered some pettreats for petname.

Go to **179**

## 179

POSITIVITY +5

She was killing it! Some seriously good adulting. No first aid kit yet, but there was still plenty of time for that, and the landlord had to provide one by law anyway.

She took everything down to the lockers in the basement, binned the flask of foul-smelling something she'd left in there last time she'd gone on a responsibility kick, and sprayed a squirt of air freshener around to cover her tracks. Job done, she strolled back upstairs to her apartment and sat down at her desk once more. Time to get started.

No excuses.

Go to **159**

## 180

Okay, enough stalling. It was time to get down to the task at hand. Alix dug her notebook out of the bottom drawer of her desk. The cover and leaves were real paper, handmade. It was her dad's, given to him as a gift, presented by the police commissioner for services above and beyond the call of duty. Alix had sneaked it out of his office after he died, right before Annie went crazy and smashed everything and Maude/Simon had to come round and prise the neck of the whisky bottle from her clenched bleeding fingers.

The front contained his own handwritten notes, small, closely written lines, like he was aware of the preciousness of writing with a real pen on real paper, and none of the rough cream surface should be wasted. Alix wished she'd found the pen, so she could hold something else he'd held. She thought often about reading his words, his thoughts committed to the page, but so far she'd resisted. What if he was unhappy? What if he hated her and Annie? What if the things he'd seen and done, been forced to see and do, had made him into someone Alix wouldn't like or recognise?

She only used the book for important projects, for things and ideas that really mattered. Everything else went in the tracker as an airnote. She was hesitant about using the notebook now. Did this count? Was this special enough?

Yes. Go to **181**

No. Go to **182**

### 181

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

ALIX +5

POSITIVITY +10

Go to **183**

### 182

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

ALIX -5

POSITIVITY -10

Go to **183**

### 183

It had to be. If it wasn't special already, it would become special, she would make it special by putting it in the book.

It was strange. To create an airnote, you waved your stylus around, literally writing in air like a wizard, and then Oju (who was basically a disembodied spirit living in your tracker) turned it into a file. And yet that whole process seemed so mundane. Pen on paper was different. Mystical. Real magic. Outlining her plans in the book would be like formulating an incantation, actually [if 'Scarf' IS ticked in the ANNIE section] buying the scarf/[if 'Short Story' is NOT blank in the PROJECT section] writing the story<sup>[OTHERWISE]</sup> finishing the video would be casting the spell.

So cast it.

Go to **184**

Go to **213**

### 184

If CAREER is HIGHER THAN 15, read **pink** text too from now on.

Alix raced into the coffee shop, weaving through the closely grouped tables. She'd ended up so caught up in her new project again, she'd lost track of time. Her bag rattled a tray of drained cups settled between a young couple obviously in for the long haul. [if POSITIVITY >25] "So sorry!" Alix called over her shoulder, and they smiled and made accepting noises. [OTHERWISE] Alix plunged onward muttering apologies, but could feel their angry eyes burning into her back. Good job they didn't have incendiary vision.

**"Don't we know her from somewhere?" the guy asked the girl, hunching low over the table as if that somehow made his voice carry less.**

Billie was in the corner, occupying a huge brown leather armchair, reading the penultimate book in that epic fantasy series. It'd always seemed unlikely that series would ever get finished, now it was surely impossible. There was a small stool opposite for Alix.

As Alix tried to manoeuvre herself onto the stool without knocking any more crockery or dragging furniture to the floor with her bag,

[if BILLIE >10] Billie dropped her book on the table and stood, folding Alix into a tight hug. Alix did her best to hug back, but it didn't come naturally. Blame Annie for that.

If 'Story Read' IS ticked in the OTHER section of your STATUS SHEET, **read on**. Otherwise, go to **185** now.

"Thanks for what you said about my story," Alix said, apparently hellbent on making an awkward moment awkwarder.

"Oh, hey," Billie grinned. "I meant it! That was really great! You got any more I can read?"

Alix shrugged and mumbled and deepened in colour.

POSITIVITY +5

DREAMS +5

Go to **186**

### 185

Billie said: "How's it going?" and carefully placed a bookmark between the pages of her book.

Go to **186**

### 186

"Got you a caramel latte," Billie pushed it towards her. "Hope that's ok. Although after yesterday, an espresso might be more appropriate!"

"I know. I'm so sorry about the hospital, my mother can be really difficult sometimes..."  
Alix trailed off, unsure whether to expand on that most awkward of subjects.

[if 'Party' IS ticked in the LOCATIONS VISITED section] "The family party, too... I mean, I know you would have come with me if I'd given you a call, but, they're so boring and everyone is so... y'know?"

Alix realised her mumbled excuses probably sounded pretty weak. Sure, Billie was nodding sympathetically now, but...

If 'Drinks' IS ticked in the BILLIE section of your STATUS SHEET, **read on**. Otherwise, go to **187** now.

"And the dive bar." Alix forged on. "That's why I'm late actually. My head's still banging and I took longer getting ready than intended."

"Same!" Billie laughed, but she looked as if she'd done nothing but drink spring water and sleep soundly last night. "What was that last place called again?"

"Puzzles," said Alix, sipping at her latte.

Go to **187**

### 187

The caramel syrup made the coffee sweeter than Alix would've liked, but Billie's own drink was a double hot chocolate with all the trimmings, so maybe this was as close to low sugar as she got. Billie picked up a teaspoon and ate the melting marshmallows, cream and sprinkles off the top like it was a dessert.

The silence stretched between them until Alix felt compelled to fill it.

"I don't know if you know about Annie...?" Go to **191**

"Do you have family back in Iseyja? Go to **197**

"Weren't you scared to fly over with... everything that's happening?" Go to **190**

If 'Rock' IS ticked in the OTHER section of your STATUS SHEET, you may also choose:

"Thanks for the rock." Go to **189**

If 'Drinks' IS ticked in the BILLIE section of your STATUS SHEET, you may also choose:

"Remember that guy in the club?" Go to **188**

### **188**

Make the following adjustments to your STATUS SHEET:

BILLIE +15

POSITIVITY +5

Go to **206**

### **189**

Make the following adjustments to your STATUS SHEET:

BILLIE +15

POSITIVITY +10

DREAMS +5

Go to **212**

### **190**

Make the following adjustments to your STATUS SHEET:

BILLIE +5

POSITIVITY -5

Go to **200**

### **191**

Make the following adjustments to your STATUS SHEET:

BILLIE +10

FAMILY +10

ANNIE +5

Billie's eyes widened.

"I mean... I know she's Annie Akerman. How could I not? And..." Billie looked down at her hands, rubbing the neck of the teaspoon like she was trying to bend it. "I saw some

of the tabloid stuff. But I know they make all that up. They like to have someone to blame."

Alix sighed. Of course. There was no way Billie couldn't have heard of Annie's exploits and the ensuing backlash, even from cold, distant Iseyja.

"But who cares about any of that anyway?" Billie continued. "What about now? Is she going to be okay?"

Alix shook her head. "Who can say? The so-called specialists certainly don't. The government won't release full details of what was in the serum, so they're trying to figure it out from her bloodwork, but-

"Whoah," said Billie. "I figured all the scare stories about the serum were just that."

Alix had come home from college to find Annie on her back on the kitchen floor, blood pooling at the corners of her eyes, trickling from her ears to the slate tiles, running out of her mouth and down her chin to add another colour to the beaded necklace at her throat.

"No," Alix admitted. "That part was true. We were supposed to be getting another payout but..."

"They're trying to use the meteor as an excuse not to bother?"

Alix nodded.

This was getting her down. A change of topic was in order.

"How's the meteor being reported in Iseyja?" Go to **192**

"Any plans for today?" Go to **194**

If the 'Drinks' box in the BILLIE section of your STATUS SHEET IS ticked, you may also choose:

"So, that guy in the club..." Go to **193**

**192**

Adjust your STATUS SHEET as follows:

BILLIE +10

CAREER +5

Go to **200**

**193**

Adjust your STATUS SHEET as follows:

BILLIE +15

Go to **206**

**194**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

BILLIE +5

"Well, here's a pretty radical idea..." said Billie, wadding up her napkin and stuffing it into her now empty cup. "But since I came here to visit you, I was thinking maybe we could hang out? What d'you say?"

"Of course, that'd be great!" Go to **195**

"Actually, I'm kinda busy..." Go to **196**

### **195**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

BILLIE +15

In BILLIE's 'Mood' section, erase any existing moods and tick 'Happy'. Go to **207**

### **196**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

BILLIE -20

In BILLIE's 'Mood' section, erase any existing moods and tick 'Angry'.

Go to **210**

### **197**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

FAMILY +5

Billie shook her head. "All worked in Lifun."

Alix's stomach clenched.

"Oh, Billie, I'm so sorry."

Billie stirred her hot chocolate, almost losing the teaspoon, and shrugged. "Your Dad-"

If 'Rock' IS ticked in the OTHER section of your status sheet, **read on**. Otherwise, go to **198** now.

Alix could only nod. This conversation was just getting worse.

Billie seemed to sense her discomfort and changed the subject.

Go to **207**

### **198**

If your FAMILY score is HIGHER THAN 15, **read on**. Otherwise, go to **199** now.

"It wasn't his fault!" Alix snapped.

Billie's teaspoon clattered onto her saucer. The couple at the next table looked round.

"Sorry, I'm just-" Alix let the words trail away. She couldn't explain her outburst without picking at old scabs, and she already felt delicate and scarred.

Behind them, the espresso machine roared.

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

BILLIE -5

POSITIVITY -5

IF BILLIE's score is LOWER THAN 15, erase any information recorded in the 'Mood' section and tick 'Angry'.

Go to **207**

**199**

Alix's expression was enough to stop Billie in her tracks. After a moment's awkward silence, she took the hint and changed the subject.

Go to **207**

**200**

"It's not so bad. Iseyja is treating it like the volcano was preparation, making this something everyone can understand, something we've survived before." She sucked her top lip thoughtfully. "Except we didn't all survive before. Maybe they're in denial, I don't know."

If POSITIVITY IS HIGHER THAN 20, **read on**. Otherwise, go to **201** now.

Billie went on: "They're already talking about how we'll rebuild after the dust settles."

"Well, Iseyja is pretty well outside the impact zone."

Go to **201**

**201**

Alix pictured the wobbly red shape they always showed on the news updates, its indistinct edges being redrawn on a daily basis as the GSA recalculated. Always growing, never shrinking, an angry amoeba threatening to eat the world.

IF BILLIE's score is HIGHER THAN 20, **read on**. Otherwise, go to **202** now.

"You know..." Billie dabbed her lips with a paper napkin. "You could always come and stay with me. It's beautiful and probably safer than here."

Go to **202**

**202**

Alix smiled sadly.

"Mum's ward is like a fortress..." Go to **203**

"If flights are still running..." Go to **204**

"This is my home..." Go to **205**

**203**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

FAMILY +10

ANNIE +10

Go to **209**

**204**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

BILLIE +10

DREAMS +10

Go to **209**

**205**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

BILLIE -5

CAREER +10

POSITIVITY +5

Go to **209**

**206**

The club was a retro-themed dive bar. No specific era, just generic 'retro', a mishmash of music, decor and drinks that had been popular once. A pool table, some neon wall art in the shape of flamingos, egg chairs, a Bakelite phone. Billie and Alix had been playing pool for about half an hour when the guy came over. He was drunk, but sober enough to recognise Alix as "That girl from the net!" attempt to charm them into accepting a drink or two.

When his half-remembered romantic sonnets prompted fits of giggles rather than acquiescence to his request for a shoulder massage, he changed tack, insisting he'd leave them alone if only one would allow him to kiss their hand.

[IF BILLIE >30] Billie [OTHERWISE] Alix took that hit.

It was only when her hand was close to his lips that he bared his teeth and nipped at the skin.

"We should've broken a pool cue over the freak's head!" she said, rubbing the back of her hand at the memory. Thankfully he hadn't broken the skin.

They laughed again. It felt good to laugh. Rare.

If BILLIE's score is HIGHER than 25, erase any information currently recorded under 'Mood' and tick 'Happy'.

Go to **207**

### 207

If 'Happy' IS ticked in BILLIE's MOOD section, or if NO MOOD is ticked, **read on**. Otherwise, go to **208** now.

"So, I was thinking during my stay we should go to that comic shop you're always raving about? And I read about that clock, the one with the fountains and the little brass people that dance around it on the hour? I know it's probably old news to you, but I'd love to see it, and maybe we could go back to your place at some point and I could get to see where all the videos are made, and- am I babbling? I'm babbling aren't I?"

Alix laughed, glad of this glimpse into Billie's stream of consciousness. "Yes, but it's fine."

Sounded like it would be a good day.

POSITIVITY +15

Go to **213**

### 208

Alix moved the empty cups onto the tray and reached for her bag.

"It's been so amazing catching up with you," she said, pushing back her chair.

[IF BILLIE >10] As they were exchanging a parting hug/[OTHERWISE] As Alix made to leave, the young couple, evidently biding their time or building their confidence, leapt between Alix and the door.

"Could we get a selfie?" asked the girl, holding her stylus under Alix's nose like it was a microphone. Perhaps she *was* recording.

"We've watched all your videos," said the guy. "You replied to one of my comments once! I'm ShyGuy999!"

Alix posed, wondering how the image would turn out, whether Billie would be visible in the background.

A large group of teenagers jostled inside, swarming around Alix, loudly discussing what they might order. A boy with a feather earring trod on her toe and [if POSITIVITY >20]apologised profusely.[/OTHERWISE]didn't even notice.

Eventually they cleared, leaving Alix feeling lost and disoriented, like she no longer knew which way the door was.

She looked over at Billie's chair.

[if BILLIE >10]Billie gave a small wave.[/OTHERWISE]Billie had gone.

Alix left the cafe, trying hard not to feel like she'd messed up somehow. Had she?

Go to **213**

### **209**

.... I guess that's where I'll be when it... happens."

[if BILLIE >20]Billie gave her arm a reassuring pat. [if POSITIVITY <15] Alix cringed away. She just couldn't help herself.

[if POSITIVITY >10]Somehow, just making plans for afterwards felt good. An acknowledgement that there would be an afterwards. [if 'Party' ticked in LOCATIONS VISITED] Maybe that was what was so annoying about Maude/Simon's parties - they were a goodbye, an acceptance of fate.

Go to **207**

### **210**

If BILLIE's score on your STATUS SHEET is LESS THAN 10, read on. Otherwise, go to **211** now.

Billie's cheeks flushed, her eyes blazed.

"I guess this is goodbye, then," she snapped, gathering her things in quick, angry movements. Her voice was loud. People were staring.

Go to **207**

### **211**

"Maybe I can get an early flight back to Iseyja," Billie said, her voice barely audible. In the BILLIE section of your STATUS SHEET erase 'Present'. Do not read any green or red text from now on.

Go to **207**

### **212**

[if BILLIE <10]Billie shrugged. Alix sensed she regretted sending it now.

"Just a little something I picked out of the rubble."

Alix flinched. "I'm so sorry," she said quickly. "I never even thought to ask. Your family-"

Billie submerged her last few marshmallows and cut Alix off quickly.  
Go to **200**

### 213

*Welcome to wiff.net, the Writers' Independent Fiction Forum.*

*The following extract was submitted by Lixxil. We thank you for taking the time to read it.*

If 'New' is written next to PROJECT 'Short Story' on your STATUS SHEET, **read on**. Otherwise, go to **214** now.

She looked up at the sky. It had never looked so flat, so nothing. It almost made her miss the green. Ash drifted down from the sky, slowly, lazily, like feathers on the breeze, or petals. She once drank a cocktail with petals floating in it, back when she thought the world was ending. Now she realised

[if POSITIVITY >20]it wasn't ending but changing. A stark change, frightening even, but life would go on./[OTHERWISE]it had ended long ago, before the protests and the car bomb, before the sickness and the meteor, it had ended when a man made a mistake, a fatal mistake that turned a school to rubble, left its playground a smoking crater.

The ash reached her, coating her skin, her hair, her clothes. She'd expected it to be hot, to scald as it landed, but it felt almost weightless, like a butterfly alighting on her outstretched fingertips. She tried to catch as much of the ash as she could as if

[if POSITIVITY >20]it was falling snow, and she was a child again, spinning around and around catching snowflakes in her hands and on her reaching tongue. The ash tasted unpleasant, like sand mixed with blood, but she paid it little mind because for now she had survived./[OTHERWISE]it would be currency in this new, failed world. What else was there? The meek had inherited the earth and the earth was a crumbling, dust-filled shit hole.

She supposed she should find shelter, because as harmless as this stuff seemed, who knew what it was doing to her as she breathed it in? She imagined her lungs filling with sand like a newly tipped hourglass. No. Better to find shelter and just wait for this to be over.

Go to **216**

### 214

If POSITIVITY is HIGHER THAN 20, **read on**. Otherwise, go to **215** now.

It is said that "beauty is in the gaze of the beholder". I have no need of beauty, for my lineage has made me unwearying, a navigator, I fight from the front – all power, terror, revenge – attributes which are not beautiful, according to rule; but they were more useful to me: father imagined His daughter needed rescuing – as if one so motherless could not survive being fatherless too.

He has sent his servant after me, a slave, a pet He has transformed to suit the purpose. I too have much changed since He saw me last, then a girl, bright-eyed, now, a goddess, owl-eyed, fierce. Yet when I compared me with mine enemies, I had no fear in them: I could imagine that most observers would suppose me weak, girlish, virginal; while they

would pronounce them monstrous, powerful, terrifying. I saw them rise, attack – it was nothing: the hair torn from my scalp had as much weight in it as their claws; the remains of my robe as much significance as their flailing limbs. I saw myself change – my hands grew bloody and hard, my body bruised yet stronger than ever before, a scream of fury danced from my mouth as easy as breathing. Something in my brain and heart, in my blood and nerves had done this to me and I knew I would never be human again.

Go to **216**

### 215

It is said that "beauty is in the gaze of the beholder". I pray that that is true, for the shifting features my master has given me, the wolf-like visage, the scales of the dragon, the golden eyes of the tiger, the massive jaw of the bear – all power, terror, revenge – are not beautiful, according to rule; but they were more useful to me: His daughter had no hope of rescue with me lying cold and dead in the ground – yet how could she look upon me now?

I was much changed since she had seen me last, then a soldier, a person, now, I know not what. A servant to my god, a slave to my own base impulses, awakened in me by the transformation He wrought. Yet when I compared me with mine enemies, I had no fear in them: I could imagine that most observers would call them monstrous, grotesque, abominations; while they would pronounce me in those same terms at once animalistic and relentless. I saw them rise, attack – it was nothing: the soil of my grave had as much weight in it as their bite; the remains of my armour as much significance as their flailing limbs. I saw myself change – my hands grew long and clawed, my wings burst from my back and spread, lightning danced from my mouth as easy as breathing. Something in my brain and heart, in my blood and nerves had done this to me and I did not know if I could ever be human again.

Go to **216**

### 216

*Thank you for reading. Please now rate the piece on a scale of 1-10. (With 1 representing 'What the hell is this crap?!' up to 10 'The finest creative work since time immemorial.')*

Write your RATING out of 10 on your STATUS SHEET in 'Rating 2'

Go to **217**

### 217

If 'Present' is ticked in the BILLIE section of your STATUS SHEET resume reading **green** text again (or continue if you already were).

Compare your scores for the FAMILY, CAREER and DREAMS statistics under ALIX's STATISTICS on your STATUS SHEET. If the HIGHEST SCORE IS FAMILY, go to **310**; if the HIGHEST SCORE is CAREER, go to **218**; if the HIGHEST SCORE IS DREAMS, go to **256**. If two or more scores are the same, you may choose which section to go to.

### 218

In the LOCATIONS VISITED section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Awards'.

The champagne fizzed to the top of the glass. Alix motioned for Elizabeth to stop, but she shook her head. "It's rare to get anything for free in this life. You grab it with both hands girl, especially if it's in alcohol-form." That wasn't strictly true. Her friends got

free things all the time. Elizabeth had companies falling over themselves to give her free pots and pans and kitchen utensils. Jodie received boxes of clothes and make-up daily. Dietmar hadn't had to pay for a videogame for three years.

Making content for MyBoxx was weird like that. Companies only wanted to give you free stuff once you'd reached a point where you could easily afford it yourself. Maybe if Alix had a clearer brand, she'd get free stuff too, although what exactly she couldn't imagine.

Hard hats and hi-vis jackets if her fans' cosplaying efforts were anything to go by.

"Good year," said Dietmar, nodding towards the date printed on the foil label. Alix couldn't tell if he was joking. It was recent, the champagne. Maybe the event organisers were trying to save money, maybe you just couldn't get vintage any more.

[If POSITIVITY <25] Why put something away for a rainy day when more days, rainy or otherwise, weren't guaranteed? [OTHERWISE] Many of the distilleries had been repurposed, some voluntarily.

She gave a non-committal smile and reached for her glass.

"Wait!" Jodie's eyes were glassy and reddened, and she kept fiddling with the underwiring beneath her bodycon dress. "We should have a toast!" She held her glass aloft but didn't say anything further.

Alix wondered what Billie was making of all this. She'd rolled up the sleeves of her tux and was chomping on a breadstick like she went to award ceremonies all the time.

[If BILLIE's MOOD is 'Angry' OR BILLIE <15] She hadn't spoken to Alix much since the coffee shop, so Alix was fretting over the state of their friendship. She had agreed to come here, at least...

Dietmar and Liz exchanged a glance, clearly waiting on Alix to come up with something.

"To friendship!" Go to **219**  
"To better times!" Go to **220**  
"To the meteorite!" Go to **221**  
"To evil!" Go to **222**

If POSITIVITY is LOWER THAN 25, you may also choose:

Let Jodie come up with a toast. She was the one who brought it up. Go to **223**

## 219

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

POSITIVITY +10

CAREER +5

Go to **224**

## 220

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

POSITIVITY -5

CAREER +5

ANNIE +5

FAMILY +5

Go to **224**

**221**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

POSITIVITY -10

CAREER -5

Go to **227**

**222**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

POSITIVITY +5

BILLIE +5

DREAMS +5

Go to **224**

**223**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

POSITIVITY -5

CAREER -5

BILLIE -5

Go to **227**

**224**

**Billie**, Dietmar and Liz grinned and echoed Alix's words at the top of their voices. As their glasses clinked together, Jodie's head lolled to her chest, and she said something that may have been "Gnnnfggh!" Maybe her next make-up tutorial should be on how to hide the tell-tale signs of a hangover.

Alix sat back and looked around the room. She hadn't been around for the first MyBoxx awards, of course, but Dietmar had told her it was a single bottle of fizzy wine sipped from plastic cups in a dingy basement at Myboxx HQ.

Today they'd packed out the Oppidan Central Theatre. The building was old, creaking, plaster peeling and the Royal Box was in such an advanced state of disrepair it had been cordoned off with red and white tape.

[if POSITIVITY <25](Although who needed a Royal Box now, right?)

But as public buildings went, it was still very grand, and Alix spent quite some time imagining her father receiving his medals on the stage, even though he got them in the Grand Hall in Shuto City. Alix had only seen it in videos, but the Hall was a monument to modern technology, all glass and neon, not some faded memory like the Central. She stared up at the ornate plasterwork of the light fittings. Each was grand in its own way, she supposed.

[if NO MOOD is ticked in the BILLIE section, or if 'Happy' is ticked]"It's a fairytale building, isn't it?" asked Billie, following Alix's gaze to the crystal chandeliers.

"Sssh, sssh!" Dietmar yelled,

[if 'Present' is NOT ticked in the BILLIE section, or if 'Angry' IS ticked in MOOD]even though no-one at the table was talking.

"It's starting!"

Chad Chen took the stage, looking like a granite block, grey suit pulled tight across his square frame.

"Is everyone excited for the awards?" he asked brightly.

All around Alix, MyBoxxers old and new whooped and cheered.

Alix kept quiet, but inside she was yelling louder than Dietmar. Go to **225**  
If POSITIVITY is LESS THAN 25, you may also choose:

She'd seen it all before, and it wasn't like she was going to win anyway. Go to **226**

**225**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

POSITIVITY +5

Go to **230**

**226**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

POSITIVITY -5

ALIX -5

Go to **243**

**227**

They sat in awkward silence, the sounds of drinking and laughter swirling around them. Just as Alix was on the verge of saying something, anything to break the strange, terrible mood that had descended, Jodie leapt to her feet and cried: "To me, to the Boxxies, to everything!" Champagne sloshed from her raised glass onto her bare shoulder, but she didn't seem to notice.

There was a note of hysteria in her voice, and Elizabeth and Dietmar echoed her words, but their eyes were sad as they clinked glasses.

*Billie joined the toast enthusiastically, the same way she seemed to approach everything.*

Alix wondered whether the lack of a nomination had hit Jodie harder than they'd thought, or if it was just the culmination of everything else piling up on her.

Taking Jodie to the ladies was probably the kindest thing Alix could do right now. Go to **228**

Being around her friends seemed like the best place for her. Go to **229**

**228**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

POSITIVITY +5

Go to **237**

**229**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

POSITIVITY +5

CAREER +5

Go to **230**

## 230

The first few awards went as expected. Dietmar took Best Channel, Most Subscribers and Most Views. Alix had always found the artificial separation of those last two weird. Was it even possible to have one without the other? At his first speech Dietmar looked bashful, his freshly shaved face transforming him back into the young Boxxer Alix had known only as a viewer. Shy, yet red-cheeked from screaming at the villain of that jumpscare game that was all the rage for about two months. An eternity in MyBoxx years.

By the second and third, he was drunker, louder, more Dookie than Dietmar. He returned to the table and made a tower from the gold cubes of his awards. Elizabeth asked a passing waiter to take away the empty champagne bottles in an effort to avoid breakages.

"Even better if we could get them switched for some full ones," said Billie, batting her eyelashes.

"I like this one, Alix," Elizabeth said, twisting her napkin into a swan to decorate the grounds of Dietmar's awards castle.

Billie redirected her eyelash batting towards Elizabeth and Alix, and they both laughed. [if 'Angry' is ticked in BILLIE's MOOD] Beneath the laughter, Alix felt even guiltier about the way she'd handled things earlier.

Jodie, who had been staring into her open clutch for several minutes, abruptly pushed back her chair and tottered away, weaving through the tables, evidently on her way to the ladies.

In the OTHER section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Jodie - Toilet'.

Jodie probably shouldn't be without a chaperone in that state. Go to **231**

It was almost time for Alix's category, it'd be a shame to miss it. Go to **232**

Surely this thing had to be over soon? Go to **233**

## 231

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

POSITIVITY +5

CAREER +5

Go to **238**

## 232

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

CAREER +10

Go to **234**

## 233

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

POSITIVITY -5

ALIX -5

Go to **243**

## 234

Chad was making a brave effort to pretend like this was a normal awards ceremony, even during Dietmar's standing ovation for Video of the Year, when flakes of plaster fell from the ceiling, and the ushers hurried round urging people to retake their seats and quieten down.

As Alix drained her champagne, her stomach growled. Always too much champagne and not enough food at these things. Tiny squares of crispbread topped with pate or hummus barely qualified as mouthfuls, never mind enough to soak up the booze.

Alix glanced over at Jodie's empty chair.

[if 'Jodie - Toilet' is NOT ticked in OTHER, tick it now and write in this line] *Alix hadn't noticed her slip away.*

Now she came to think about it, Jodie had been gone a while.

"I'm sure you're all excited by this brand new category," Chad was saying, sweat beading his forehead under the lights.

Elizabeth and Dietmar were engrossed in the small castle they'd constructed from his awards. He'd fashioned a princess out of a napkin and she, voiced by Dietmar, was deep in conversation with a knife and fork, puppeteered by Elizabeth.

Jodie had seemed a little out of it, maybe Alix should go and check on her? Go to **235**

He was literally on the verge of announcing Alix's category. Go to **236**

## 235

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

CAREER -5

POSTITIVITY +5

BILLIE +5

Go to **239**

## 236

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

CAREER +10

BILLIE -5

Go to **243**

## 237

"Jodie," Alix shouted across the table, "I'm going to the toilet, come with?"

"Oh my god!" Jodie looked delighted. "You never let me pee with you!"

Not going to this time either, Alix thought. She knew the kind of weird female-bonding shit Jodie was into. If there was any way to lure Jodie into an environment where Alix could get her to drink water and talk about what was going on with her, this was it.

Jodie hiccupped, her expression changing abruptly. Go to **238**

## 238

Despite being drunk, and wearing spike heels, Jodie somehow managed to get halfway across the room before Alix had even stood up. Alix hurried after her.  
Go to **239**

### 239

A girl with a mohawk was sitting in the sink, passionately kissing a girl in a t-shirt dress and combat boots. Wet tissue paper trailed from the heel of her cowboy boot and disappeared under the door of the end cubicle. All three cubicle doors were closed. Alix hesitated.

[if POSITIVITY <25] She didn't dare disturb the kissing couple.

Mohawk somehow noticed Alix passing and broke free of her kissing partner.

"Isn't that Lixxil?" She said, as if Alix couldn't hear her.

"You see which cubicle Jodie Torres went into?" asked Alix.

They shuffled apart from one another and stared at her, slack-jawed.

"Tiddlywinks?" she tried again.

Still nothing.

A muffled moan emerged from the middle cubicle.

"Jodie?" Alix tapped lightly on the door, turning her back on the couple.

A loud sob was her only answer.

"C'mon," Alix persisted. "Let me in there."

"S'open."

Alix squeezed her way inside, not wanting to open the door too wide in case Jodie was semi-undressed, or snorting coke, or covered in puke. She was none of those things. Just sprawled on the floor, face streaked with mascara and tears.

The lights flickered. Alix froze for a second, expecting the worst, but after a moment they stabilised. The sooner she could take care of Jodie and get her back to the ceremony, the better.

"Is this about the awards?" Go to **240**

"There's still time before it hits..." Go to **241**

"Whatever this is about, I'm sure talking about it will help." Go to **242**

### 240

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

CAREER +5

POSITIVITY -5

Go to **247**

### 241

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:  
POSITIVITY +10  
DREAMS +5  
Go to **247**

**242**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:  
POSITIVITY +5  
BILLIE +5  
Go to **247**

**243**

Alix stifled a yawn. She'd half-dozed her way through the last few categories.

"... differs from the other awards in that it's awarded by a panel of judges from MyBoxx HQ, rather than subscriber votes." Chad was saying.

Alix sat up straighter. This was it.

[if positivity <25] Time to apply her gracious defeat face./ [OTHERWISE] Maybe she should have prepared a speech, just in case...

The lights flickered. Alix thought for a moment it was the lighting technicians attempting to build tension, but Chad's panicked expression suggested otherwise. He tugged at his collar and had an urgent eye-conversation with some unseen authority. Eventually the spotlights brightened and stayed on, and the hushed mutterings around the room resided.

"Well," Chad recovered himself quickly. "Without further ado – Most Innovative Video! And the award goes to..."

How long does it take to open a bloody envelope?!

If CAREER is HIGHER THAN 30, go to **244**

Otherwise, go to **245**

**244**

"...Lixxil for *Apocalyptic Triptych!*"

Alix took a moment to register the strange Boxxer tag before realising it was hers. She'd done it. She'd won a Boxxie!

"C'mon and join us on stage!" Chad said, possibly for the third or fourth time.

Still stunned, wishing she'd worn better clothes, or prepared something to say, or at least let Jodie do her make-up, Alix stumbled towards the stage. Chad reached down to her, and she couldn't tell whose hand was sweatier as he hoisted her up beside him. She looked down at all those expectant faces.

Go to **246**

**245**

"Brodericheese for *Charlie Bit My Butt!*"

"Who the fuck is that?" said Elizabeth out of the corner of her mouth, before standing up and yelling: "You go, dude! You go!"

"C'mon and join us on stage!" Chad said, possibly for the third or fourth time.

Whoever this winner was, they were incredibly drunk, and had an entourage of equally drunk friends, all of whom seemed intent on going to the stage en masse.

"Jesus Christ," muttered Dietmar, sitting back down.

Go to **246**

## 246

[if 'Jodie – Toilet' is ticked in OTHER]Jodie's seat was still empty. Where the hell was she?

Alix opened her mouth to speak...

...and...

Go to **248**

## 247

[positivity >25] "Thanks Alix, but it's [otherwise]"Oh my god! It's

not about that! It's the whole world, don't you see?"

In the OTHER section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Jodie – Saved'. From now on read purple text in addition to any other colours.

"It's not," said Alix, [positivity >20]and she really meant it. [otherwise]although she hardly sounded convincing.

"There's the bunkers, and the evacuation plans and the impact zone's really quite small and-"

Jodie was really sobbing now. "But don't you get it, Alix?" She asked. "That's for people like us. What about everyone else? Thousands of people will die. Thousands of my subscribers will die. And I don't mean that in an 'ooh, no, lower subscription numbers' way, I mean that lots of them have airnoted me and sent me gifts and... I just really wish your dad was here. Or your mum. Any of them really." And she sobbed harder than ever. Alix didn't know what to say.

[if family >25]"I guess I hadn't really thought about other people missing them..."[otherwise]

The silence stretched between them.

Before Alix could think of anything more to add, the lights gave another brief sputter... and...

Go to **248**

## 248

**Total darkness so sudden it's heart stopping.**

**A deep, ominous rumble, horribly close.**

**Was it already happening?**

**Did they get the date wrong?**

**A sound, like rain with rocks in it.**

**"Are we safe here?"**

... Are we safe anywhere?"

If 'Awards' is ticked in the LOCATIONS section of your STATUS SHEET, go to **249**

If 'Home' is ticked in the LOCATIONS section of your STATUS SHEET, go to **299**

If 'Park' is ticked in the LOCATIONS section of your STATUS SHEET, go to **302**

If 'Mall' is ticked in the LOCATIONS section of your STATUS SHEET, go to **303**

If 'Relative's House' is ticked in the LOCATIONS section of your STATUS SHEET, go to **334**

## 249

There was a mad press towards the fire exits. Ushers waved penlights and shouted themselves hoarse trying to calm everyone, but the fear had created a hivemind intent on breaking out of the ageing building. The first wave stampeded the fire door, breaking it open and leaving it dangling on rusted hinges. The second wave trampled the first, smelling the cold outside air and rushing towards it eagerly. Alix was caught up in the third and penultimate wave, carried along in a jostle of tightly packed bodies, locking eyes with Dietmar who was equally helpless just meters away. They reached out to one another, but a heavysset man with long curly hair put his shoulder to her spine and knocked her out into the world.

Into the cold.

Alix rubbed her bare arms and wondered where she'd left her jacket. Elizabeth and Dietmar joined her, Dietmar's tux jacket wrapped around Liz's shoulders.

"Sorry, I've only got the one jacket."

Go to **250**

Go to **251**

## 250

[if Billie >20 and her MOOD is not 'Angry'] "Pssht," said Billie, taking off her tux jacket and handing it to Alix. "Where I'm from, this is barbecue weather!" [or, if Billie's MOOD is NOT 'Angry'] "You could wear mine?" Billie offered, although she seemed reluctant to part with it, so Alix shook her head. [Otherwise] Billie folded her arms and looked away.

Go to **251**

## 251

They huddled together in the cold, staring back towards the building. It was dark, or night at least. True night had been permanently interrupted by that perpetual green glow. White shapes flashed across the green-black expanse.

"Shit," said Liz. "Is that-"

Another streak, a flash, a boom, and the roof of The Central slowly crumbled in on itself. The crowd assembled outside scurried backward as one, fearing further collapse, fearing the Big One, but after a few moments, there was only silence. The meteor shower had stopped. It wasn't the end, just a precursor to it. Dietmar hugged Alix and Elizabeth close, one arm around each of them.

Billie hovered awkwardly close by.

"Wait," said Alix. "Where the hell is Jodie?"

Together they scanned the crowd, looking for her long, artfully styled hair, or her sleek, second-skin dress.

[if 'Jodie -toilet' is ticked in OTHER] "She wasn't in her seat," said Alix, a sick feeling growing in her stomach. [Otherwise] "She was right behind me, I'm sure of it."

Alix looked again at the Central. The outside looked mainly intact. Maybe-

"You can't go back in there," said Dietmar, his arm tightening around her. "Alix, it's not stable."

"I can," said Alix. "I'll be fine, I-" She strained against his grip, knowing that this was the moment, the moment the tabloid press had predicted, where her eyes would glow green and the Protectorate power would flow into her, imbuing her with super strength or laser beam eyes.

Elizabeth and Billie joined Dietmar in restraining her. "You're not like them, Alix-" "I am!"

If 'Jodie – Saved' is NOT ticked in the OTHER section of your STATUS SHEET, go to 252. If it IS, go to 255

## 252

Alix clenched her eyes tight, determined not to let the hot tears flow. She knew how it went with collapsed buildings. You pulled people out quick, or you pulled out corpses. Sure, there were those miracle cases where days later small children were dragged free virtually unscathed, but they were just that, miracles.

[if positivity <25] She'd seen the news bulletins - the body bags that Dad couldn't bear to look at. Now she truly understood why.

But Alix's nascent powers didn't make themselves known. There was no-one to throw the rubble aside and dig for survivors, no-one to create a telekinetic perimeter to prevent further collapse. The emergency services eventually arrived, but their work was painfully slow, and by the time the crowd had dwindled to small knots of grief, Alix and her friends were forced to admit what they had known as soon as the first bodies were brought out.

Jodie was gone.

Tick 'Jodie – Dead' in the OTHER section of your STATUS SHEET.

If 'Award Win' is ticked in the ALIX section of your STATUS SHEET, go to **253**.

Otherwise, go to **254**.

### 253

Alix still had the award gripped tight in her fist. The jutting corners made her fingers ache.

[if positivity <25]She looked down at it, imagined hurling the worthless gold block into the wreckage with the other rubbish, but somehow she couldn't let it go. She could never let anything go. [Otherwise]She held it tighter still until she thought the edges would pierce her flesh. They didn't.

Go to **338**

### 254

Just like dad.

Go to **338**

### 255

"I lost my fucking shoe."

They broke apart from their tense tussle, all grinning broader than they'd ever thought possible. There was Jodie, hair made grey with dust, barefoot and limping, a single stiletto gripped tight in her fist. "They were soooo expensive. I mean, I got them for free for a video, but still-"

She seemed still drunk, unaware that she'd just clambered from the wreckage of a collapsed theatre. As Dietmar and Elizabeth hugged Jodie and fussed around her, helping her shake out her hair and giving her Dietmar's dress shoes, Alix stood staring at the tiny chips of rock littering the ground, hugging herself tighter and smiling.

Jodie was fine.

Dusty, but fine.

Go to **338**

### 256

The metal squirrels bobbed around on their hourly dance, the gushing water revealing the greenish blue tarnish on their coppery coats.

"The Aqua Horological Tintinnabulator," said Billie, reading from the plaque on the front of the fountain. "Well, there's a name to conjure with." Alix smiled.

[if Billie's MOOD is 'Angry']Things were still a little tense between them after their previous exchange, but Billie seemed to be trying to make the best of it.

[if 'Present' is not ticked in BILLIE's section]Billie had come a long way to visit, so Alix hoped their activities weren't too mundane. Spending hours discussing trivialities on the MyBoxx forums, wasn't the same as meeting in person. In fact, this was the first time Alix had ever met an online friend, aside from the regular subscribers who turned up at expos to have their merch signed. And this was different.

They'd spent the morning perusing Comicus, although the shelves were getting sparse now with so many print runs coming to an end. To compensate, the shop owner had dragged boxes of dusty back issues out of the storeroom, some decades old. The reasons they'd gone unsold were mostly self-evident - poor quality printing, speech bubbles filled with indistinct text, colours layered on top of each other incorrectly reducing characters to murky brown blobs. Others sported ridiculous or downright offensive characters leering from the covers - King Cannibal, Sheba the Feminazi, Wolfmanbatturkey. Still others represented movie and game tie-ins that had obviously failed to impress.

Alix had found herself drawn to a foreign language edition called Magister Fortis, no doubt ordered in error, its cover emblazoned with a triumphant purple-costumed man holding a car above his head. Painted in dreamy watercolours, even though the man's costume was as exaggerated and unrealistic as his physique (abs bulging through lycra, a flowing cape that was an accident waiting to happen), the resemblance to her father was undeniable.

"Make a wish?" asked Billie, holding up a shiny penny and interrupting Alix's reverie.

Always with the reverie interruptions.

Wish for dad. Go to **257**

Wish for Annie. Go to **258**.

Wish for everyone. Go to **259**.

If your POSITIVITY score is LOWER THAN 25, you may also choose:

What's the point in wishing? Go to **260**

### **257**

Make the following adjustments to your STATUS SHEET:

FAMILY +5

BILLIE +5

POSITIVITY +5

Go to **262**

### **258**

Make the following adjustments to your STATUS SHEET:

FAMILY +10

ANNIE +5

POSITIVITY +5

BILLIE +5

Go to **263**

### **259**

Make the following adjustments to your STATUS SHEET:

DREAMS +5

CAREER +5

FAMILY +5

BILLIE +5

POSITIVITY +10

Go to **264**

### **260**

Make the following adjustments to your STATUS SHEET:

DREAMS -5  
BILLIE -5  
POSITIVITY -5  
Go to **261**

**261**

Alix shook her head. She'd done it when she was a kid, but it seemed kind of stupid now. Billie shrugged and threw the coin herself.  
Go to **265**

**262**

Alix wished that her dad's enhanced metabolism had caused the coroner to make a mistake. She wished he'd actually just gone into a hibernation state to repair the damage to his body. She wished that his hibernation was over now, and he'd come smashing out of his coffin and zooming back to her, strong and smiling as the day he'd left.  
Go to **265**

**263**

Alix wished that next time she went to the hospital, Annie would be up and out of bed. She wished that the doctors would tell her her mother had made a miraculous recovery. She wished Annie would tell her not only was she going to resume her duties immediately, she was going to stop the meteorite and everything would be just fine.  
Go to **265**

**264**

Alix wished that whatever happened, everyone she knew and loved would be safe, and everyone she didn't know would be safe too. She wished that once they'd rebuilt and reflected, everyone would be happier and closer and value everyone else more.  
Go to **265**

**265**

A futile gesture, perhaps. Childish even.  
[if positivity >25]At least she still had hope. [Otherwise]What was the point in wishing? May as well wish for a million in the bank and a flying horse.

"So, obviously we should go grab some lunch," said Billie. "But what then?"

"We could head back to mine and read our purchases?" Go to **266**

"Sorry to cut this short, but I'm really tired." Go to **267**

If you have a PET, you may also choose:

"How would you like to meet *petname*?" Go to **268**

**266**

Make the following adjustments to your STATUS SHEET:  
BILLIE +5  
Go to **272**

**267**

Make the following adjustments to your STATUS SHEET:  
BILLIE -10  
ALIX -5

Go to **284**

### **268**

Make the following adjustments to your STATUS SHEET:

BILLIE +10

ALIX +5

If your pet is a DOG, go to **269**

Otherwise, go to **272**

### **269**

In the BILLIE section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Walk' under ACTIVITIES.

Read the **green** text in addition to any other colours you have been instructed to read from now on.

petname was in his/her element at the park. They skirted the edge of the duck pond, where mallards and moorhens left criss-crossing wakes in the green algae. petname frequently disappeared into the knee-high yellow grass that had overpowered the 'Keep off the Grass' signs. Some of the more affluent areas had their own clean-up crews to take care of nearby public spaces. This was not one of those neighbourhoods. In a few months, the tall stalks would overwhelm the burnt-out lawnmower abandoned in the middle of the playing field.

Alix and Billie amused themselves for a surprisingly long time talking, throwing a ball for petname, buying extremely dubious meat on a stick from a street seller.

"You're not actually going to eat that, are you?" asked Alix, as Billie sniffed the deep fried nugget.

Billie made a face. "Smells like butt." She wound back her arm and whipped the stick forward, propelling the battered meat chunk into the duck pond. A mallard attacked it hungrily.

"Are ducks carnivores, usually?" Alix asked.

"Ducks are psychopathic necrophiles, a bit of fried rat is probably small potatoes to those guys."

"We used to joke about the street sellers round here serving fried rat, but nowadays..."

A low rumble filled the sky overhead.

"Great," said Alix. There hadn't been a full-blown thunderstorm in ages. "We should probably..."

... hurry back to mine." Go to **270**.

... find shelter." Go to **271**

### **270**

Make the following adjustments to your STATUS SHEET:

ALIX +5

BILLIE +5

Go to **272**

### **271**

Make the following adjustments to your STATUS SHEET:

POSITIVITY +5

DREAMS +5

Go to **291**

### **272**

In the LOCATIONS VISITED section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Home'.

From now on, read green text in addition to any other colours you have been instructed to read.

Alix took extra time turning the key in the apartment door as she struggled to remember whether she'd left any dirty underwear lying around. She was drawing a blank, so opened the door equally slowly to scan the room before allowing Billie inside.

If 'Walk' is ticked in the ACTIVITIES section of BILLIE's section of your STATUS SHEET, go to **278**

If 'Walk' is NOT ticked, but you DO have a PET, go to **273**

Otherwise, go to **274**

### **273**

For reasons known only to his/her tiny animal brain, petname

[if positivity <25 AND cat/rabbit/dog] had deposited a shit right in the middle of the kitchen table.

Go to **276**. [if positivity <25 and fish/bird/lizard] had escaped the confines of his/her

tank/cage/vivarium and was now flopping/flying/running around the floor/apartment.

Fortunately they were back before he/she had come to any harm. Go to **276** [positivity <25

and 'Walk' ticked in ACTIVITIES] go to **275** [if pet is a fish/bird/lizard] had made an enormous mess

around his/her tank/cage/vivarium by throwing gravel/sand everywhere and was now

splashing/squawking/lashing his/her tail triumphantly. Go to **277** [If pet is a cat/rabbit or walk is

NOT ticked in ACTIVITIES] had fallen asleep spread-eagled on his/her back. His/her neck was

twisted at an uncomfortable-looking angle, legs splayed, feet and mouth twitching as

he/she doubtless dreamed of devouring an extra big pettreat. Go to **277** [Otherwise] Go to

**278**.

### **274**

If your POSITIVITY score is LOWER THAN 25, go to **275**

Otherwise, go to **278**

### **275**

Alix had left the window open, allowing some mangy pigeon to enter, wander around shedding feathers and shitting, and then apparently exit, since it was now nowhere to be found.

[If 'Walk' is ticked in ACTIVITIES] petname immediately ran inside and begin rolling in the droppings, eyes shut blissfully. Go to **276**

### **276**

Alix sighed, took off her jacket and rolled up her sleeves.

"Let me just take care of this."

Tick 'MESSY' in the PET section of your STATUS SHEET.

Go to **279**

277

[If 'Walk' is not ticked in ACTIVITY]"So, that's petname," said Alix. Go to billiegiggle.  
Go to 278

278

"So, this is the pad of dreams," said Alix, wincing as she said it. Pad? She'd never called it a pad in her life. Where the hell did that come from?  
[if 'Walk' IS ticked in ACTIVITIES]She let go of petname's lead and the eager pupper hurried over to his/her water bowl, and immediately began lapping noisily, splashing water everywhere.  
Go to 279

279

Billie stifled a giggle.  
[If MESSY is ticked in the PET section]Once Alix had cleaned up and restored some semblance of order,  
[Otherwise]Once Alix had carefully put away her Magister Fortis comic, still in its cellophane wrapper,

she joined Billie on the sofa.

Billie had made herself at home, kicking off her shoes to reveal brightly coloured socks, surrounding herself with her haul of brand new comics. Alix liked that about her, she always seemed so at ease, no matter where she was or what she was doing. And in her hands...

Alix's stomach lurched. Billie was holding the journal. Dad's journal.

[if family >25 OR dreams >25]"Don't touch that!" Alix yelled, far louder than she'd meant to.  
[Otherwise]"Please don't open it," Alix said quietly.

"Sorry," said Billie, looking faintly shocked. She put it carefully down on the coffee table. "It's really beautiful."

"I know. It was my Dad's."

"Ah.  
[if Billie>20]You've never read it?"

Alix shook her head. "It's not- I just-"

The lights flickered and there was a sound like a freight train passing overhead. Alix barely noticed. Ugh. Why couldn't she just explain?

"Let's read it together." Go to 280

"I don't think I'll ever read it." Go to 281

280

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

FAMILY +10

DREAMS +5

BILLIE +10

Go to 282

**281**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

ALIX +5

ANNIE +10

Go to **283**

**282**

Alix pulled the familiar tome into her lap, and opened it carefully to the first page. There it was, Dad's neat handwriting, line after line of everything that had happened to him, from around five years ago right up until his death. But, before she could even take in the first word-

Go to **248**

**283**

To emphasise her point, Alix pressed the diary closed with both hands, hugged it to her chest and drew up her knees to enclose it, to keep anyone from ever reading a single line. Billie shifted uncomfortably and Alix was just about to ask if she fancied some snacks in an effort to break the silence when-

Go to **248**

**284**

Billie's face fell. Alix hunkered down in her jacket and looked away, trying to gather her thoughts. Billie spoke before she could.

If BILLIE's score is LESS THAN 15 AND Billie's MOOD is 'Angry', go to **285**

If BILLIE's score is LESS THAN 15, go to **286**

Otherwise, go to **287**

**285**

"I've tried, I really have. I'm not really sure why you even invited me over here if you were going to fob me off at every opportunity. I'm going to get the first flight I can back to Lifun. Don't bother trying to vidcall me again."

In the BILLIE section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Gone'. Stop reading green text, and do not read it at all from this point forward.

Adjust your STATUS SHEET as follows:

POSITIVITY -10

DREAMS -5

Go to **288**

**286**

"Maybe call me once you've had plenty of sleep and you're not slammed with work? Because until then, it seems like you're just wasting both of our time. I'm going to find someone to hang out with who actually wants me around."

Stop reading green text from this point forward.

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

POSITIVITY -5

Go to **288**

**287**

Billie gave her a hug.

"Alix, I know you've got a lot on your plate right now with Annie and... everything. But you don't have to push everyone who cares about you away." She took a knitted hat from her coat pocket and arranged it on her head. "I'm always around if you need me. I hope that'll be some time soon."

Stop reading green text from this point forward and update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

POSITIVITY +5

DREAMS +5

Go to **288**

### **288**

[If 'Walk' IS ticked in ACTIVITIES] Billie shouldered her way back outside, heedless of the coming storm. Through a crack in the pavilion door,

Alix watched Billie go until she was a short, fast-moving speck in the distance. [if POSITIVITY <15]She didn't have any tears left to shed.

[if Alix <15]She wondered if the mishandling of that situation was really her fault, or if there was someone else, somewhere out there, to blame.

If 'Walk' is NOT ticked in the ACTIVITIES section of your STATUS SHEET, go to **289**

Otherwise, go to **290**

### **289**

Tick 'Mall' in LOCATIONS VISITED on your STATUS SHEET.

The fountain had come to a dead stop. Alix stared up at it for a fraction of a second before the lights failed. Shocked shoppers gasped as one, the susurrus of alarm punctuated by the sibilant thuds of plastic bags heavy with tinned goods dropping from surprised fingers. The lights returned, but the clock remained stationary. When they were static, the squirrels lost some of their magic, somehow. The jewels embedded in their moving joints were clearly lumps of dull glass, their edges not just tarnished but furred with green mould. As around her everyone resumed their shopping, Alix wondered whether the motor had burned out. Perhaps they'd never move-

Go to **248**

### **290**

Tick 'Park' in LOCATIONS VISITED on your STATUS SHEET.

petname barked and strained at his/her lead, clearly wanting to follow his/her newfound friend. Alix knew exactly how he/she felt. The sky darkened and thunder rumbled overhead.

"Pathetic," muttered Alix.

The sky was unrepentant.

Go to **248**

### **291**

Tick 'Park' in LOCATIONS VISITED on your STATUS SHEET.

The park's pavilion was, like most public or government-owned spaces these days, in a state of disrepair. It had been boarded up, but kids or drug addicts had broken in so many times the wooden cladding hung loose like an open door. Alix swung it aside and climbed cautiously in.

"Here's hoping there's no looters in here," said Billie, using her stylus as a torch as they moved through the dim interior.

"Nothing to loot," said Alix. The place had been picked clean months ago. Even an old filing cabinet in the former reception area had been stripped of its drawers. Presumably the metal was worth something to someone.

"So we're just hanging out here until the storm passes?" Billie asked.

Alix nodded.

[if BILLIE >15]"Cool." [Otherwise] "Awks."

Break the silence. Go to **292**.

Let it hang. Go to **295**.

### **292**

"This is fucking terrifying." A little heavy for small talk, but it was the first thing that came into Alix's head.

If BILLIE's score is HIGHER THAN 15, go to **293**

Otherwise, go to **294**

### **293**

"No way," said Billie, shaking her head. "Your danger vision'll keep us safe."

"My danger vision?"

"Why else would you bring us into this crappy pavilion?!"

Go to **298**

### **294**

"Uh huh," said Billie. She nudged a smaller scorpoid with her toe and didn't offer anything further.

Go to **298**

### **295**

If BILLIE's score is HIGHER THAN 15, go to **296**

Otherwise, go to **297**

### **296**

Billie's hand appeared in Alix's. They interlinked fingers.

"This is some near death shit," Billie said eventually.

Alix could only nod and squeeze Billie's hand.

In BILLIE's MOOD section on your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Smitten'  
Go to **298**

**297**

"Do you even want me around?"

Alix was so blindsided the question, she didn't know how to respond. Could only stammer "I- I mean- that it-"

Go to **284**

**298**

Alix couldn't tell if it was her eyes attempting to adjust, but it seemed to be getting ...darker.

Go to **248**

**299**

[if BILLIE>25]Alix found herself gripping Billie's hand, with  
[if cat/dog/rabbit] petname cuddled in between them. [Otherwise] a sick feeling growing  
in her stomach.

The rumbling above intensified, the light fittings shook, the curtain rail rattled. And then it was over. The lights didn't come back on, but the noise and the shaking subsided and after a moment, it became clear nothing further was going to happen.

[if POSITIVITY <25 AND BILLIE >25] Alix let go of Billie's hand abruptly, feeling ridiculous.

[if POSITIVITY >25 AND BILLIE >25]Alix felt embarrassed. Billie was so great, and she probably thought Alix was a complete sap now.

Alix stood up. "The power's tripped. I should probably go and reset the circuit box."

"Aren't you curious to see what went on out there?" asked Billie. "Those were some weird sounds. It didn't seem like a normal storm."

"I guess." Go to **300**

"I'd rather just get the lights back on." Go to **301**

**300**

In the ALIX section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Storm'.

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

BILLIE +5

POSITIVITY +5

Go to **304**

**301**

In the ALIX section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Lights'.

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

BILLIE -5

CAREER +5

Go to **304**

**302**

After the sounds had subsided and the ground had stopped shaking, Alix

and Billie emerged from the pavilion. The ground was wet. Alix looked up at the sky. Still green and cloudless. As she stepped onto the path, the origins of the water became clear. A large chunk of rock, still steaming from its entry into the atmosphere, had smashed into the centre of the pond, splashing most of its contents out onto the surrounding ground.

The ducks and moorhens were nowhere to be seen. It was eerily quiet all round.  
[if 'Gone' is ticked in the BILLIE section] Alix hoped Billie made it back safely. Instinctively,

"Your tracker working?" Billie asked. "Mine seems to be dead."

Alix took her tracker from her pocket. The screen was blank. She tried turning it off and on again, removing the battery and reinserting it. Nothing.

"Mine too."

petname tugged on his/her lead jerking Alix into the edge of the long grass. Hundreds more fragments of rock were scattered between the clumps of weeds. Some had burned small patches to brown stubble. Billie picked one up. "Ouch, hot!" she dropped it quickly, sucking her fingers.

Alix checked her tracker again. Still couldn't connect. The storm must have interfered with the relays. Feeling oddly cut off, Alix stuffed her hands in her pockets and hurried home forcing Billie to jog to keep up with her. Faster and faster, all the way home.. Disconnected.

Go to **338**

### 303

Someone knocked into Alix from behind, and she banged her knees against the solid marble base of the fountain. She reached down and clung to the edge until shopping centre staff approached, their torches providing little spots of light in the darkness like angler fish in murky deep sea trenches. Alix allowed herself to be ushered outside, and it was only then that what had just happened hit home. As she joined the throngs at the fire assembly point over the road, the police were already setting up a cordon around the smoking chunk of rock embedded in the shopping centre's window display. Not the meteor itself, of course, something much smaller. A fragment, a taster, a warning of what was to come.

She hoped Billie was well away from here.

Safe. Go to **338**

### 304

[if you have a PET, but it is NOT a Fish] Once petname had settled back down from the shock of the sudden noise and blackout, they emerged into the corridor to find the emergency lights had failed.

They emerged into the corridor to find the emergency lights had failed.

Alix moved briskly, using her stylus as a torch. At least that was working.

"Aren't the emergency lights supposed to be foolproof?" asked Billie.

"Maybe it's not an emergency after all," said Alix wondering wildly if the power had been cut on purpose.

If 'Lights' is ticked in the ALIX section of your STATUS SHEET, go to **305**. If 'Storm' is ticked, go to **306**.

### 305

As she hurried down the steps to the basement, she half expected some smallscale horror – a spiderweb full in the face, or the inner door padlocked shut leaving her without light. There was nothing out of the ordinary, apart from the power having tripped, of course. Alix opened the fusebox and flipped the switch.

[if positivity >25]The overhead lights flickered and returned to life, filling the room with harsh white light, banishing thoughts of the apocalypse back to the shadows where they belonged. [Otherwise]The overhead lighting stubbornly refused to come on, but the emergency generator clicked and purred into life. The emergency lights emitted a dim glow that left everything looking indistinct and twilight, but it was better than nothing. Go to **309**

### 306

Alix hurried up the emergency fire escape taking the steps two at a time. It wasn't too dark in the stairwell, because someone had already opened the fire door, letting the green light flood in. She slowed as she reached the rooftop.

Virtually everyone who lived in the building was up here, and they were all picking things up off the roof and chattering.

"You seen this crazy shit?" asked the old guy from the floor above. He held out a rock for Alix to look at.

She took it. It was grey, pitted, warm to the touch.

"What happened?" asked Billie.

[if positivity >20]"Just a meteor shower," said a girl in a red plaid shirt. "They're more common than you think. Just don't usually happen in suburban areas." [Otherwise]"End of times," said a teenage boy with a topknot. "Just an early taster of how things are going to be forever in a couple of months."

Alix glanced around at the rocks peppering the roof tops like half-melted snow. She was reminded of an old film she watched once, where little alien pods hitched a ride down to earth in a rain storm, and infected anyone who touched them with an extra-terrestrial disease.

[if positivity <25]She dropped the rock back to the felt roof covering just in case. [Otherwise]She rubbed the rock thoughtfully with her thumb. It seemed harmless enough.

If 'Rock Received' is ticked in the OTHER section of your STATUS SHEET, go to **307**.

Otherwise, go to **308**.

### 307

"It's like the one you got me," Alix observed.

Billie shook her head, and put on a voice like an old-timey radio announcer.

"It came from Outer Space!"

Alix smiled in spite of herself.

Billie rocks.

Go to **338**

**308**

It always seems harmless at first.

Go to **338**

**309**

"Back to comics and snacks? You've got snacks, right?"

Alix nodded and led the way back to her apartment.

"You like cereal?"

Go to **338**

**310**

In the LOCATIONS VISITED section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Relative's House'.

If the RELATIVE section of your STATUS SHEET is blank: tick the 'Aunt Maude' box and from now on, write in 'Aunt Maude' wherever Maude/Simon appears in the text, write 'her' over his/her in sections relating to Alix's relative and so on with other pronouns as appropriate.

Maude/Simon lived further out of town than Aunt Serita, in a proper house rather than a flat. That tiny, narrow townhouse was practically a mansion in Alix's eyes. The area still had a functioning neighbourhood watch keeping the gangs at bay and tending to the streetlights and the weeds between the paving slabs. All in all, it seemed largely untouched by everything that had happened so far.

Alix still wasn't sure why she'd accepted Maude/Simon's invitation. He/she had extended the offer countless times before and Alix always found some reason not to go. She could have said she was visiting Annie, or maybe doing "important research", and even if that wasn't strictly true,

[if positivity >25] she could've made it so by doing exactly that. Or thinking about it, at least. Thinking about was almost as good as doing. [Otherwise] how would Maude/Simon ever know anyway?

[if 'Party' NOT ticked in LOCATIONS] Still, Alix had given Maude/Simon's last party a miss, so perhaps it was only right for Alix to actually spend some time with him/her for once. And at least this way she wouldn't have to deal with 1970s party food and tuneless karaoke.

Alix reached the front door, decorated with a hanging basket of carefully tended pansies, purple and yellow. Alix spun it gently on its chains, stalling before

knocking on the glass panel of the front door. Go to **312**

If 'Advice Received' IS ticked in the RELATIVE section of your STATUS SHEET, you may also choose:

letting herself in with the spare key Maude had given her. Go to **311**

### 311

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

POSITIVITY +5

FAMILY +5

Go to **313**

### 312

"It's open!" Came Maude/Simon's voice from inside. Of course it was.

[if positivity <25] To lock it would be an admission that the world was no longer a safe place.

Go to **313**

### 313

The hallway was small, chintzy and smelled faintly of dog, although Alix couldn't remember Maude/Simon ever owning one. A small television hub was audible from the kitchen, playing away to itself, repeats of a gardening programme, years old. Alix wandered through to the lounge expecting Maude/Simon to be there, but finding only a mantelpiece filled with gold-embossed vases, their puny carat stickers still in place.

"I'm here!" Alix called out to the house, feeling strange.

*She wished that she'd brought Billie along, hadn't been too embarrassed to open up this part of her life to her friend. But she'd left Billie to occupy herself for now, with the promise of another meet up later.*

"I'm up here!" the house yelled back, but of course, it was Maude/Simon's voice muffled, the direction suggesting upstairs.

The bedroom, clearly. Go to **314**

Most likely the loft. Go to **315**

Better wait until Maude/Simon was done with whatever he/she was doing. Go to

**316**

### 314

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

POSITIVITY +5

Go to **317**

### 315

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

POSITIVITY +5

FAMILY +5

Go to **320**

### 316

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

POSITIVITY -5

Go to **321**

### 317

Alix peeped into Maude/Simon's bedroom. It was less kitsch than expected, although obviously

[if relative = Simon]gilt war memorabilia and protectorate photographs in ornate frames  
[otherwise]porcelain figurines of little girls in petticoats  
took pride of place. The shelf they were on was immaculate, and the smell of furniture polish still hung in the air.

[if relative = Simon]Unable to help herself, Alix moved over to a huge photo of the entire protectorate, her eyes scanning the rows of green-eyed faces for<sup>[if family</sup>  
>25]Annie.[Otherwise]Dad. Go to **318**

Go to **319**

### 318

There. The three of them together. The photo was from the passing out parade, so Simon looked almost handsome, chest puffed out and beaming with pride. And on either side of him, Annie and Dad, young and unworried and unaware of all the missions that awaited them, all the times they'd sit in the kitchen when they thought Alix was sleeping, whispering about whether they should get this wound or that wound checked out, or whether it would heal on its own like the others.

There was another woman beside Simon, one Alix had never seen before in the photos or the news stories. She looked-

In the RELATIVE section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Secret Discovered'.

Go to **319**

### 319

A creak on the landing...

Go to **322**

### 320

At the top of the stairs, a rickety wooden ladder led up into the loft. Alix climbed it warily, mindful of splinters, cobwebs, and spiders. The rungs hurt her feet through the soft soles of her plimsolls, but she managed not to slip to her death.

There was barely room to stand upright, but that didn't matter to Maude/Simon, who was kneeling in front of a leather-bound trunk, loading packet upon packet of photos into a cardboard box. He/she smiled as Alix hunched closer.

"Oh good, you're here! You can help!"

It took less than one packet for Alix to become completely distracted by a photoset of a baby half-buried in an enormous frilly bonnet.

"Who's that?" asked Alix, but Maude/Simon wasn't listening, staring instead at a packet of photos in the bottom of the trunk. It looked like several of the others that had already gone into the box, a blue cardboard envelope from the days you had to go to special shops to get photos developed, but when Alix reached for it, Maude/Simon batted her hand away.

"We've got enough to be going on with here," he/she said softly, pushing the box towards the loft hatch.

Reluctantly Alix helped manoeuvre the box back downstairs.

If Relative is Uncle Simon, tick 'Secret Discovered' in the RELATIVE section of your STATUS SHEET.

Go to **323**

### 321

Alix helped herself to a couple of caramel wafer biscuits from the cupboard, and then poured a glass of coke. It was flat, as it always was at Maude/Simon's house because he/she didn't drink it him/herself: it was there for Alix.

She kicked off her shoes, settled down on the sofa and turned on the large TV. Maude/Simon had a really expensive cable package. Alix found flicking through the huge array of music and movie channels more enjoyable than actually watching anything. She held the remote at arm's length, never allowing anything to stay on the screen too long, making a living collage of comedies, dramas, music videos and adverts, double-tapping on news channels to keep them from polluting the flow with their negativity.

She was so absorbed, she started when the door opened.

Go to **322**

### 322

Maude/Simon stood in the doorway looking a little confused.

"Didn't you hear me shout? I was in the loft."

"I was just... hanging out." Alix faltered, cheeks blazing. She felt caught in the act, though the act of what, she couldn't say. He/she wasn't fooled for one second, but instead of berating, Maude/Simon shifted his/her attention to the cardboard box he/she gripped tightly with both hands. It was filled to the brim with those packets photos used to come in before everything went digital.

"Want to look?" he/she asked and Alix nodded.

"I'll make tea."

Go to **323**

### 323

They settled down together on the sofa with two mugs of tea and a tray of biscuits, heavily sugared and filled with crushed currants.  
[if FAMILY >25]Dad had called them squashed fly biscuits so consistently Alix couldn't remember the proper name.

Maude/Simon had pre-selected several packets of photos and laid them out on the coffee table.

"Which one first?"

He/she seemed to get some kind of pleasure from curating Alix's interaction with the photos, the same way Annie had always been with Christmas presents. It was weird, but Alix played along now just like she always had then.

The one labelled: 'Protectorate Days.' Go to **324**

The plain yellow one. Go to **327**  
The one with 'Jim' written on it, obviously. Go to **332**

**324**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:  
ANNIE +5  
FAMILY +10  
CAREER +5

Alix chose a packet and carefully removed the more delicate paper envelope of photos inside.

There was Annie, hanging upside down in her bunk, with pants on her head for some reason. There was Annie with dad, squashed together in one lower bunk. Annie with wild messy hair she'd never have now, even if her hair wasn't thinning.

If 'Secret Discovered' IS ticked in the RELATIVE section of your STATUS SHEET, go to **325**. Otherwise, go to **326**.

**325**

Another woman, in the mess hall, her face half-hidden behind an enormous burger.

"Who's that?"

"That's your Aunt Maggie." Simon's scalp glowed redder than ever, but his knuckles were white around his tea cup.

"I have an Aun-"  
Go to **248**

**326**

In the ANNIE section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Joker'.

"Was Annie... fun?" Alix asked, worried it was a strange thing to ask, but Maude/Simon seemed to understand. He/she put his/hers cup down on the coffee table, nodding.

"She was the joker of the protectorate. I heard none of the pilots wanted to fly with her, because she'd always find little ways to mess with them in transit."

"What kind of-"  
Go to **333**

**327**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:  
BILLIE +5  
POSITIVITY +5

Alix chose a packet and carefully removed the more delicate paper envelope of photos inside.

All the pictures were of a large, incredibly smiley Alsatian dog playing in a neatly kept garden. Maude/Simon lurked in the background of some of the photos wearing outdated clothes, and in one particularly entertaining sequence, an ill-advised wig. If Alix has a PET, go to **328**. If not, go to **331**.

**328**

"I never knew you had a dog!

Maude/Simon smiled. "That's going back some years now. His name was Conan. He's long gone."

If Alix's pet is a dog, go to **329**. Otherwise, go to **330**.

**329**

"Don't you ever think of getting another?" Alix asked. "I'm not sure I could be without one after petname."

Maude/Simon shrugged.

[if POSITIVITY >25]"Perhaps. Never say never, eh? Maybe petname will have puppies some day and I can have one of those?" [Otherwise]"It just doesn't seem right now, you know, with the current climate."

Go to **330**

**330**

For once in her life, Alix wanted to voluntarily hug Maude/Simon, and was on the verge of asking if she could...

Go to **333**

**331**

"That's some wig!" Alix giggled. "Did you-"

Go to **333**

**332**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

ALIX +5

FAMILY +5

DREAMS +5

Alix chose a packet and carefully removed the more delicate paper envelope of photos inside.

Maude/Simon suddenly became very attentive to his/her tea, investing a great deal of effort in blowing and sipping at it. Alix breathed in sharply. She wasn't sure what she'd expected from the photos, but it wasn't this. Herself and her dad at the beach, building a sand turtle. She remembered collecting scallop shells to make the flippers, wading out through foul-smelling black seaweed to find the best ones, yet couldn't remember which beach it was, had forgotten the holiday itself altogether until now.

[if RELATIVE is Aunt Maude]"It was when your mother was first taken ill," Aunt Maude supplied. "I took care of all that, so your dad could..." she trailed off, busying herself with dabbing sugar dust from her saucer with an index finger.

"Where...?" Alix began,

Go to **333**

### 333

but then the lights flickered, forcing a different question: "That happen a lot round here?"

"Never happened before." Maude/Simon said, frowning. "How about your neighbourhood? Prone to-"

Go to **248**

### 334

Alix wasn't sure how she felt about the fact Maude/Simon had a meteor shelter. Relieved? Concerned? Maude/Simon him/herself seemed a little embarrassed. When the lights went out, he/she had taken control of the situation instantly, digging a torch out of a little drawer in the coffee table, grabbing Alix's hand, hurrying out the back door and across the lawn in a half crouch that Alix had automatically imitated. Now, in the artificial light of the bunker hidden beneath his/her garden shed, the Maude/Simon of old had returned, pre-occupied and hesitant.

"You take the armchair," he/she said. "I was going to tune the radio anyway."  
[if family >25]"No way," said Alix, lowering herself to the rug. "Tune it from the comfort of the chair."

The 'radio' was a sleek, featureless silver box that Maude/Simon bought to life with a sweep of his/her hand. Noticing Alix's expression, he/she shrugged. "Being part of the 'Protectorate Family' isn't *all* bad."

The box emitted a crackle of static before stabilizing into a repeating message in an artificial voice, not a million miles away from Oju, the assistant on Alix's tracker, but a little deeper. "... warnings in place for this region." Alix's heart hammered, but the message rolled on, indifferent. "Minor Scorpiid shower confirmed. Repeat: No meteor warnings in place for this region. Minor Scorpiid shower confirmed. Re-"

They both exhaled. Maude/Simon made the hand motion again, and the radio fell silent.

"False alarm," he/she said. "Shall we go back to the house?"

They emerged from the shelter to find the lawn scattered with irregularly shaped pebbles, steaming in the dewy grass. The steam scared Alix more than she cared to admit.

[if POSITIVITY <25]A rock was something with heft. A quick death. Steam? Didn't bear thinking about.

If the FAMILY score on your STATUS SHEET is HIGHER THAN 25, go to **335**. If Alix has a PET and it IS NOT a fish or a lizard, go to **336**.

Otherwise, go to **337**.

### 335

"Another pot of tea?" asked Alix. Tea made everything better. "I'll make this one."

Go to **338**

### 336

"petname will be frantic after that little outage." said Alix.

Go to **337**

### **337**

"I should be going."

Go to **338**

### **338**

If 'Gone' IS ticked in the BILLIE section of your STATUS SHEET, turn to **339**.

If 'Awards', 'Home', or 'Park' is ticked in the LOCATIONS VISITED section of your STATUS SHEET, AND Billie is present, go to **340**.

Otherwise, go to **341**.

### **339**

Alix replayed their conversations in her head all the way home until it started to drive her crazy. As she climbed the stairs to her apartment, she tried again to log in to Wiff.net, desperate for the network to be back up, to give her the distraction she needed.

Go to **343**

### **340**

As they reached the apartment door, Alix tried to log into WIFF.net as discretely as possible. She didn't want Billie thinking she was so shallow she cared more about ratings than [if 'Jodie - Dead' IS ticked] what had happened to Jodie, but she just needed one tiny thing that wasn't wildly outside her control. [Otherwise] the scoriid shower, but right now, shallow didn't seem so bad.

Go to **342**

### **341**

As Alix reached the door of her apartment a little later, she idly asked Oju to log in to WIFF.net, forgetting the problems she'd had with the network all the way home. It was so routine, checking her ratings. Almost obscenely routine after the shock of the scoriid shower.

Go to **342**

### **342**

That was part of the reason she did it. Good or bad, it was something normal.

Something from her boring old life, the life before

[if 'Jodie - Dead' IS ticked] building collapses were milestones. The life when she and Jodie would send each other funny animal gifs and argue over how gif was pronounced.

[Otherwise] meteor showers were added to the menu of extreme weather conditions.

Go to **343**

### **343**

She removed her tracker from her wrist, intending to charge it when she got inside.

If RELATIVE'S HOUSE is NOT ticked in LOCATIONS VISITED, go to **344**

If RELATIVE'S HOUSE IS ticked in LOCATIONS VISITED, go to **345**

Go to **351**

### **344**

"What are you doing?" asked Billie, poking her head over Alix's shoulder, cheeks red from the brisk walk. "You've got signal?"

"Oh, yeah, weird, must be back up."

"That site - is it ratemyfic.com?" asked Billie, already reaching for her own tracker, testing it yet again.

"Kinda," Alix admitted, shyly angling the screen away from her friend. "But it's original stories, not fanfictions."

"Of course," Billie nodded. "Silly me! You're way too creative to need to use someone else's ch- crap! Mine's still dead."

If 'Jodie – Dead' IS ticked in the OTHER section of your STATUS SHEET, go to **346**. Otherwise, go to **349**

### 345

A Stickapp came through from Billie, a hot chocolate with a smiling mug and animated steam. Alix was unsure whether it was in reference to their meeting, or an invitation for another. She'd have to reply later. A cookie with a question mark on it, maybe?

a piglet in a poncho. Alix smiled in spite of herself.

Go to **350**

### 346

An uncomfortable pause.

"Look, Alix, I wasn't going to say anything about this, but it feels weird that we're both avoiding it, so... do you want to talk about Jodie?"

"Yes." Go to **347**

"No." Go to **348**

### 347

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

DREAMS +5

As soon as she'd said it, Alix didn't know what to follow up with.

"It's okay," said Billie. "Take your time."

"I miss her already," said Alix. "We were nothing alike, I mean - you've seen her videos?"

"I'm not a regular viewer," Billie admitted, "but yes. I used her smokey eye tutorial for a work Christmas party."

"Well, exactly. We had virtually nothing in common, and yet...? I always felt like we were more on the same wavelength than Dietmar and Elizabeth, you know? Dookie's just so... much and Liz always tries to mother everyone. But Jodie and I? We had fun."

They sat in companionable silence for a moment. Alix wiped her eyes. "It sounds stupid," she said. "That that's all I can come up with to say about her."

"Hey," said Billie firmly. "From what little I know of her, Jodie would have loved that!"

Alix wasn't so sure.  
Go to **350**

**348**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:  
CAREER +5

Alix shook her head. What was there to say? My friend is dead and I could have stopped it? My friend would be alive if not for me. Alix swallowed, refusing to cry. She kept her focus fully on her tracker.  
Go to **351**

**349**

"Maybe because you're on the roving package?"

"I guess."

Go to **351**

**350**

A deluge of bleeps and notifications threatened to vibrate Alix's tracker straight off her wrist. The network was back.  
[if 'Jodie - Dead' IS ticked] Soon, Jodie's fans would know what had happened. Someone was sure to post about it. Should it be Alix? No. She was no good at that stuff. Better to leave that kind of thing to Elizabeth. Alix wiped her eyes again and sniffed. She was holding it together. Focussing on her tracker helped.  
Go to **351**

**351**

If 'Rating 1' on your STATUS SHEET is 5 or LOWER, go to **352**  
If 'Rating 1' on your STATUS SHEET is 8 or HIGHER, go to **353**  
If 'Rating 1' on your STATUS SHEET is 6 or 7 AND 'Jodie - Dead' IS ticked, go to **355**.  
Otherwise, go to **354**

**352**

After that 1/2/3/4/5 out of 10, Alix couldn't help feeling a prickle of apprehension as she thumbed her login details into her tracker's screen.  
Go to **356**

**353**

Even after everything that had happened in between, Alix still felt a tingle of pleasure at her previous 8/9/10 out of 10. It was one small thing to keep her going when thoughts of her sick mother and the meteor's effects threatened to drag her down.  
[if 'Jodie - Dead' IS ticked] 'Meteor's effects'. It sickened her that she couldn't even acknowledge Jodie's death properly in her thoughts. She kicked off her shoes angrily in the hallway, trying to keep her attention on the whirring buffer symbol instead.  
[if 'Gone' IS ticked in BILLIE's section] Could she pass the thing with Billie off as one of the meteor's effects? Like how people used to think the moon could send you crazy?

Go to **357**

### 354

The login seemed to be taking forever.  
Go to **356**

### 355

Alix finally took off her coat and shoes, checking the whirring buffer symbol every few seconds, desperate for a distraction from thinking about Jodie.  
Go to **358**

### 356

Waiting for the page to load, Alix swiped her fob over the access panel.  
[if 'Relative's House' is NOT ticked] Billie skipped inside offering to make a drink and proceeded to rattle around the small kitchen, asking for things like hazelnut syrup and coffee beans. Coffee beans! At this hour!

Alix had removed her coat, put away her shoes and curled up on the sofa before the little whirring buffer symbol finally dissolved into her stats page.

If the PET section of your STATUS SHEET is blank, AND/OR 'Jodie – Dead' IS ticked, go to **358**  
Otherwise, go to **357**

### 357

Alix's involuntary squeal of excitement upset petname and sent him/her [Cat] racing to hide under the kitchen table, tail lashing furiously [Dog] running a circuit round the furniture, barking his/her head off [Rabbit] scurrying to hide under the kitchen table, his/her hind feet skidding on the tiles [Fish] swimming furiously back and forth, his/her tail churning the water into bubbles [Lizard] scurrying to hide in the faux rock cave in the corner of his/her vivarium [Bird] into a fury of squawking and trilling.  
Go to **358**

### 358

A new rating. She touched the red notification dot and bit her lip as the anonymous rating appeared on her screen.

[During this section, Alix reacts to the scores she has been given so far, but it would be too laborious and unrewarding to recreate here. Suffice to say – she is happy about high scores, and not so happy about low scores!]

"Message. Limit. Reached."

"What?"

"You have 20. New. Messages." Oju informed her. Alix tensed.

[If 'Jodie – Dead' IS ticked] The guilt of checking her wiffnet score while Jodie lay dead squeezed Alix's heart again. Dead and cold and undiscovered by the emergency services. They'd been told to go home, that there was nothing more to be done, but Dietmar and Elizabeth had stayed. Perhaps this, and it was bound to be bad news, whatever it was, {missedcalls} missed calls was never not bad news, perhaps this was

Alix's punishment for not being a better friend. Perhaps dad had been punishment for something else.

If the RELATIVE section of your STATUS SHEET is blank: tick the 'Aunt Maude' box, and from now on, write in 'Aunt Maude' wherever Maude/Simon appears in the text, write 'her' over his/her in sections relating to Alix's relative, and so on for other pronouns as appropriate.

"Message. Left. Today. At. Eight PEE-em." Oju's voice gave way to Maude/Simon's:

[if 'Relative's House' IS ticked in LOCATIONS]"That damn scorpoid shower seems to have knocked out a relay somewhere. The hospital were trying to contact us for hours, Alix! I hope you remembered what I said at the party, Alix. I hope you were kind to her, because... [Otherwise]"Where are you, Alix? The hospital have been trying to contact you for hours!

You need to get to David Jones right away. Your mother's-"

Maude/Simon continued, but Alix could no longer process the words. Her tracker slipped through her fingers.

[if Relative's House IS ticked in LOCATIONS]She was vaguely aware of a vidcall coming through from Billie, made a vain attempt to catch the tracker and accidentally accepted the call instead. Go to smash

[if 'Relative's House' is NOT ticked in LOCATIONS]She was vaguely aware of Billie lunging for it as it dropped, [if POSITIVITY >25]snatching it up before it hit the ground with reflexes that would have made dad proud. But she couldn't find any words to thank her friend because every atom of her being was focussed on keeping her upright, keeping her on her feet, propelling her in the direction of the hospital just as soon as she was able to start moving again. Go to 360 [Otherwise] but she wasn't quick enough. Go to smash  
Go to 359

### 359

The face hit the ground first. The casing cracked, but fortunately the screen didn't shatter.

"Your warranty is now invalid." Oju intoned.

"My warranty is now invalid," Alix echoed, unaware of what she was saying, a ventriloquist's dummy spouting someone else's words, parroted phrases barely audible over the sound of her own hammering heart.

In the distance Billie was saying: "Alix? Alix?" until that too became a meaningless, repetitive noise. Meaningless, repetitive noise. Go to 360  
Go to 360

### 360

# STILL SATURDAY

DJ Memorial looked different by daylight. *This could really be it.* The multi-storey car park buzzed with life and movement. *The end.* If you could afford hospital, you could afford a car, usually. Alix couldn't. She

and Billie

had arrived in a taxi. Its paintwork was peeling and there was a rust hole in the boot. Water dripped from the exhaust - its converter was clearly failing.

Billie had to install a new app just to call it.

The driver had seemed bemused to be called out, but eager for the work. The car didn't have a payer installed, so Alix had to connect direct to his tracker. She had turned on every available piece of protective software first.

Now in the car park, Alix watched sons in suits push mothers in wheelchairs up the spiralling ramps to waiting saloons and people carriers. Kids on crutches manoeuvred nimbly over the speed bumps and into minis and hatchbacks and escorts driven by grandparents and aunts and uncles. She felt a little dazed. Shaking her head to clear it, she

jogged down the spiral ramp. Go to **361**

pressed the call button for the lift. If 'Relative's House' is NOT ticked go directly to **361** If 'Relative's House IS ticked, you should now read **gold** text in addition to any others from this point forwards. Go to **361**.

### 361

Past the purple gravel and the dusty leaves, past the nurse on reception and her dirty books, down the pungent buffed corridors and into the Protectorate Pledge Wing with its gouged sign and paintings of muted coloured nothings in plain pine frames. Had she become an orphan during that brief taxi ride? During that walk from reception to ward?

Above the fob panel was a key pad, for emergencies. The most used buttons on the keypad had lost their numbers. The one, the six, the two, eroded away to plain silver from all those tapping fingers. But that was for staff to worry about. Alix swiped her fob, just like home and the door light blinked green, just like home. This was her second home, in a way.

Billie hovered in the doorway, clearly uncertain about whether to proceed.<sup>[if Billie's MOOD is 'Angry']</sup>Who could blame her? They weren't exactly getting along great right now.

If BILLIE's score is HIGHER THAN 30, go to **362**. Otherwise, go to **363**.

Go to **364**

### 362

"I... I could really use you coming in here with me," Alix said, barely recognising her own voice. "That is, if you don't mind." Billie smiled and gave Alix's forearm a squeeze.

"Right with you, chief," she said, and her voice sounded different too.

Go to **364**

### 363

Billie rubbed the back of her neck awkwardly and looked away. "I think this is a moment for you and your mum, don't you?" Oh well. It wasn't as if Alix wasn't used to going alone.

Stop reading **green** text for now.  
Go to **364**

### 364

Alix steeled herself for whatever was on the other side of the door.

THUNK!

While she dithered, the door lock had engaged and she hurt her elbow shoving against the unresisting metal.

**She gave Billie an embarrassed smile.**

She swiped her fob again, pushing the door immediately this time electronic hinges whirred softly...

...to reveal Annie

**and Maude/Simon standing by the window together. Go to 365**  
standing in front of the window.

"You just missed your Aunt/Uncle," said Annie. Then, muttering: "He/She actually made an effort to get here, even if he/she didn't stick around."

Go to **365**

### 365

A doctor, previously lounging in the visitors' chair making airnotes leapt to her feet as Alix  
**and Billie**  
entered.

"I thought you were dying," Alix said softly, joining her. She couldn't help staring - how could this bundle of sticks in a hospital gown be her mother? The doctor exchanged a glance with

**Maude/Simon and Billie. Go to 366. Go to 366.**

Annie.

Go to **366**

### 366

Alix pretended not to notice.

"Seems you were misinformed, no doubt by this idiot." Annie inclined her head towards

**Maude/Simon.**

**Maude/Simon continued to gaze out of the window, his/her mouth a tight line.**

**"Your heartbeat was erratic. You were struggling for breath. Your eyes... your eyes..." Go to 367**

the doctor.

Go to **367**

### 367

"Let's not overexert ourselves now, shall we?" asked the doctor, a tall woman, her hair up in two neatly pinned buns like mouse ears.

"On the contrary," said Annie, turning towards them, "I feel better than I have in ages."

Alix took a step back.

If Billie hadn't been there to catch her, she probably would have gone sprawling to the floor.

Annie's eyes blazed. Not in their usual smug know-it-all way, but with a bright green fire like copper sulphate on a naked flame. With her yellowing emaciated body and those beautiful, terrible other-worldly eyes, she looked increasingly like an alien imitation of Annie Akerman, a frightening replica of the real thing.

It took all Alix's strength not to back all the way up to the door. Her mother

[if ANNIE >30]seemed hurt by [Otherwise]seemed to be revelling in

her daughter's barely concealed fear and revulsion. Alix addressed the doctor, but did her best to hold her mother's gaze out of principle.

"So, she's okay? It was a false alarm?" Go to **368**

"What's wrong with her eyes? Why are they like that?" Go to **369**

"Thank you doctor, you can leave us now." Go to **370**

### 368

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

FAMILY +10

BILLIE +5

ANNIE +5

Go to **371**

### 369

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

FAMILY -5

ANNIE -5

Go to **371**

### 370

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

ANNIE +10

DREAMS +5

FAMILY +5

Go to **372**

### 371

"Well,

**your Aunt/Uncle is correct.**

Annie suffered a bout of arrhythmia and some shortness of breath. We've fitted her with a portable ECG, so we'll be immediately aware of any sudden changes, but it seems she's stabilised now." The doctor held up her tracker as proof. Little peaks and troughs blipped across its screen. "We're still in somewhat uncharted territory as far as Annie's genetic modifications go. My best guess is the implanted genetic material has been displaced from its activity sites and is accreting around the organs, the eyes being the most visible. When we have the scans and bloodworks back, we'll have a better idea."

"No you won't," said Annie. She sounded pleased, like she got a kick out of being a medical mystery.

**"Anyway, who's this? Don't I get an introduction? Ashamed of your mutant mother?"**

[if 'Scarf' is ticked in ANNIE's section]"I got you a scarf!" Alix blurted.

**"Isn't it time we... made arrangements?" said Maude/Simon.**

Go to 372

372

At that, the doctor quietly slipped outside, her tracker still blipping softly along with Annie's heart.

Annie tilted her head, clearly waiting for more from her daughter.

[if 'Scarf' is ticked in ANNIE's section]Alix looked down at her empty hands, her cheeks colouring. "I really did buy you a present this time, I did. It arrived, but I left it at the apartment. It's purple, with silver and..." she trailed off, too uncomfortable to continue.

**It was then that Billie did the unthinkable. She stepped forward, folded Annie into a hug and said: "Hi Mrs Akerman, I'm Billie. It's an honour to meet you!"**

[if ANNIE >25]Annie did the unthinkable right back. She not only accepted Billie's hug, but squeezed her tight and said: "The famous Billie! Finally she brings you to visit." Alix was gobsmacked. She'd never mentioned Billie to Annie, she was sure of it. She was always so careful where Billie was concerned. [Otherwise]Over Billie's shoulder, those green eyes flashed. Alix swallowed. Was she going to pay for this later? As soon as Billie let go, Annie was behaving as if the exchange had never happened.

**"Arrangements?" Alix finally caught on to what her Aunt/Uncle had said. Annie seemed to have missed the entire exchange, distracted by her own reflection.**

She had picked up a bedside mirror and was squinting into it. Alix couldn't tell whether Annie was examining those eyes or her altogether changed complexion.

**"Can't wait until I'm dead before picking over my corpse, Maude/Simon?" She hadn't missed a thing.**

**"Annie..." Maude/Simon sounded tired. Exhausted. "I'm just thinking of Alix. She'll have a lot to deal with and-"**

[if ANNIE <20]"When it's all said and done, put me in the bin, set me on fire, throw me out to sea or something, save yourself the bother!" [Otherwise]"I'm thinking make an event of it, you know - everyone has to wear purple, have a ceilidh, eat little sausages on sticks, it'll be fun!"

Go to **374**

Go to **373**

**373**

She had been paying attention after all.

Go to **374**

**374**

"STOP IT!" said Alix, clenching her fists.

[Green or Gold text active] They were [Otherwise] Annie was

looking at her strangely. Taken aback, but with a touch of admiration. Suddenly Alix was ten years old again, her parents stitching one another's wounds over the kitchen table and joking about having matching coffins. She'd hated it then and she hated it now - premature funeral planning.

Slowly Alix exhaled. She glanced out at the patio where a kid in an oxygen mask limped in a halting circuit, watched over by a nurse.

"I need some air.

Alone." Go to **375**

Join me, Annie?" Go to **376**

Come with, Billie?" Go to **377**

How about you, Maude/Simon?" Go to **378**

**375**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

CAREER +5

FAMILY -5

ANNIE -5

Go to **379**

**376**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

FAMILY +5

ANNIE +10

Go to **384**

**377**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

DREAMS +5

BILLIE +5

Go to **380**

**378**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

FAMILY +10

Go to **381**

### 379

Alix slid the patio door aside and stepped out into the courtyard. The perks of being ex-Protectorate: a pretty hole to go and die in.

On the other side of the courtyard, the kid had come to a stop and was staring up into the sky, arm outstretched. Alix's first thought was 'meteorite!' but the kid didn't look afraid. Balding and pinched and unafraid, somewhat like Annie.

Alix glanced back through the patio door.

[if Green AND Gold text is active] They were all chatting like they'd known each other years. Go to feeling. [if ONLY Green text is active] Billie (Go to book) [If ONLY Gold text is active] Maude/Simon (Go to book) [Otherwise] Annie

had picked up a book and was nonchalantly flipping through it.

Alix had that feeling again, the one she'd had all her life, like she was outside looking in. Maybe that's why she'd got so hooked on making MyBoxx videos - it gave her the chance to be inside looking out for once. She took a deep breath,

[if positivity <40]but it just made her eyes sting all the more, heavy with suppressed tears.

She blinked hard and turned back to the courtyard. [Otherwise] it helped a little. She took a couple more and turned back to the courtyard.

A purple butterfly alighted on the kid's outstretched fingers. Nurse and kid alike oohed and aahed over it.

[if positivity >35]Alix had thought all the butterflies had died, was sure she'd seen a news report to that effect, and yet here was this little guy, proving everyone wrong. [Otherwise]Probably wouldn't last the day.

Go to **400**

### 380

Alix slid the patio door aside and stepped out into the courtyard. The perks of being ex-Protectorate: a pretty hole to go and die in.

On the other side of the courtyard, the kid had come to a stop and was staring up into the sky, arm outstretched. Alix's first thought was 'meteorite!' but the kid didn't look afraid. Balding and pinched and unafraid, somewhat like Annie.

As if reading her mind, Billie said: "It could be worse, I suppose."

"Really? How?"

[If PET is blank/Fish]"You could have a hairy back and smell like a burst sewage pipe."

[Otherwise]petname could have been run over by a lorry right in front of you and popped like a water balloon."

"Jesus! Billie!" But Alix was laughing. Some of the tension eased. She only realised her shoulders had been hunched when they dropped back to their normal position.

"Hey, wouldya look at that!" Billie elbowed Alix and pointed across the courtyard.

Go to **387**

### **381**

Alix slid the patio door aside and stepped out into the courtyard. The perks of being ex-Protectorate: a pretty hole to go and die in.

On the other side of the courtyard, the kid had come to a stop and was staring up into the sky, arm outstretched. Alix's first thought was 'meteorite!' but the kid didn't look afraid. Balding and pinched and unafraid, somewhat like Annie.

As if reading her mind, Maude/Simon said: "It could be worse, I suppose."

"Really? How?"

Maude/Simon made a face. "Oh, I don't know. It's just what people say, isn't it?" He/She picked at a loose thread on his/her sleeve.

If Alix's RELATIVE is 'Uncle Simon' AND 'Secret Discovered' is ticked in the RELATIVE section of your STATUS SHEET, go to **382**. Otherwise, go to **383**.

### **382**

"Is that what people said to you... about Aunt Maggie?"

Simon yanked the thread, popping several stitches. "Goddamit!"

"I'm sorry," Alix said immediately. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have brought it up, it's none of my business."

"It's ok," he said, but he looked sick. "How do you think an oddball like me had any connection whatsoever with the protectorate?"

"You're military."

"So are a lot of people, doesn't mean they brushed shoulders with the special forces on a daily basis. And I was a cook. Did your parents never tell you that?"

Alix shifted her weight uncomfortably. Truth be told, the only thing her parents had told her about Simon was to be nice to him, no matter how oddly he might behave at times.

"Well," Simon said, clearly reading her thoughts in her features. "I'm not surprised, because it was Maggie they were friends with really, not me." Alix made small noises of protestation, but he snorted and said: "It hardly matters now. They've more than paid their dues, whatever. Maggie was the first one to show signs of-" He gestured over his shoulder towards Annie, who had taken to her bed  
and was now chatting to Billie

"Whatever the hell happens to them when the gene splicing starts to fail." He pinched the bridge of his nose.

Go to **385**

### **383**

"D'you ever feel like it's all a waste of time?" Alix blurted.

Maude/Simon gave her a long, appraising look. "All what?"

"The parties, the media, trying to go on as normal, everything."

[if positivity >45]Maude/Simon shook his/her head vehemently. "No. Never. No time spent trying to make things better is ever wasted. Whether it's for five minutes or fifty years. And what else are we going to? Descend into orgies and pitchfork mobs?"  
[Otherwise]Maude/Simon gave up on the thread, let his/her fingers drop to his/her side. "Maybe. But I suppose it's better than a return to what happened when the news broke. All that rioting, the fires, the... other stuff."

Alix wrinkled her nose.  
Go to **386**

### 384

Alix slid the patio door aside and stepped out into the courtyard. The perks of being ex-Protectorate: a pretty hole to go and die in.

On the other side of the courtyard, the kid had come to a stop and was staring up into the sky, arm outstretched. Alix's first thought was 'meteorite!' but the kid didn't look afraid. Balding and pinched and unafraid, somewhat like Annie.

"Why aren't you afraid?" asked Alix, before Annie could even attempt to answer the first question.

[if annie >20]"Seems I've already faced the worst there is." [Otherwise]Annie shrugged and rubbed her stick arms. It was mild outside, airless if anything, yet she shivered.

"Which means?" Alix prompted.

[if Annie >30]Annie held Alix's gaze. "My husband's dead and my daughter hates me." Her mouth twitched like she had a living creature clamped tight in there and it was fighting to get out, but Alix barely noticed, transfixed by those eyes. [Otherwise]A shake of the head, hands clasped over her stomach, possibly in pain. Alix sighed. Always the same. Pain and silence.

Go to **391**

### 385

A purple butterfly alighted on the kid's outstretched fingers. Nurse and kid alike oohed and aahed over it.

[if positivity >35]Alix had thought all the butterflies had died, was sure she'd seen a news report to that effect, and yet here was this little guy, proving everyone wrong. [Otherwise]Probably wouldn't last the day.

"Alix, she went so fast." Simon's voice cracked. He hadn't even noticed the butterfly. "Just be grateful for this time with your mother, that's all I can say. Treasure every last second."

Go to **394**

### 386

A purple butterfly alighted on the kid's outstretched fingers. Nurse and kid alike oohed and aahed over it.

[if positivity >35]Alix had thought all the butterflies had died, was sure she'd seen a news report to that effect, and yet here was this little guy, proving everyone wrong. [Otherwise]Probably wouldn't last the day.

"Look, the thing is, Alix, you don't have to do this on your own," said Maude/Simon after the butterfly had fluttered away once more. "I'll always be here for you, even after- Even after. Especially after. Remember that."

Go to **394**

### **387**

A purple butterfly alighted on the kid's outstretched fingers. Nurse and kid alike oohed and aahed over it.

[if POSITIVITY >35]Alix had thought all the butterflies had died, was sure she'd seen a news report to that effect, and yet here was this little guy, proving everyone wrong. [Otherwise]Probably wouldn't last the day.

Before they went back inside, Alix just had to say it.

"Thanks Billie, for everything." Go to **388**

"All of this has been a huge mistake. I'm sorry." Go to **389**

"I don't know what I'd do without you Billie, seriously." Go to **390**.

### **388**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

ALIX +10

BILLIE +5

Go to **398**

### **389**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

BILLIE -10

ALIX -10

In the MOOD list of BILLIE's section, tick 'Angry'.

Go to **398**

### **390**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

ALIX +10

BILLIE +10

In the MOOD list of BILLIE's section, tick 'Smitten'.

Go to **398**

### **391**

A purple butterfly alighted on the kid's outstretched fingers. Nurse and kid alike oohed and aahed over it.

[if POSITIVITY >35] Alix had thought all the butterflies had died, was sure she'd seen a news report to that effect, and yet here was this little guy, proving everyone wrong. [Otherwise] Probably wouldn't last the day.

Every time Alix thought Annie had done the most frustrating thing she could possibly do, she found some new way to be infuriating. Alix's voice shook as she said the words:

"Have it your way." Go to **392**

"I love you, you insufferable woman." Go to **393**

### **392**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

FAMILY -5

ANNIE -10

ALIX -5

Alix turned on her heel and went back inside. She hardened her heart as Annie struggled to close to the patio door, burying her nose in her tracker so she couldn't be drawn into any further loaded conversations.

Billie was watching them with a confused frown, but Alix matched it with one of her own, as if whatever she was reading on her tracker was important and perplexing.

Textbook avoidance tactic.

There was a notification.

Compare your scores for the FAMILY, CAREER and DREAMS statistics under ALIX's STATISTICS on your STATUS SHEET. If the HIGHEST SCORE IS FAMILY, go to **411**; if the HIGHEST SCORE is CAREER, go to **401**; if the HIGHEST SCORE IS DREAMS, go to **404**. If two or more scores are the same, you may choose which section to go to.

### **393**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

FAMILY +10

ANNIE +10

POSITIVITY +5

Go to **419**

### **394**

Alix nodded. Go to **395**

What was there to say to that? Nothing. Go to **396**

Alix wasn't much of a hugger, but if ever there was a time, this was it. Go to **397**.

### **395**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

FAMILY +5

ALIX +10

Go to **399**

### **396**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:  
FAMILY -5  
ALIX -5  
Go to **399**

### 397

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:  
FAMILY +10  
ALIX +5  
ANNIE +5  
Go to **399**

### 398

Billie stayed outside a moment. She said it was to watch the butterfly some more, but she wiped her eyes when she thought she was no longer in Alix's periphery.  
Go to **400**

### 399

Alix stood to one side and let Maude/Simon go back in first.  
Go to **400**

### 400

Alix returned to the hospital room, leaving behind thoughts of  
[if positivity >35] against the odds [Otherwise] doomed  
butterflies.

She slid the patio door shut, immediately burying her nose in her tracker to get out of any awkward conversations. Textbook avoidance tactic.

There was a notification.

Compare your scores for the FAMILY, CAREER and DREAMS statistics under ALIX's STATISTICS on your STATUS SHEET. If the HIGHEST SCORE IS FAMILY, go to **411**; if the HIGHEST SCORE is CAREER, go to **401**; if the HIGHEST SCORE IS DREAMS, go to **404**. If two or more scores are the same, you may choose which section to go to.

### 401

A videomail from a code Alix didn't recognise. She slipped in her earbud and pressed play:  
If CAREER is HIGHER THAN 45, go to **402**  
Otherwise, go to **403**

### 402

A woman in a navy blue suit, sitting at a desk somewhere with a cityscape view. "Alix, this is Melanie," she said, smiling a toothpaste advert smile. "I'm head of Talent Acquisition at MyBoxx Gold, and after your most recent upload, we would love to have you on board making some premium content for us.  
[if PROJECT = VIDEO AND 'Pet'] Your little dog/cat/lizard/bird/fish/rabbit is just adorable, by the way. No wonder it raked in all those hits! [if PROJECT = VIDEO AND 'Hospital'] Those hospital workers are so brave, I have to say. Content with heart is exactly what we're looking at. [if PROJECT = VIDEO AND 'Expo'] You've really hit on something with the whole 'A

day in the life of a Boxxer' thing, I think. Our research shows users will pay more for that kind of content. **[If PROJECT = VIDEO AND 'Party']** You definitely opened my eyes to a new cultural phenomenon with your Aunt's end of the world parties. I thought they'd be more... raucous, somehow. But your video had real pathos. **[Otherwise]** Go to 417. Go to **417**

### 403

It was Chad Chen, of all people. He looked a little slimmer than he had at the MyBoxx Awards, younger too, like this might be an old vid- Oh no.

"Dear... LIXXIL..." said Chad, although the 'Lixxil' had a strange emphasis, clearly dubbed – a syllable by syllable reconstruction using snippets of Chad's voice that didn't fit together quite right. "As you know, MyBoxx values all its content creators. However, in light of the recent economic downturn, we can only offer financial recompense to those Boxxers who score in the absolute top rating figures across a variety of metrics, and we're sorry to say that you fell short of our new algorithmic requirements. We hope you'll continue to contribute to MyBoxx even without the added bonus of a consistent revenue stream. Chen out."

Alix remembered when rumours of that video first surfaced. She'd dismissed it as a hoax, thinking MyBoxx would never be so crass as to dismiss its contributors in such a faceless, corporate manner.

On your STATUS SHEET, make the following adjustments:

POSITIVITY -5

In the ALIX section, tick 'Lost job'

Go to **418**

### 404

Oju was clever enough to automatically mute alerts when entering a hospital, so Alix had missed this one. An email. A little old school, but for small companies they were a helluva lot cheaper than vids.

If DREAMS is HIGHER THAN 50 on your STATUS SHEET go to **405**.

Otherwise, go to **408**.

### 405

It was from Zest, a publisher of short story anthologies Alix had submitted to a little while ago. Alix swallowed and opened the message.

Add together 'Rating 1' and 'Rating 2' from your STATUS SHEET. If the total is HIGHER than 15, go to **406**

Otherwise, go to **407**

### 406

**... we're pleased to inform you that your short story "The Superpower of Being Ordinary" has been accepted for publication and will appear in Zest Zine volume ten. Please complete the attached...**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

POSITIVITY +5

Go to **416**

**407**

**... we regret to inform you...**

Go to **416**

**408**

It was from WIFF.net. More ratings had come in. A suspicious amount. Alix swallowed and opened the message.

Someone had linked to her WIFF.net profile under one of her videos. More than a thousand ratings had come in all at once. In some ways, it was better than reading each individual rating. One short, sharp shock, and there they all were, aggregated and averaged.

Add together 'Rating 1' and 'Rating 2' from your STATUS SHEET. If the total is HIGHER than 15, go to **409**  
Otherwise, go to **410**

**409**

9.7 overall. Wow.

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

POSITIVITY +5

Go to **416**

**410**

1.3 overall. Yikes.

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

POSITIVITY +5

Go to **416**

**411**

Spam. The ruse of message-checking wouldn't last long if all she had to read was a mail from a lost astronaut needing her to note him money so he could get-

[if FAMILY >50]Annie was calling out softly. "Alix. Alix." Alix looked up from her tracker. Annie had given up trying to tuck herself back into bed and instead lay awkwardly on top of the covers. Go to **412**. [Otherwise]Go to **422**.

**412**

Her mother's eyes had a slightly glazed look, but she was apparently aware of Alix's gaze, because she patted the bed beside her, inviting Alix to sit.

Alix complied

[if ANNIE >25]willingly. [Otherwise]warily.

If ANNIE's score is HIGHER THAN 30, go to **413**.

Otherwise go to **414**.

**413**

"I know I haven't been the most understanding mother, or the nicest mother, or the most... motherly, even, but," Annie swallowed and her throat made a clicking sound like beetle wings. "You know I love you, right?" For the first time since her mother took ill, Alix was terrified. Following Annie's first collapse, Alix had developed a dull awareness that her mother was dying, an unpleasant background buzz like a fly slowly expiring in the windowsill. On the way to the hospital, that had reached a crescendo, roaring in her ears until she thought her head would explode. But what was happening now was worse. There was nothing. No buzz, no awareness, just numbness and silence, on and on, rolling over her like waves, drowning her. She couldn't catch her breath to speak, to say the words back. She was almost scared to, because of the added weight they carried, the undertones of goodbye.

Go to **415**

#### **414**

"I know everything's going to shit, but at least you'll have some spare funds when I cark it. Just take the cash and leave. The public bunkers, even the well-managed ones, they're bullshit. Trust me on this - there's not going to be enough room, or food, it'll be a horror show. But there's this captain, his number's in one of Maude/Simon's boxes in the attic, you know the ones. We had a thing, when I was at military school. Before your father. Anyway, he has some program, some high level bunker filled with rich arseholes and indispensable geniuses. Codename is Ark, they just love their Biblical references, but it could be your best chance." She went on and on, babbling, delirious.

Go to **415**

#### **415**

Annie gripped Alix's wrist and that bony hand was hot, terrifyingly hot, Alix could feel her skin reddening under the touch. This was it.

"NURSE!" Alix yelled. "DOCTOR! NURSE! SOMEONE!"

Go to **422**

#### **416**

Alix clutched her tracker to her chest and looked up at the-

Go to **422**

#### **417**

Anyway, when you get a minute, call me back." She pressed a button on her desk, and her contact code filled the screen in large white numerals. Alix hurriedly saved it and closed the call.

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

POSITIVITY +5

Go to **418**

#### **418**

Unbelievable. Alix had always struggled with the idea that she might be wasting her time making videos what with the meteor and her mother and everything, but now? She couldn't think straight.

Go to **422**

#### **419**

"Oh. Really? Well." Annie hugged herself tighter.

[if annie >20]"I've already made the will you know. You don't have to suck up." [Otherwise]"Amazing what people talk themselves into believing with a massive space rock looming over their heads."

IF POSITIVITY is HIGHER THAN 30, OR ANNIE's score is HIGHER THAN 45, go to **420**. Otherwise, go to **421**.

#### 420

Alix surprised herself by laughing. "You are such a cow."

Annie let out a snort that sent the butterfly fluttering back into the sky. The kid looked crestfallen, but Annie was laughing too hard to care. "Then we make a good pair 'cause you're a moose," she coughed. Alix patted her back and helped her back inside as she wheezed and choked, both of them smiling around pain.

Go to **400**

#### 421

Well, she had really tried, and still, Annie was terrible. She was already shuffling back inside without so much as a second glance for Alix.

Go to **400**

#### 422

An alarm.

The alarm connected to Annie's heart, or her lungs, or both. It was sounding. Annie went stiff, eyes wide, bulging, the green in them glowing brighter, it seemed, although that could have just been because she was staring unblinking at the lights overhead.

Billie knocked over the leather visitor's armchair in her haste to make room for the crash team that rushed in.

**Maude/Simon looped his/her arm across Alix's chest and half carried her to the doorway as the team of doctors and nurses surrounded Annie's bed, calling medical jargon to one another and making quick checks on Annie's eyes, her pulse, her airways. Alix fought and struggled, because someone had to. Annie certainly wasn't.**

A tired-looking surgeon burst into the room and barked: "Outside, please," before pulling up his mask. "Why's this AI off?" he grumbled, flicking a switch on the overhead unit. As the AI found its voice, Alix finally found hers too, and said: "Please!" She didn't know what she was pleading for. She was led outside as the AI reeled off Annie's vitals, a sequence of ever-decreasing numbers.

One nurse took up position outside the door, hand poised over the hazard foam control, while another ushered

[if Green OR Gold text is active]them [Otherwise]Alix

to the waiting area and swiped a hospital-issue fob against the vending machines for snacks no-one would eat.

[if 'Gone' is NOT ticked in the BILLIE section, and 'Present' IS ticked]Billie joined them, returning from wherever she'd been waiting. She didn't ask what they were doing or what was happening. It was written all over their faces. Resume reading **Green** text from this point forward.

Hours passed. Go to **423**

## 423

*Welcome to wiff.net, the Writers' Independent Fiction Forum.*

*The following extract was submitted by **Lixxil**. We thank you for taking the time to read it.*

Writing and reading are a strange partnership. I sit here and write this now, and you sit there and read it now, but for both of us, 'now' means something different. By the time you read this, my world could have ended. You could be reading it as your world is ending, without even knowing it. And this looking glass through which you view me, you think it's one way, but it isn't. It's taken me a while to piece it all together, but I think I always knew about you. I sensed you were there.

That first Rating 1 out of 10 that made me so  
[if 'Rating 1' >6]happy. [if 'Rating 1' <5] sad. [Otherwise]unsure of myself.

That was you. And then you followed it up with that Rating 2 and  
[if 'Rating 2' >6]I felt only relief. [if 'Rating 2' <5]that really took the wind out of my sails.  
[Otherwise] I didn't know what to think.

That box left on my doorstep to see how I'd react, that was down to you too, indirectly.  
[if 'Rock Received' is NOT ticked in OTHER AND PET is NOT blank]So I suppose I have you to thank for  
petname.

My  
[if ANNIE >15 AND POSITIVITY >30 OR ANNIE >45 AND POSITIVITY >15];improved [if ANNIE <5]terrible  
[Otherwise]mediocre relationship with my mother, my  
[if BILLIE 'Present' AND BILLIE >15]wonderful [if BILLIE <5 OR BILLIE's MOOD = 'Angry' OR BILLIE =  
'Gone']doomed [OTHERWISE]non-existent friendship with Billie, you played your part in  
those too.

So thank you.

[if 'Rating 1' + 'Rating 2' > 15]Thank you for believing in me even when I didn't. [if 'Rating 1' +  
'Rating 2' >10]Thank you for bothering to leave a score, even if sometimes you were left  
cold by my words. [OTHERWISE]Thank you for reminding me that I don't do this for  
anyone's approval but my own.

[if ANNIE >15]Thank you for giving me those helpful nudges towards a woman who at  
times I was convinced hated me and didn't want me. [if ANNIE <5]Thank you for making  
me feel like I was justified in distancing myself from someone who distanced  
themselves from me my entire life.

[if BILLIE >15]Thank you for encouraging me to embrace a friend who I needed more than I  
ever could have imagined, and who has enriched my life beyond all reckoning. [if BILLIE

<5|Thank you for teaching me I need to stand on my own two feet and can't use others as an emotional crutch.

Compare your scores for the FAMILY, CAREER and DREAMS statistics under ALIX's STATISTICS on your STATUS SHEET. If the HIGHEST SCORE IS FAMILY, go to **426**; if the HIGHEST SCORE is CAREER, go to **425**; if the HIGHEST SCORE IS DREAMS, go to **424**. If two or more scores are the same, you may choose which section to go to.

**424**

Thank you for encouraging me to follow my dreams.  
Go to **426**

**425**

Thank you for encouraging me to knuckle down and work hard to achieve the things that are important to me.

[if 'Award win' IS ticked] Although that MyBoxx award was all me.

Go to **426**

**426**

Thank you for helping me see the value of those around me, even if their endless parties seem stupid.

[if 'Secret Discovered' IS ticked] And for my opening my eyes to the additional traumas some of them have been through. [if 'Joker' IS ticked] And for making me realise that my mother wasn't always the bitter husk she is now.

Thank you for being there, for seeing this through, whatever this is.

[if POSITIVITY >20 AND ALIX >15] Perhaps someday we'll meet.

[if POSITIVITY >20] Perhaps you'll read my next story too. [Otherwise] Perhaps this is goodbye.

Whatever happens

*Thank you for reading. Please now rate the piece on a scale of 1-10. (With 1 representing 'What the hell is this crap?!' up to 10 'The finest creative work since time immemorial.')*

Write your RATING out of 10 on your STATUS SHEET in 'Rating 3'

Thank you.

Go to **427**

**427**

SUNDAY

Doctors and nurses fluttered around her like moths, their words drifting against her ears. "Stabilised... life-signs... poor prognosis..." Alix waved them away and sat with her hands on her knees.

Billie had found a vending machine that dispensed sudokus on reels of receipt paper. She'd completed dozens and was now turning them into little origami cranes and frogs and penguins.

Billie was so good at entertaining herself in hospital waiting rooms, it made Alix wonder again about the Lifun disaster with a twinge of guilt that she'd never really asked her friend about it.

Maude/Simon came and went, returned again with a holdall of clothes, some for Annie, some for him/herself.

"Is there anything you'd like from home Alix? The doctors have said she doesn't- There isn't much-" Her Aunt/Uncle crouched in front of her like when she was little and asking about dad. "I should have enough time to go back again and get an overnight bag for you. I should have picked things up on the way, but my head wasn't- I wasn't thinking-" Tears welled in his/her eyes, but Alix just didn't have it in her to be comforting.

Billie did though. She had hugs for days and she shared them easily, even with a virtual stranger like Maude/Simon. Alix watched them enviously.

Who would comfort Alix? Where were the hugs and words of encouragement she needed?

Read **gold** text from this point forward, unless you are instructed to stop.

She stood up. Go to **428**

She remained seated. Go to **429**.

**428**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

DREAMS +10

CAREER +10

ALIX +10

Go to **430**

**429**

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

FAMILY +10

BILLIE +10

ANNIE +10

Go to **431**

**430**

"You stay here," said Alix. "I'm going to go home. Just for a moment. There's something really important I need to do."

Go to **441**

**431**

Where else was there to be but here?

[if 'Advice Received' IS ticked in the RELATIVE section]It was like Maude herself had said at the party, in not so many words - Annie needed someone to be there for her now.

Alix shook her head.

[if POSITIVITY <50]What else was there to do anyway but wait for death. Her own. Her mother's. Everyone's. "Don't. Just stay here. Wait with me."

If the PET section of your STATUS SHEET is blank, go to **437**.  
Otherwise, go to **432**

### 432

"But what about petname?" asked Maude/Simon. Alix was touched that he/she'd even remembered. "I could go get him/her?" Maude/Simon continued. "Bring him/her here? If we say he/she's Annie's they might even let me bring him/her on the ward."

"I doubt it," said Alix. Annie didn't exactly keep her distaste for all living things to herself.

"Or I could get him/her?" Billie piped up. "I'd only need your fob. That way you can be right here if anything... happens..."

"Yeah, I should probably go and get him/her." Go to **433**

"Maude/Simon are you sure? I'd really appreciate it." Go to **434**

"I'll just call Elizabeth and ask her to drop in and feed him/her." Go to **435**

"Thanks Billie. That would be incredible." Go to **436**

### 433

In the OTHER section of your STATUS SHEET, write 'Alix' under 'Pet Rescuer'  
Go to **441**

### 434

In the OTHER section of your STATUS SHEET, write 'Maude/Simon' under 'Pet Rescuer'.

Stop reading **gold** text from this point forward.

Go to **445**

### 435

Update your STATUS SHEET as follows:

ALIX -5

Go to **437**

### 436

In the OTHER section of your STATUS SHEET, write 'Billie' under 'Pet Rescuer'

Stop reading **green** text from this point forward, unless you are told to resume.

Go to **445**

### 437

If 'Scarf' is ticked in the ANNIE section of your STATUS SHEET, read on. Otherwise, go to **445** now

"You're absolutely sure?" Maude/Simon pressed. "Nothing you need?"

The scarf. She'd left the scarf as it had arrived, folded in green tissue paper inside a cardboard carton.

"The scarf," said Alix, getting that strange feeling again that she was a puppet and someone else was wiggling the lever that moved her mouth.

"I have to go and get it." Go to **438**

"It's ok. There are more important things to be worrying about." Go to **445**

"Maude/Simon if you could pick that up for me, I'd be eternally grateful." Go to **439**

"Billie, would you mind fetching it for me?" Go to **440**

### **438**

In the ANNIE section of your STATUS SHEET, write 'Alix' next to 'Scarf Fetcher'. Go to **430**

### **439**

In the ANNIE section of your STATUS SHEET, write 'Maude/Simon' next to 'Scarf Fetcher'. Stop reading **gold** text from this point forward. Go to **445**

### **440**

In the ANNIE section of your STATUS SHEET, write 'Billie' next to 'Scarf Fetcher'. Stop reading **green** text from this point forward. Go to **445**

### **441**

Alix jogged from the hospital to her apartment. Maude/Simon had offered to drive her, and Billie had offered to call another taxi, but Alix needed the run. She ran in the bus lane, because it wasn't as if any buses would be using it and other traffic was few and far between. When she reached her building, she stopped and did something she almost never did. She looked up at all those windows and thought about all the lives going on behind them.

The girl who mostly wore plaid shirts, apart from when she was having fancy dress parties, which was often, these days. The young lad with the topknot and the serious expression, who had dropped out of university when the meteor was announced. The old guy from the floor above who still had an allotment and grew potatoes and made more potato salad than he knew what to do with.

[if POSITIVITY <50] Soon they would all be gone. Maybe the building too.

Alix turned on her tracker's news ticker long enough to see the latest. Sixteen days. Sixteen days? Could that be right? That was the lowest it had been in a while.

But now wasn't the time to worry about that. Alix had come here for a reason, and it was time to get to it.

If 'Alix' is filled in under 'Pet Rescuer', go to **442**

If 'Alix' is filled in under 'Scarf Fetcher' AND Alix has a pet, go to **443**  
If 'Alix' is filled in under 'Scarf Fetcher', go to **444**  
Otherwise, go to **446**

#### 442

petname was important, of course he/she was, but he/she wasn't the only reason Alix had come here. Once petname was safely in his/her [Bird]carry cage [Rabbit/Cat/Dog]pet carrier [Fish/Lizard]travel tank there was another thing Alix needed to do before she could go and witness her mother's final hours.

Another important thing.  
Go to **446**

#### 443

Alix was glad she hadn't just left it to Elizabeth to feed petname. As she entered the apartment her beloved dog/cat/fish/lizard/bird/rabbit [Cat]yowled [Dog]barked [Bird]wolf-whistled [Fish]shimmied [Lizard]blinked slowly [Rabbit]twitched his/her nose at her. Once it became apparent he/she'd have to go in a [Bird]carry cage [Rabbit/Cat/Dog]pet carrier [Fish/Lizard]travel tank his/her enthusiasm dwindled. Alix chased him/her around [Rabbit/Cat/Dog]the apartment [Bird]his/her cage [Fish]his/her tank [Lizard]his/her vivarium for ten minutes with [Bird/Fish/Lizard]a net [Cat/Dog/Rabbit]the open pet carrier before he/she finally succumbed to the lure of pettreats and co-operated. Now Alix was able to get on with the task at hand.

If 'Alix' is written in under 'Scarf Fetcher' on your STATUS SHEET, go to **444**  
Otherwise go to **446**

#### 444

The scarf was right where she had left it, in its cardboard box from the mail order company. She picked it up and turned it in her hands. It was deep purple with a lilac trim, finished with silver embroidery and fringing. It couldn't be more perfect, and yet, typically, Alix had left it too late and now it was unlikely Annie would ever-

The tears came as a shock, seemingly out of nowhere.  
Go to **468**

#### 445

[If 'Pet Rescuer' or 'Scarf Fetcher' is Billie]Billie [If 'Pet Rescuer' or 'Scarf Fetcher' is Maude]Aunt Maude [If 'Pet Rescuer' or 'Scarf Fetcher' is Simon]Uncle Simon smiled, apparently grateful of being given something to do. Alix accepted his/her hug as best she could, but she was too busy running potential scenarios of what was happening to her mother in there. [Otherwise]Alix felt like Maude/Simon expected something more from her, but she was too busy running potential scenarios of what was happening to Annie to oblige.

She went from simple heartbreaking scenes where her mother just quietly slipped away, to outlandish horror movie vignettes where Annie mutated into a green and gold beast, ripped all the doctors' throats out and bounded off into the night.

Billie completed her latest origami piece, an owl, and held it out to Alix. "Sorry, I know they're useless."

"They're-"

Maude/Simon waved a tin of mints under Alix's nose.

"Mint?"

With the threat of apocalypse right on the horizon, people were buying tinned everything. Except mints. Alix had yet to meet anyone under the age of fifty who bought mints in tins.

"I-"

Alix took a deep breath. She felt like someone had wrapped layer upon layer of duct tape around her chest, like in one of Dietmar's videos. Every inhale was a battle. Everything about this would be laughable if it wasn't so-

Another alarm

Go to **484**

**446**

If 'Jodie - Dead' is NOT ticked on your STATUS SHEET, read purple text from this point forward.

Compare your scores for the FAMILY, CAREER and DREAMS statistics under ALIX's STATISTICS on your STATUS SHEET. If the HIGHEST SCORE IS FAMILY, go to **454**; if the HIGHEST SCORE is CAREER, go to **447**; if the HIGHEST SCORE IS DREAMS, go to **452**. If two or more scores are the same, you may choose which section to go to.

**447**

This could be her last chance to see her friends.

Go to **448**

**448**

In the LOCATIONS VISITED section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Dietmar's'.

"You absolutely sure about this?" Dietmar asked, although with Alix already boosted up on his shoulders and holding his vape pen, she'd have thought he had his answer already. "You sure this thing gets hot enough?" he continued.

"If they can explode and knock people's teeth out, they can get hot enough to set off a foam dispenser."

Alix hadn't been sure Dietmar would come through, much less get Elizabeth and Jodie

on board. Not because of the logistics - it wasn't such a big deal for a millionaire to send a limo across town to pick up some friends.

[if PET is NOT blank](And their dog/cat/fish/rabbit/lizard/bird).

More because of the sheer randomness of it – calling him up to make that video at that moment. But then again, that was the kind of thing Dietmar thrived on. It was why his videos were watched by millions, Alix included.

If neither 'Awards' NOR 'Expo' are ticked in LOCATIONS VISITED on your STATUS SHEET, go to **449**  
Otherwise, go to **450**

#### 449

It seemed like forever since she'd seen them, her fellow myboxxers, outside of watching their video antics. They didn't meet physically too often, but their joint streams and other collabs were amongst their most popular uploads. The scoriid showers made vid connections patchy, and for some reason, they rarely contacted one another just to chat, so their friendship had lapsed a little. Alix was glad she'd had the chance to rekindle things.

Go to **450**

#### 450

Elizabeth was wearing a shower cap and had the waterproof cover on her tablet too. "Check out Dookie being a big ol' wussy!" she chuckled, pinching the screen to zoom in on his face. The fire alarm clanged, and the foam canisters hidden in the ceiling released, coating Alix and Dietmar in a thick layer of foam.

Further down the corridor, Jodie in short shorts and a bralet, twirled under the cascading foam, streaming herself on her tracker, filming Elizabeth filming them, laughing and screeching.

A woman wearing an actual velvet stole came out to see what the noise was all about and

[if POSITIVITY >25]ask if she could join in. Seemed they weren't the only ones who needed to let their hair down. [Otherwise]tell Dietmar he was trash and she hoped he got evicted. They livestreamed the whole rant, of course.

It couldn't have come out better if they'd paid her to do it.

After a few minutes the canisters stopped squirting, and Dietmar dumped Alix onto the floor and then threw himself down alongside her and made foam angels on the hallway carpet.

Go to **451**

Alix played along and joined him, but it wasn't the same without Jodie. She hated that none of them had even said her name since it happened.

Go to **451**

#### 451

When the second alarm sounded, they barely even noticed.

Familiarity breeds contempt and all that...

Go to **485**

#### 452

She unlocked the bottom desk drawer and retrieved her laptop from its hiding place. There was her memory stick, right where she'd left it a life time ago. She usually synced her short stories to her tracker so she could work on them anywhere, but with everything that had been going on lately, this one had slipped through the cracks. It was an odd one, even by her standards, but it felt important.

[if ALIX >20]"No matter how it seemed, the last one was for me. But this one? This one is for you," she said aloud. [if PET is blank]Go to **453** [Otherwise]petname assumed she was talking to him/her and circled excitedly inside his/her [Dog/Cat/Rabbit]pet carrier [Bird]carry cage [Fish/Lizard]travel tank. Go to **453**

### 453

She wasn't sure she'd even finish it now. She'd thought a suitable ending would come to her, but so far, it was proving elusive.

She didn't bother trying to sync it – the network was up for now, but connection was still patchy. Instead she tucked the memory stick into the lining of her rucksack and returned the laptop to its drawer.

Go to **468**

### 454

It was there in the middle of the coffee table where she had left it. Dad's book. She picked it up and flicked first to the back, where her own notes were about  
If 'Game' is written beside 'Short Story' in the PROJECT section of your STATUS SHEET, go to **455**

If 'New' is written beside 'Short Story' in the PROJECT section of your STATUS SHEET, go to **456**

If 'Pet' is written beside 'Video' in the PROJECT section of your STATUS SHEET, go to **457**

If 'Hospital' is written beside 'Video' in the PROJECT section of your STATUS SHEET, go to **458**

If 'Expo' is written beside 'Video' in the PROJECT section of your STATUS SHEET, go to **459**

If 'Party' is written beside 'Video' in the PROJECT section of your STATUS SHEET, go to **460**

Otherwise, go to **461**

### 455

that latest piece of writing.

*Story idea: Mysterious shapes are hurtling towards earth. It takes a plucky girl with telekinetic powers to assemble them into a vast wall. To everyone's astonishment, when the pieces all interlock, they disappear.*

Go to **462**

### 456

that latest piece of writing

*Story idea: A young woman with an uncertain future constantly feels as though someone is looking in on her life from afar. She leaves them coded messages on a short story forum and eventually, they respond...*

Go to **462**

457

that last video she made.

VD: "When Alex took me in, I was happy just to have a home and regular meals. Had I known she constantly nannates her own life and makes up songs about eating cereal, I may have held out for a less irritating owner."

Go to 462

458

that last video she made.

Important things to remember:

1. Microphone
2. Spare battery pack
3. Hospital lighting = terrible. Bring a lamp or two
4. That nurse's name (check before going. Write it on your hand if you have to)
5. DON'T let Annie know when filming is happening

Go to 462

459

that last video she made.

~~HEY GUYS FOLKS ALL!~~

Want to be famous? in a Lixil video? part of something special? Upload your videos to Myboxx with the hashtag #TDC - prizes? Should there be prizes?

REMEMBER: Get that autoblocker off Elizabeth first to reduce no. of dickvids.

Go to 462

460

that last video she made.

- Buy a bottle of wine for Aunt Senita for hosting
- Put a minicam in the vase on the mantelpiece? Oh unethical?
- Don't let Uncle Simon get too drunk
- Karaoke? Funny or just embarrassing?

Go to **462**

### 461

choosing a gift for Annie.

*TROUSERS?* - No. Annie's too skinny now. Also rules out skirts, dresses, coats etc.

*POUCHES?* - No. Annie finds them shapeless.

*JEWELLERY?* - No. Annie thinks I have cheap taste.

*SLIPPERS?* - No. Annie thinks they're for people who've given up on life. (See also  
dressing gowns)

*SCARF?*

Go to **462**

### 462

If PET is NOT blank, and 'Pet Rescuer' IS blank, write in 'Alix' beside 'Pet Rescuer'.

The book weighed heavy in her hands. Could she do it? Could she really read his words, his private thoughts? It seemed like a betrayal, somehow.

[if ALIX > 20] No. She couldn't betray him. She'd made herself a promise. She would look after it, and maybe, someday, after all this she'd read it. But not today. Go to **463**

[Otherwise] Well, perhaps if he hadn't betrayed her by dying, he'd be here to stop her reading his diary. It was a stupid thought, petulant, but she couldn't help it. If she didn't read it now, then when? When she was cowering in some meteor shelter right before it hit? Fuck that. She [if 'Pet Rescuer' = Alix] peered into petname's [Bird] carry cage

[Dog/Cat/Rabbit] pet carrier [Fish/Lizard] travel tank

for a moment to check her dog/cat/fish/bird/rabbit/lizard was comfortable, then nodded to herself

[Otherwise] tucked Annie's scarf into the top of her bag

Go to **464**

### 463

She put the book carefully into her bag, picked up

[if 'Pet Rescuer' = 'Alix'] petname [Otherwise] the scarf.

and turned to go.

Go to **468**

**464**

and sat down on the sofa to read.

Hours passed.

She closed the book and wiped her eyes. Well.

[if POSITIVITY >50] He loved them both very much, that much was clear. Everything else could be forgiven. [Otherwise] Her worst fears were confirmed. She was no longer sure why she'd done this to herself.

If the PET section of your STATUS SHEET is blank, go to **467**

If 'Alix' is filled in beside 'Scarf Fetcher', go to **465**

Otherwise, go to **466**

**465**

Alix's fingers crept into the top of her bag, catching the edge of the scarf, rubbing the soft silk between finger and thumb.

Go to **467**

**466**

[Fish] petname bumped his/her head against the side of the travel tank.

"Stop it," said Alix absently. "You're only hurting yourself."

[Bird] petname hooked his/her beak through the bars of his/her travel cage, screeching furiously at their refusal to break or bend. "Ssssh, ssshhh," said Alix. "Not much longer, I promise."

[Lizard/Cat/Dog/Rabbit] petname scratched at the front of the travel tank/pet carrier and looked up at Alix with large, pleading eyes. "You're better off in there for now," said Alix. "Trust me."

Go to **467**

**467**

There was nothing left to do but return to the hospital. She gave her apartment a final look over and closed the door.

What? Thought you'd get to read the journal?

Go to **468**

**468**

In Alix's pocket, Oju began emitting a loud noise, a very specific noise Alix had previously only heard on news reports and public safety adverts. Alix reached for her tracker, strapped it to her wrist, and sure enough, the display was flashing red. The evacuation countdown had begun. Twelve minutes. So much for sixteen days. If she ran, really pushed herself, she could probably just about make it back to the hospital. If the PET section of your STATUS SHEET is blank, go to **470**, otherwise, go to **469**

**469**

petname wouldn't like being bashed around in the

[Fish/Lizard] travel tank [Bird] carry cage [Cat/Dog/Rabbit] pet carrier

as Alix ran, but he/she'd like being hit by an asteroid even less.

[if POSITIVITY <50] Although even that might be preferable to spending the next who knows how many hours in a bunker with a bunch of strangers.

Go to **470**

**470**

Make a run for the hospital, go to **471**

Stick with the building's evacuation procedure, go to **479**

**471**

If 'Dietmar's' is ticked in the LOCATIONS VISITED section of your STATUS SHEET, go to **472**

Otherwise, go to **473**

**472**

Dietmar's driver made nervous small talk for the entirety of their drive. Alix watched a bead of sweat make its way down the nape of his neck to the collar of his shirt as he prattled about his children and his wife. They lived in another country and he hoped the money he sent them was enough to get them into a good shelter, but since the impact alarm, he hadn't been able to get through to them.

"It couldn't have hit somewhere else without us knowing, could it?" he asked her, on the wrong side of the road with his indicator still flashing from the turn half a mile back. Alix made placatory noises to the contrary.

Overhead, the sky boomed and grew darker and the driver slammed on his breaks.

"Get out, get out, I'm going back, I'm sorry," he babbled. When she didn't move he opened the car door for her and she had no choice but to hop out onto the roadside. He turned an abrupt circle with a screech of tyres and sped off back towards Dietmar's place, door still flapping open.

Well, at least she was a little nearer to the hospital than she had been. Perhaps if she hurried she could get there before her mother's ward was totally locked down. That was a necessary peculiarity of the Protectorate Pledge wing. It acted as a kind of secure facility as well as a hospice. They tried to keep it quiet, but she'd heard, no, knew, about what happened to some of the Protectorate in their final hours.

Nothing else for it. Taking a deep breath, she set off at a run.

Go to **475**

**473**

Alix had to at least try. Even if Annie never woke up again, Alix couldn't let her be alone in her final hours. As she left her apartment, the other tenants were already filing downstairs to the underground car park. It wasn't a bunker, but it was the best they had. The old man from upstairs called out to her as she turned off the staircase for the lobby.

"Missy, aren't you coming with us?"

She shook her head and clutched

[If 'Pet Rescuer' is 'Alix'] petname's carry cage/pet carrier/travel tank [If 'Scarf Fetcher' is 'Alix'] Annie's scarf [Otherwise] her rucksack

to her chest, shouldering the door open. Outside the sky was darker than it had been in a long time, but still tinged with green. Alix made for the bus lane again, and sprinted.

If ALIX's score is HIGHER THAN 20, go to **475**

Otherwise, go to **474**

#### 474

Alix's legs pumped, her heart throwing itself against her ribcage as violently as [if 'Pet Rescuer' is 'Alix']petname was against the front of the cage/travel tank/carrier. [Otherwise]a captive animal against the bars of its cage.

Go to **478**

#### 475

Vomit scorched the back of her throat, dark spots threatened the edges of her vision, and a burly security guard sucking a lollipop barred her way, but she'd made it. The alarm was still sounding, but otherwise, the hospital was quiet. She supposed those who could move easily had already been evacuated. Porters with patients in wheelchairs and on gurneys moved briskly down the corridors. Alix wondered what happened to those hooked up to machines like her mother. Perhaps she'd find out.

She hoped

Billie and Maude/Simon

had made it to the hospital shelter, at least. Finding out would be difficult, what with all the network problems, but she couldn't afford to think about that right now.

"Mother... intensive care..." she managed to pant, and the guard looked sympathetic, but didn't move.

If the PET section of your STATUS SHEET is blank, go to **477**.

Otherwise, go to **476**

#### 476

His eyes travelled to petname.

"You can't bring a cat/dog/bird/lizard/rabbit/fish in here without special dispensation. It has to have had all the proper checks."

In the PET section of your STATUS SHEET, tick WARD.

Go to **477**

#### 477

"Oh, let her be, Duncan," said a nurse, appearing at his side. Might've been the one with the dirty books from Annie's ward, Alix couldn't be sure. "It's not like we'll be liable if anything happens. There'll be no-one left to sue."

He nodded and joined the tail-end of the evacuees making their way to the priority care bunker. Alix was free to run again.

Go to **488**

#### 478

The sky grew darker and she felt as if she was trying to outrun the meteor.

[if POSITIVITY >50]And succeeding. [Otherwise]And failing.

[If 'Scarf Fetcher' is 'Alix']The lilac scarf, now clutched in her fist, [Otherwise]Her hair streamed out behind her, caught by the breeze of her own speed.

It was like being a child again, running downhill, almost too fast for her own legs, laughing wildly at the sheer recklessness of it all, her laughter almost as high as it had been then, but with an edge to it, cackling at the simple enjoyment of going fast, of being young and fleet-footed and full of promise and then it went black and she stumbled, she was falling, she couldn't be falling, but she was, and she couldn't even see the ground in front of her as she SLAMMED into it.

Go to **489**

#### 479

In the OTHER section of your STATUS SHEET, write 'Apartment' beneath 'Shelter'.

Alix joined the tail end of the orderly queue that was making its way down to the underground car park. Although the apartment block was built a little after cars had ceased to be commonplace, architects and town planners were initially isolated from the effects of the downturn and so it never occurred to them that the people likely to live in these cramped, one bedroom apartments would also be unlikely to afford a car of their own. Throughout Alix's tenancy, it had been used primarily for barbecues and games of table tennis.

There were some old school lockers at the back of the car park, each containing the residents' survival kits.

[if 'Survival kit' IS ticked in ALIX] Alix was glad she'd added to hers – a few packs of noodles and a box of chocotreats would have looked pretty pathetic right now. Go to **480**

[Otherwise] Shit! Alix never got round to finishing hers. She supposed she'd have to rely on the kindness of strangers now, or enter into a barter system, trading packets of noodles for powdered milk to go in her chocotreats. POSITIVITY -5. Go to **481**

#### 480

[if PET is NOT blank] "Don't worry," Alix told petname, circling in his/her travel tank/cage/carrier. "I even remembered pettreats for you."

Go to **482**

#### 481

[if PET is NOT blank] "Sorry buddy," Alix told petname, "You might have to go without pettreats for a while." She'd just have to hope she could scrounge up *something* for the poor bird/cat/dog/rabbit/lizard/fish to eat.

Go to **482**

#### 482

If 'Gone' is NOT ticked in BILLIE'S section, you may now resume reading **green** text from this point forward.

The other residents dragged out camp beds and blankets and camping chairs, from their stashes.

[if 'Survival kit' IS ticked] Alix realised she wasn't as prepared as she'd thought.

Perhaps she should try to

Check in with Maude/Simon, go to **507**

Get some sleep, go to **483**

483

Alix spread out a moth-eaten old blanket from the back of her locker. It smelled awful and she could feel the cold concrete through it, but what choice did she have? She hadn't been savvy enough to bring an inflatable mattress like her uber-prepared neighbours.

An old man had a coughing fit, a pair of small siblings fought and had to be carried to separate ends of the car park, screaming.

Alix stared up at the ceiling and watched spiders crawl around the rafters.  
Go to 548

484

**Alix was so sick of alarms. This one was particularly intrusive. It rang out throughout the hospital, but it also flashed across every wall-mounted screen, white lettering on red, and vibrated with a resonance that permeated her bones. Even the coma patients must surely be aware of its import: the meteorite was coming, no more time for parties and pleasantries.**

Everyone must go.

But go where? Nurses and orderlies were operating with fittingly surgical precision, some taking up key positions along corridors, others ensuring the sickest and most immobile patients were moved to the evacuation points. Annie's ward was different, Alix knew. A fortress in and of itself, instead of evacuating, it would go into lockdown, blast doors going up, originally intended for containing the Protectorate, now being used to protect them from the impact.

If Alix hurried, she could make it to Annie's ward, could ride it out locked in there with Annie and the automated medcare system. But did she want to? She knew how some of the Protectorate had gone out. Being locked in a metal box with... that... well, it was almost as dangerous as going head to head with the meteorite. The hospital's meteorite shelter wasn't likely to be much better. It would be overcrowded and underfunded. She'd be with

Billie and  
Maude/Simon and

a bunch of strangers. Supplies would be scarce. If they had to stay down there any length of time, it could get real unpleasant, real fast. She should probably

Hurry to Annie's ward, go to **487**

Take her chances in the hospital shelter, go to **523**

#### 485

Eventually the press of evacuating rich people became too much to ignore. The woman in the velvet stole stepped delicately over them and made her way to the back stairway, their brief time together forgotten in an instant. Alix sat up. Dietmar was still lying on his back, clothes darkened with gradually dissolving foam.

"It's happening, you idiots!" screamed a man in a tweed sports coat as he passed. "Those supposed experts got it wrong - it's happening NOW!"

"We should go," said Elizabeth. "If he's right..."

Alix was filled with sudden remorse. Her mother was dying, actually dying, and she'd left

Billie and

Maude/Simon to deal with the reality of it.

"I guess." Dietmar stood slowly, pulled Alix to her feet too. "The bunker here is really sweet," he added, but his voice was devoid of all emotion. "There's a pool table and a bar. We'll have a meteor party or something."

"An end of the world party," Jodie corrected, her voice equally flat.

Alix watched as a guy in an old-timey bellhop uniform went from door to door, knocking and scanning to make sure no-one got left behind. No-one should die alone, after all. Dietmar caught her expression. For all his frivolity, he was an astute judge of emotions in others.

"I can pay my driver a shit ton of money to take you to the hospital, if you want," he said. "It's probably illegal or something, but," he shrugged.

"Immoral is the word you're looking for," said Elizabeth sharply. "You can't exploit the guy just because he's poorer than you."

"Look, if Alix wants to go, she can, that's all I'm saying."

"I don't want to, but I have to. Thanks Dietmar." Go to **471**

"I can't ask you to do that, Dietmar. Or your driver." Go to **486**

#### 486

In the OTHER section of your STATUS SHEET, write 'Dietmar's' under 'Shelter'.  
Go to **554**

#### 487

"Billie, I'm sorry, I have to-"

"Don't even," said Billie firmly. "See you on the other side."

Alix hated how she always seemed to end up running away from Billie. But right now, running was necessary.

Maude/Simon had already committed to joining the throng heading towards the hospital bunker, and Alix struggled to even see her Aunt/Uncle over the crowds as she slipped away. Between the crowds and his/her unwavering commitment to following rules, it was unlikely Maude/Simon would follow.

"Alix, are you sure?" he/she yelled after her, already knowing exactly where she was going. Alix raised her right hand in a thumbs up as she ran, and hoped her Aunt/Uncle saw it.

Alix *sprinted*.

Go to **488**

### 488

In the OTHER section of your STATUS SHEET, write 'Ward' under 'Shelter'.

Alix came to a skidding halt. The door to her mother's ward was closed and locked. The blast door had lowered to cover it. She swiped her fob on the access panel, but it just flashed red and beeped. Swipe. Beep. Swipe. Beep. She was too late. After everything she'd been through, she'd missed this, the most important moment for her, for her mother. Their last chance and she'd missed it.

She glanced to the keypad at the side of the door. It accepted a four digit numerical code. An override, for emergencies just like this. She banged on the metal surface, knowing it to be fruitless, whose attention was she hoping to attract? There was no one. Her gaze returned again to the keypad. She didn't know the number. She didn't know who programmed it, so it wasn't even as if she could make an educated guess. The chances of her happening across the correct number by accident was ten thousand to one.

But what about that other person? The one who made her decisions for her sometimes, it seemed. Someone who both was and wasn't Alix, who watched her antics with a degree of detachment, like an out of body experience. Maybe they had heard it somewhere. Maybe they could guess. It was a wild theory, but it was all she had right now.

She hovered her finger over the keypad and let 'them' punch in the number.

It worked! Alix could barely believe it. The keypad flashed in acceptance of the override, the blast shield rose, Alix pushed the heavy metal door behind it aside and raced through. On the other side, she punched the manual lockdown button and sealed herself in. This was it.

No going back.

If ANNIE's score is HIGHER THAN 25, go to **549**

Otherwise, go to **550**

#### 489

For a moment, there was only blackness, and Alix wondered if it was all over. Slowly, she opened her eyes. The road was rough against her cheek, and as she pushed up off it, her head swam and she felt sick. Gingerly her fingers floated to her forehead. A large bump was growing, but she hadn't broken the skin. Still sore to the touch though, and she winced as she clambered to her knees, which were bruised and battered too. The sky was black with a jade tinge, like a magpie's wing.

Alix knew she should find shelter, but close by there was nothing but several lanes of a disused dual carriageway, and a short way off, a bus shelter. As soon as she stood, all she could think about was sitting down, so the bus shelter seemed as good a place as any. No protection against a meteor, of course, but then what was, really? Bunkers were like aeroplane oxygen masks. If you needed them, your chances weren't good anyway.

She limped towards the bus stop,

If the PET section of your STATUS SHEET is blank, go to **490**. Otherwise, **read on**.

only then remembering poor petname. His/her cage/tank/carrier was a little way off, upside down, but when Alix picked it up, he/she moved.

[Fish] Some of the water had leaked out, but there seemed to be enough that he/she could at least move and breathe, which would have to do for now. Alix carried the travel tank as carefully as she could to avoid sloshing any more water out

[Otherwise] Alix took him/her out, hugged him/her tight and apologised over and over for getting him/her into this mess. Satisfied that he/she was none the worse for his/her ordeal, she tucked him/her into the front of her jacket, leaving the carrier in the middle of the road,

Go to **490**

#### 490

In the OTHER section of your STATUS SHEET, write 'Bus' under 'Shelter'.

and sat down on the one remaining plastic seat in the bus shelter.

As she checked her tracker, she almost cried to find she had signal. She really needed to speak to someone, anyone, really, although her priority should probably be

Maude/Simon. Go to **507**

Annie. Go to **491**

Billie. Go to **492**

#### 491

Unfortunately, before Alix could call anyone, a forced news notification came through, preventing her from dialling anything other than emergency services.

If ANNIE's score is HIGHER THAN 45, go to **556**

Otherwise, go to **559**

#### 492

Alix sat back against the wall, her gaze fixed on her tracker's signal meter, almost daring it to drop. She selected the frequent callers from her app list and touched Billie's picture. Well, it was a photo of a pug in a bobble hat, but that was Billie's go to avatar.

The dialling screen had barely initialised before Billie answered, her face filling most of the tracker's screen.

"Alix? Oh, Alix, thank god! When the alarms all went off, I was so scared!

[If 'Pet Rescuer' is 'Billie']But at least I have some company!" She held petname up to her tracker's camera

[Fish]in his/her tank. [Other Pet]pressing him/her close to her face. He/she wriggled and squirmed, so Billie nuzzled him/her briefly then loosened her grip a little, lowering petname into her lap off-screen. Go to 493

[If 'Scarf Fetcher' is 'Billie']But I got it." She held the scarf up for Alix to see. [If PET is NOT blank]"Naturally, I picked petname up too." She turned her tracker's camera on him/her briefly as proof. Go to 493

[If 'Pet Rescuer' OR 'Scarf Fetcher' is Maude/Simon]Maude/Simon isn't back yet. Have you heard from him/her?"

"No." Alix swallowed. Oh god, what had she sent her Aunt/Uncle into? She had turned the news ticker off, what if something had happened at the apartment block that she didn't know about?

"I'm sure he/she's fine," said Billie, clearly sensing Alix's unease. "It's all just gone kind of crazy here at the moment."

[Otherwise]Maude/Simon just went to try to find out what's happening with Annie's ward. Apparently it has some kind of automated care system or something? Anyway, Maude/Simon's not too happy about an AI being the only one keeping an eye on your mom."

"It's good that he/she's looking out for Annie like that."

Go to 494

### 493

"I guess I have to join your building's evacuation procedure, now?" Billie continued.

The building's alarm wailed on in the background. Billie looked away from her tracker's camera. She was on the move. Billie's face darkened and lightened as her tracker struggled to accommodate the changing light levels.

"Yes," said Alix. "Yes, please do."

Moments later she heard her landlord's voice off-screen, saying he wasn't about to start letting in any old waifs and strays off the street. Billie looked ready to cry.

"Show him my fob," said Alix, then, louder, to the landlord: "Let her in, please, Gordon! She's my guest!" She was shaking, unable to believe he could be like this, that anyone could be like this.

"Alix?" asked the landlord, looming into view as Billie turned the tracker camera on him. "Why aren't you here? Who's thi- You know what? I don't care. Fine." He moved aside and waved Billie through.

"Oh, thank you thank you thank you!" Billie gushed, openly crying now.

"Don't get too excited yet," said Alix, trying to take on Billie's role since she didn't seem to be playing it any more. "Who knows how long you'll spend in that disused car park with all my awful neighbours?"

"Are they really awful?" asked Billie, crying harder.

"Oh, god, Billie, no! They're fine. It was just a joke, a terrible, terrible joke."

Billie wiped her eyes and sniffed. "Good. I think I'm okay now."

Go to **494**

#### **494**

Billie nodded to herself, then squinted intently into her tracker, peering around as if that could help her see behind Alix. "Where are you?"

Check what is written beneath 'Shelter' on your STATUS SHEET.

'Bus' Go to **495**

'Apartment' Go to **496**

'Dietmar's' Go to **497**

'Hospital' Go to **498**

#### **495**

[if BILLIE >25]"I'm in my apartment's shelter," Alix lied. "It's kind of basic, but we're all ok."

"You're with people? It sounds kind of quiet there. Not like here."

"Yeah, yeah, they're just sleeping. I should probably go, actually. Don't want to wake them." Go to **502**

[Otherwise]Alix shrugged. "A bus stop just outside town, I guess?"

"Alix! God!" Billie covered her mouth, but it didn't stop the sob escaping. "How-why-can't you come back here? Please, Alix, come back here!"

Alix shook her head. "I don't think there's time. And my knee's kinda scuffed up, and... I'll be okay, Billie, I promise."

Billie kept her hand clamped over her mouth and her shoulders shuddered, but there was no further noise. Alix cast around for some kind of assurance, but she wasn't sure there were any, so she just said:

[if POSITIVITY >30]"I've got Protectorate blood, remember? That's virtually like being made from girders."

[Otherwise]"I'll be fine."

Go to **500**

#### **496**

"In my apartment's shelter. Although calling it a shelter is giving it too much credit." She swooped the tracker in a wide arc so Billie could see.

"The one here's cramped, but it's not so bad," said Billie. She followed suit, and for a moment, Alix was able to see knots of people, some sitting on the floor, some standing, a couple making use of the machine-dispensed sudokus, a group of children playing with brightly coloured bricks on the floor, unaware anything was amiss. "How it'll be in a couple of days is anyone's guess, but let's hope it doesn't come to that."

"You're in the best possible place, really," said Alix. "Virtually everyone there has had state disaster training." Go to **500**

#### **497**

"I'm in Dietmar's shelter with him and Elizabeth  
and Jodie

Go to **499**

**498**

"It's ok, I'm in the shelter," said Alix, turning the tracker away from herself for a moment to offer Billie a view of DJ Memorial's utilitarian shelter. It was, like all public services, overcrowded and underfunded, yet somehow meeting a myriad of regulations and guidelines thanks to dedicated workers breaking their backs. In the corner, a group of children were transfixed by a large plastic doll's house, moving the animal figurines around inside as everything was normal.

Go to **500**

**499**

- It's pretty wild." She panned the tracker round so Billie could get a load of everything. The pool table, the bar with its uniformed bartender, the goddamn crystal chandeliers.

"Whoah," said Billie, finally cracking a smile. "How the other half live, eh?"

"They'll be shitting on the dancefloor at the first sign of trouble," said Dietmar, overhearing. "I guarantee it."

"There's a dancefloor?!" Billie's eyes widened. Alix smiled. It was nice to see a little of her friend's usual self coming through. "I thought this was a classy bunker because it has a drinking fountain and building blocks for the kids."

"I wish I was there," said Alix suddenly.

"Can I hear a string quartet?"

"It's a recording."

"Yeah, one of the violinists didn't bring his bow, so they had to go with the back up option."

"Elizabeth, you're not helping."

Go to **502**

**500**

"Oh, good," said Billie, her lip trembling. "I wish I was there. Or you were here, whichever."

"Me too. I'm so, so sorry you ended up there without me. I don't know what I was thinking."

[If 'Pet Rescuer' is 'Billie'] Billie held petname up again. "You were thinking of this one. And I don't blame you. It was an impossible decision, your pet or your mother." Go to **501**

[if 'Scarf Fetcher' is 'Billie'] Billie held the scarf up again. "You were thinking of Annie and how happy this would make her."

Showed how little Billie knew Annie, but Alix didn't have the heart to disagree. Go to **501**

[Otherwise] Go to **502**

**501**

If 'Home' IS ticked in LOCATIONS VISITED on your STATUS SHEET, **read on.**  
Otherwise, go to **502**

Billie held something else up in front of her tracker's camera. "I picked up something else while I was at it," she explained.

"Dad's journal!"

"I haven't read it," said Billie quickly. "I haven't and I won't. I just thought you might want it."

"Thanks Billie. I do. Thank you so much." It was Alix's turn to become tearful. She zoomed her tracker out a little, hoping it was too low def to pick up her tears.  
Go to **502**

**502**

"Hey," said Billie suddenly. "Remember **that coffee shop we met up in?**" Go to **503**  
that volcano that erupted in my home town? The one where your dad saved all those people?" Some of those people, Alix thought. Billie was waiting for a response, so  
Go to **503**

**503**

Alix nodded.

"Let's meet up there when this is all over," said Billie, and her eyes were so full of hope and fear and desperation, Alix paused for a long time thinking about how to respond.

"Of course." Go to **506**

"I love you." Go to **504**

"You're my best friend." Go to **505**

**504**

If BILLIE'S score is HIGHER THAN 35, tick 'Love' next to MOOD on your STATUS SHEET.

Otherwise, tick 'Not Love'.

Go to **506**

**505**

If BILLIE's score is HIGHER THAN 30, tick 'Best Friend' next to MOOD on your STATUS SHEET  
Go to **506**

**506**

Alix took a breath to say the words just as the screen of her tracker flickered and cut out, replaced with

[if ANNIE >45]BREAKING NEWS. Go to **556**

[Otherwise]something else. Go to **559**

**507**

Alix had to scroll way down her list of recently called numbers to find Maude/Simon. His/her avatar was that picture from about twenty years ago of him/her wearing a noticeably wiggy auburn wig. Alix still wasn't sure if the wig was a joke or not.

The call rang out for a good long while. Just as Alix was about to give up and try Aunt Serita instead, Maude/Simon picked up. At first Alix thought he/she had selected audio only, because the screen was black, but when he/she said: "Hello, Alix? Is that you?" She realised Maude/Simon just had his/her mobile phone pressed to his/her ear.

Old people. Why couldn't they get on board with trackers like everyone else?

"Yes, Maude/Simon, it's me."

If 'Maude/Simon' is written next to 'Pet Rescuer' on your STATUS SHEET, go to **508**  
If 'Maude/Simon' is written next to 'Scarf Fetcher' on your STATUS SHEET, go to **509**

Otherwise, **read on.**

"Billie's just gone to get a final few snacks from the vending machine for us. She's a sweet girl. As soon as she's back, we'll evacuate."

"Good," said Alix. "I'm glad you're both safe."

Go to **513**

"I'm just waiting on that ridiculous doctor to give me a satisfactory answer on who's going to be looking after Annie during all this. As soon as she's consulted her superiors and reported back, I'll be heading to the shelter myself."

"Annie's ward is probably the safest place in the city." Alix said.

Go to **513**

**508**

"What is wrong with this damn cat/rabbit/bird/dog/lizard/fish of yours, Alix? Is it feral?"

"He/she's a sweetheart when you get to know him/her."

"I'll bet."

"Is everything ok?"

Maude/Simon sighed. "Yes, yes, he/she just [Fish] kept avoiding the net and then trying to jump out of the damn tank. I only just got him/her in the portable tank.

[Bird] attempted to peck my face off, then flew around screeching his/her head off and pooping all over the place. I had to throw a blanket over him/her to get him/her in the carry cage.

[Otherwise] tried to bite my fingers off when I picked him/her up and then hid behind the furniture for twenty minutes. I only just got him/her in the pet carrier. Go to **511**

**509**

"I think I have the scarf you wanted. It was in a package, right, not in any of your drawers or closets?"

Good grief, who knew what the old snoop had been poking around in?

[If 'Secret Discovered' IS ticked] Although Alix supposed she was a fine one to talk about that.

Go to **510**

**510**

"Yes," Alix said. "That's the one. Purple and silver."

"Oh, I didn't open it. But I have it."

[If 'Rock Received' IS ticked] Alix hoped he/she didn't turn up with Billie's volcano rock.

"Right. Thanks."

"Okay then,

Go to **512**

**511**

Still, we're ready to go now,

Go to **512**

**512**

so I guess I'll see you in a little while."

"Wait, what?"

"I'm heading out."

"Maude/Simon you can't do that! Didn't you hear? There's an evacuation in progress. You have to go to the apartment's bunker. You can't come back here."

"Or what? It's not like I'm going to get arrested, is it? And anyway, DJs has a public shelter. They can't turn me away no matter how late I get there."

"That's assuming you make it back! Maude/Simon, please, this is madness, please stay there. You can use my fob if you have any trouble getting in. The landlord's a dick, but if you show him that, he has to let you in."

"Language, Alix. Even if I'm not registered to the property? Sounds risky."

"Not as risky as driving during a meteor strike!"

Go to **513**

**513**

"Speaking of," Maude/Simon added seamlessly, "where are you right now? Somewhere safe, I hope?"

Check what is written beneath 'Shelter' on your STATUS SHEET.

'Bus' Go to **514**

'Apartment' Go to **515**

'Dietmar's' Go to **516**

'Hospital' Go to **517**

#### 514

[if POSITIVITY >40] "Don't freak out, because I promise I'm going to be absolutely fine."

"I'm already hating the sound of this."

"I'm in a bus shelter just outside town."

[Otherwise] "I fell and bumped my head and scratched up my knee and now I'm stuck in some tumbledown bus shelter on the main road towards DJs."

Go to **519**

#### 515

"In my apartment's shelter. All the mod cons." Alix glanced over at the dripping drinking fountain. Someone had put a saucepan underneath to collect the drops.

"Oh good," said Maude/Simon, missing Alix's sarcasm completely. "The one here is full of screaming children. Driving me absolutely up the wall. Sorry, Alix."

"No worries," said Alix, confused as to whether the apology was because Maude/Simon regarded her as a child, or because he/she assumed Alix liked children, or for something else entirely.

[If 'Secret Discovered' IS ticked] "I wish Margaret was here." It was so sudden and he sounded so sad, Alix was caught off guard.

"Oh. Gosh. I-"

"I know, I know, it's weird of me to bring it up. It's just she really hated children. She would have had a field day with these little shits." He was laughing, but there were tears too.

"Don't!" said Alix. "You'll set me off too!" Go to **520**

[Otherwise] go to **520**

#### 516

"I'm in Dietmar's shelter with him and Elizabeth

and Jodie

go to **518**

#### 517

"It's fine, I'm in the shelter here," said Alix, glancing around DJ Memorial's utilitarian shelter. It was, like all public services, overcrowded and underfunded, yet somehow meeting a myriad of regulations and guidelines thanks to dedicated workers breaking their backs over it all.

In the corner, a group of children were transfixed by a large plastic doll's house, moving the animal figurines around inside as if everything was normal.

"Glad to hear it," said Maude/Simon. "Wish I was there."

"Yeah, sorry about that. I should have gone myself."

"Not at all. I had the car, after all. And you can't drive, so-"

[If 'Pet Rescuer' is Maude/Simon] Presumably talking about petname, Maude/Simon added:

"Anyway, I've got this one, and now I suppose I'm heading down to your shelter..." Go to 520

[If 'Scarf Fetcher' is Maude/Simon] There was an intense rustling noise at the other end of the line and then Maude/Simon said: "I've squished your gift into my pocket, but I'm sure it'll be fine. Heading down to your building's shelter now."

[If PET is NOT blank]"Wait, while you're there can you get petname before-" Alix said suddenly, but Maude/Simon had already moved on and was saying something about: "... better than any of the previous ones. Go to 522

Go to 520

## 518

so..."

"Oh, that's nice," said Maude/Simon. "So you're with friends?"

Alix wanted to say "I'm with *rich* friends" so her Aunt/Uncle could appreciate the opulence of the shelter she was in, but it seemed too crass. Particularly since while Alix had a pool table, a well-stocked bar and crystal chandeliers to admire, Maude/Simon was in an overcrowded public shelter where even toilet paper would be rationed.

Instead, she said: "Yes. All his neighbours are here too."

"That's good," said Maude/Simon. "Community is important."

Alix watched Dietmar flicking through the musical options on the surround sound system, pointedly ignoring the lady in the stole saying she wanted dubstep.

"Uh-huh."

Go to 520

## 519

"Oh my goodness! Which one?"

Alix snorted: "Why?"

"Because I'm coming to get you." Alix could hear fabric swishing, probably Maude/Simon putting on a coat.

"You can't do that Maude/Simon. If you're between the hospital and here when it hits, what good does that do either of us?"

"So I'm supposed to sit here doing nothing?"

"You're supposed to be a comfort to Annie."

Maude/Simon sighed heavily. Alix could feel the droop of her Aunt/Uncles's shoulders in his/her voice. "Okay. Fine."

Go to 520

## 520

Alix felt like the call was over and was about to say her goodbyes when Maude/Simon said suddenly: "When all this is done with and the government have got everything back up and running, we'll have a party like you've never seen.

[If 'Party' IS ticked]No hummus and cheese on sticks. We'll have fondue – the cheese kind and the chocolate kind! And instead of karaoke, we'll play that game you like, with the electronic guitars and things? Go to **521**

[If 'Relative's House' IS ticked]And I'll get all the photos digitised so everyone can see them all – we'll have them projected onto the wall, five feet tall! Go to **521**

[Otherwise]Go to **522**

### 521

[If 'Relative's House IS ticked, and PET = 'Dog']And you know what? I bet the animal rescue centres will be overflowing after the impact, so I'll get a new dog, no, two new dogs and they can play with petname.

Go to **522**

### 522

You can pick the music, and we'll have cocktails instead of that horrific wine. How does that sound?"

"That sounds wonderful." Go to **506**

### 523

In the OTHER section of your STATUS SHEET, write 'Hospital' beneath 'Shelter'.

The hospital bunker was already uncomfortably hot due to the sheer number of people packed in. As one of the main public evacuation shelters in the area, it was both incredibly well run and extremely ill thought out. Hospital staff slid easily from directing families around the building to directing them around the shelter, but nothing could help with the fact that the air conditioning units were so sporadically positioned there were hot spots and cold spots, that the drinking fountains, although fresh and cool, were too few for a shelter of that size. The same too for the chemical toilets and washing facilities.

"Ooh look - goodie bags!" said Billie, pointing.

"Billie, those are our survival kits."

[If Green and Gold text are BOTH active]"I think those are wash kits, dear," said Maude/Simon absently, joining the queue to take one despite having a holdall with a nightmask peeping out the top.

Billie made eye contact with Alix and gave a playful little shrug.

Go to **524**

Go to **524**

[If NEITHER Green nor Gold text are active]Go to **547**

"Oh thank goodness," said Maude/Simon, pointing. "I was worrying that I hadn't packed a wash bag for you, but they have little emergency ones."

Thank goodness, thought Alix, as she took the small tote bag from the shelter volunteer. Inside there was a bottle of water, a packet of dehydrated fruit, a small square of flannel

for washing, a tiny plastic toothbrush and a comb. God forbid anyone should have a hair out of place during the apocalypse.

Go to **526**

#### 524

Each in turn received an identical beige tote bag which contained a a bottle of water, a packet of dehydrated fruit, a small square of flannel for washing, a tiny plastic toothbrush and a comb.

Billie rooted in the bottom of hers until she came up with a DJ memorial notebook and pen. She held them up triumphantly.

"See! Goodie bags!"

Alix smiled as best she could. Making jokes in the face of potential annihilation was her brand. She wasn't used to being on the receiving end. Maybe those commenters who said she was wrong in the head were right after all.

If BOTH **Green** AND **Gold** text are active, go to **525**

Otherwise, go to **527**

#### 525

The dormitory area was filled with triple decker bunkbeds. Since they were in a party of three, they had one to themselves.

"Shotgun top bunk!" yelled Billie, tossing the notebook up there to secure her place.

Alix sighed. She could hardly expect **Maude/Simon** to go on the middle bunk. Manoeuvring into it was awkward enough for a young person, never mind a stiff oldster.

"Guess I'm in here then," she said, hauling herself onto the thin mattress. Creaking bedsprings overhead and beneath her spine. Worst of both worlds.

It was still a little early to attempt to sleep just yet. She could  
make the most of having Billie and **Maude/Simon** with her. Go to **528**  
check for news updates. Go to **526**

#### 526

If ANNIE's score is HIGHER than 45, go to **556**

Otherwise, goto **559**

#### 527

A shelter volunteer in a hi-vis vest led them to the dormitory area. Because there were two of them, and the beds were all triple decker bunks, they were going to have to share with a stranger. In this case, a pregnant woman with her hair tied back in a brightly coloured head scarf. Obviously, she had to have the bottom bunk, which left middle and top for Alix and **Billie Maude/Simon**. Alix wasn't sure which was worse. Three inches from a cobwebbed concrete ceiling, or between two sets of creaking bedsprings?

"Shotgun top bunk!" Billie yelled, struggled up the ladder and belly flopped onto the bed. The whole frame creaked and rocked. Fortunately the pregnant woman was laughing.

"Billie!" But Alix was laughing too. Billie had that effect.

At least in here, they could catch up. Go to **529**

At least in here, Alix could catch up with the latest on the meteor. Go to **526**

**"I'm not quite the old relic you think I am!" said Maude/Simon following Alix's gaze to the top bunk. With a twinkle in his/her eye, he/she sprang up the ladder and onto the mattress. "I probably won't want to move again for the next couple of hours though," he/she admitted, folding his/her arms behind his/her head.**

**"That's okay," Alix smiled, crawling into her own bunk.**

**"We can just talk." Go to 541**

**"I was going to check the news anyway." Go to 526**

### **528**

"We should find some way to pass the time," said Alix, mindful of Maude/Simon's tired, red-rimmed eyes.

Billie produced a deck of cards from her back pocket. "Do you have the game No Soup over here?"

Maude/Simon and Alix shook their heads.

"Okay, I'll teach you."

They all squeezed into Maude/Simon's bunk and played a practice round. The game seemed to consist primarily of shouting "SOUP" or "NO SOUP" in response to questions about your hand of cards. Alix was just starting to get the hang of things when both her own and Billie's trackers went off simultaneously.

Go to **526**

### **529**

"Cools," said Billie, letting one leg dangle over the edge of her bunk, so it was like the split down the toe of her Converse was speaking to Alix. "What d'ya wanna talk about?"

"Our impending deaths." Go to **530**

"You and me." Go to **533**

"Anything. Literally anything." Go to **538**

### **530**

If POSITIVITY is HIGHER THAN 45, go to **531**.

Otherwise, go to **532**

### **531**

Fortunately Billie saw it for the joke it was. There was the inevitable creak of bedsprings and then her face appeared over the edge.

"Well, obviously," she said. "We should be making our wills right now." She disappeared for a moment and Alix heard furious scribbling. Then a note was handed down to her.

"'I hearby'- that's not how you spell that, Billie, 'I hearby leave all my worldly possessions to' ALL your worldly possessions?"

"Well, currently that's this pen."

"That's not what worldly possessions are. That's just what you currently have on you."

"Okay, give it back a minute," her hand appeared, open waiting.

"No. Your stuff is mine now."

Billie's head appeared next, her face a mock scowl.

Go to **502**

**532**

Alix heard the pregnant woman tut beneath her.

Billie's head appeared over the edge of the bunk.

"Hey," she said. "Less of that kind of thing, ok? People are trying to hold it together."

Go to **502**

**533**

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Alix wondered what the hell she meant by them.

Billie exhaled slowly.

If BILLIE's MOOD is 'Angry', go to **534**

If BILLIE's score is HIGHER THAN 20, go to **535**

Otherwise, go to **537**

**534**

"We're ok, I guess."

Alix nodded to herself. That was a start.

On her wrist, her tracker had been flashing news updates for a while now, and she finally allowed herself to look at one.

Go to **526**

**535**

In the BILLIE section of your STATUS SHEET, if 'Smitten' is ticked, erase it and instead tick 'Love'. Go to **536**

Otherwise, go to **537**

**536**

"...I think I know where you're going with this," said Billie slowly, her smile lighting up her whole face.

Go to **506**

In the BILLIE section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Smitten'.

"Why do you bring it up?" asked Billie, dangling her face over the edge of the bunk, close to Alix's own.

Maybe it was just being upside down that did it, but she was bright, bright red.  
Tell her, you fool. Go to **506**

**537**

"You and me are besties for LYFE!" said Billie, extending her pinkie over to Alix for a pinkie shake.

Alix pinkie shook, of course.

As she did, her wrist came into her eye-line, and the newsfeed she'd been avoiding for the last half hour or so loomed into view from her tracker.

Go to **526**

**538**

"What's your favourite bird?"

"Favourite bird?" Alix was confused. If this was a joke, it didn't have a punchline she knew.

If PET is a Bird, go to **539**.

Otherwise go to **540**

**539**

petname of course!"

"Not your favourite individual bird!" Billie snorted as if Alix was the crazy one.

"Favourite kind. Mine's a peacock. What about cheese?"

Go to **546**

**540**

"I don't know. African Grey parrots are cool, I guess?"

"Neato, mine's a peacock. What about cheeses? I'm very partial to a nice bit of Edam."

Go to **546**

**541**

"You and me are the only ones who could've ended up stuck in here, Alix," said Maude/Simon, his/her voice flat and emotionless. "None of the rest of our shitty family could get over themselves long enough to come."

"That's because we're the best ones." Go to **544**

"They're not so bad." Go to **545**

If 'Secret Discovered' IS ticked in the RELATIVE section of your STATUS SHEET, you may also choose: "Aunt Maggie would be here if she could though, wouldn't she?"

Go to **542**

If 'Joker' is ticked in the ANNIE section of your STATUS SHEET, you may also choose: "You never got round to telling me about Annie's practical jokes." Go to **543**

**542**

Simon didn't answer for a long time, and Alix was worried she'd upset him, but then he said softly: "No, she would have insisted on going to Annie's ward."

"Really? They were that close?"

"Oh no. But they understood one another. And Maggie thought she was indestructible, of course, like they all did. So she wouldn't have even considered the dangers."

Alix hadn't considered the dangers, not really. As if reading her mind, Uncle Simon said forcefully: "We did the right thing being here, Alix. We don't have superpowers. We're no use to anyone up there."

Alix wondered if they were any use down here.

Go to **506**

### 543

"Oh," Maude/Simon shuffled a little, like he/she was settling in for a good story. "Well. How about this one? You know they travelled in those dropships, the protectorate?"

"Uh-huh."

"They had a footwell, like in a car? And there was this ongoing joke where everytime there was a new pilot, someone would put a rubber rat in there. Big black Halloween thing, red eyes, furry body, squeaked when you squeezed it, you know the kind."

"I do."

"Well, there's this old hand flying, Morrison, I think his name is, and he reaches down in the footwell, and there's the rat. And he's not some rookie, so he doesn't freak out, he reaches down and picks it up, gives it a damn hard squeeze.

Only it's not the fake rat. It's a real rat, two weeks dead, and when he squeezes it, his fingers mush through its ribcage and its eyes pop out onto the ground in front of him. *Then* he freaks out."

"And Annie did that? Our Annie?"

"Our Annie."

Alix is speechless. As usual, it's her tracker that breaks the silence - BREAKING NEWS. Go to **526**

### 544

Maude/Simon chuckled. "Damn right! When all this is over, *we'll* throw a party. Show them how it's done."

"We should have hot dogs, and mini pizzas," said Alix, warming to the idea. "No cheese skewers."

"Some things are, sacred, Alix."

"*In addition* to cheese skewers?"

"Now you're getting it."

If that was a contentious issue, Alix wondered how a karaoke ban would be received.  
Go to **506**

**545**

"They're shitheads."

"Then why go to their parties?"

Maude/Simon sighed. "What else am I going to do? Host more of my own?"

"Why not?" asked Alix. Thinking: surely you have to get better at it eventually?  
Go to **506**

**546**

And they worked their way through favourite everythings (with occasional suggestions from the pregnant lady, whose name was Toni, and whose favourite condiment was brown sauce) until they were almost able to forget where they were and what they were doing.

Almost.

Go to **526**

**547**

Alix got her welcome pack which contained rather wonderfully (no doubt from some enormous historic stockpile) a DJ memorial pen and notepad, a bottle of water, a packet of dehydrated fruit, a small square of flannel for washing, a tiny plastic toothbrush and a comb. Personal grooming was important, evidently. She was shown to her dorm, which was an area with twenty or so triple decker bunk beds, each with a thin mattress and a scratchy wool blanket. Alix was on the middle bed, the worst of both worlds. She slid in and stared up at the bowing springs of the mattress above her.

Go to **548**

**548**

She should probably use her tracker to check in on

Maude/Simon. Go to **507**

a local news bulletin. Go to **526**

Billie. Go to **492**

**549**

There she was, sitting on the edge of her hospital bed as she had done a thousand times before. But this time something was different. The monitors around her were all flashing red and the automated voice of the medical computer was strongly insisting that she return to her bed for a full body scan. Her hair was all but completely gone and she was thinner and yellower than ever, yet her back was ramrod straight. She turned as Alix approached and Alix gasped.

She looked well. She looked happy and strong and powerful, in spite of everything. "It's almost over," she said.

"TEMPERATURE CRITICAL," intoned the medical AI. "RETURN TO YOUR BED FOR THE COOLING PROCEDURE. TEMPERATURE CRIT-"

"That's why I always preferred the damn thing with its voice turned off," said Annie, ignoring its requests and getting to her feet.

Alix rushed forward, ready to steady Annie against the collapse she knew must come.

"No," said Annie and she held out her hand to motion 'stop' and Alix did, even though she didn't want to. Annie's stance was rock solid. No hint of a stagger or a sway as she strode towards the patio doors.

"The blast shield is down," said Alix, still straining to move towards her mother, every muscle taut.

Annie laughed. "It won't matter," she said, staring straight into Alix's soul with those green, green eyes. Alix realised that rather than being alien, those eyes were Annie's essence. The core of Annie distilled into vibrant jade. "I wish I could hold you, one last time, my girl." Annie looked down at her hands, and when she blew a kiss, Alix fancied she heard her mother's damp lips sizzle as they touched the skin of her fingertips. Annie grasped the edge of the patio door and squeezed it hard and her fingers sank in like it was butter. The blast door too, glowed orange at her touch. It took a little longer, and Alix could see it took effort as Annie furrowed her brow and her hands reddened. But eventually she was through and out into the courtyard and, instead of offering any goodbyes, she just grinned and leapt and was away like a shooting star in reverse, streaking upwards into the sky.

[If 'WARD' IS ticked in the PET section] Whatever Annie had done seemed to have affected petname too. Alix had never seen him/her so utterly motionless.

Eventually Annie's power waned, and the sudden regaining of her faculties made Alix pitch forward, grabbing at the edge of the bed to right herself, just like Annie used to when she stumbled. She hurried to the gap in the blast shield to stare up at the sky, but her mother was gone.

Nothing but green sky.

In the ANNIE section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Blaze of Glory'.

If POSITIVITY is HIGHER THAN 50, go to **560**

Otherwise, go to **571**

## 550

"Hello, Alix."

Alix flinched. It wasn't her mother's voice. Annie remained inert and yellowing beneath her bed covers. "Doctor Carson activated my vocal settings when the lock-down was initiated," the AI explained in its soothing, modulated tones. "Your mother does not have much time," it continued, its blue scanner lights roving endlessly over Annie's sleeping frame.

"However, her coma is medically induced. I could wake her if you'd like to say goodbye."

Alix sat down heavily in the leather armchair. Her hands went to the arm rests and she realised there were grooves where she had dug in her nails all those times Annie had said something snide and cruel. "Will it hurt?"

"I can minimise her pain."

That seemed like a machine's way of saying yes. Which was more selfish? To demand a goodbye from Annie, or let her go without getting the last word? Alix sighed. She knew exactly how Annie would see it.

"Wake her up, please." Go to **551**

"Leave her in peace." Go to **552**

### **551**

Slowly Annie's eyes opened. She blinked, then said: "Maude? You came back."

Alix swallowed. "Of course I did."

"But you were so upset about Jim. I thought-" Annie looked down at her hands, tried to lift them, but the effort was too much. "I thought I cut my hands. There was blood."

Alix moved to the edge of the bed, ignoring the AI's rote proximity warnings. She clasped Annie's hand and it was so hot it almost hurt.

"No," Alix told her. "No blood and no upset. Everything is fine."

"Then why am I in the hospital?" asked Annie drily, and with a twinkle in her eye.

"No getting anything past you, is there?"

"Alix?"

"Yes?" Alix's breath caught in her throat. She didn't know what she expected, but her mother only looked at her like she was seeing her for the first time, not in this particular meeting, but ever, at all. A weak smile tugged at the corners of Annie's mouth and then she closed her eyes.

"Is she...?"

"No," said the AI. "But it is unlikely she will wake again. You should now retreat to a safe distance."

Go to **553**

### **552**

Alix leaned forward in her seat and took her mother's hand. It was hot to the touch, almost painfully so. The skin had a yellow sheen and was pulled tight over jutting bones. Alix squeezed it and it was like squeezing the handles of barbecue tongs left too long on the grill.

"Internal temperature rising," the AI warned. "Please retreat to a safe distance."

Go to **553**

### 553

"You retreat to a safe distance," said Alix, and continued to hold her mother's hand until the last traces of heat had ebbed away.

If POSITIVITY is LOWER THAN 50, go to **571**  
Otherwise, go to **586**

### 554

"Okay," Dietmar nodded and wandered off to give his driver the good news.  
[If PET is NOT blank] As Dietmar was leaving, the bellhop entered, carrying petname. Alix waved him over and took her pet gratefully, trying to push down the guilt of forgetting all about him/her. She was dropping the ball on a lot of things lately.

"Can't have been an easy decision," said Elizabeth, giving Alix's arm a squeeze.

"Half the time they don't feel like decisions," Alix confessed. "Not really. I mean, what else could I do?"

"I guess," Elizabeth nodded, furrowing her brow and Alix felt bad. Elizabeth was estranged from her family, had moved out when she was seventeen and never looked back. Family vs friends wasn't something she'd ever have to consider. Not that that was really the choice Alix had been faced with. More condemn someone else to certain death or give them a chance of survival.

"Hey, that looks like serious face," said Jodie. "I don't like serious face. Why don't we go and watch those guys play foosball? A couple of them are hot..."

Go to **555**

Elizabeth. "Why not put it to good use? We could go and show those losers how to play foosball?"

Go to **555**

### 555

Alix followed her gaze to where several guys in polo shirts were circling, none wanting to be the first to undertake such a frivolous act as to play table football during a planetary crisis.

"Sure, in a sec."

First, Alix wanted to use her tracker to  
call Maude/Simon. Go to **507**  
check the latest news report. Go to **526**  
call Billie. Go to **492**

### 556

**BREAKING** said the news ticker over and over again. No further elaboration, just that. The image was poor quality, clearly being streamed from a tracker zooming beyond its capabilities and wobbling thanks to an inexperienced streamer.

A lone figure, pale green and blurry, stalking across an empty car park. Sound quality was poor too. A hubbub of voices welled up, all asking who it was, and what they were doing, distorting and crackling with a static edge.

Alix's heart clenched like a fist. She was fairly certain that particular shade of pale green was exclusive to hospital gowns. The figure stopped for a moment. Crouched as if gathering strength. They began to glow, brighter and warmer, until the glow was too bright to make out the figure within, and then they streaked upward, into the sky like a reverse shooting star. For a moment, there was a hushed silence, as all the watchers held their breath. Then a sonic boom which shook the ground so violently the concrete cracked beneath Alix's feet. She clutched her chest, struggling to breathe, strangled with fear.

In the ANNIE section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Blaze of Glory'.

Check what is written beneath 'Shelter' on your STATUS SHEET.

'Bus'. Go to **558**

Otherwise, go to **557**

### **557**

The lights went out, dropping to the emergency back-up and there was a flash so bright Alix had to look away and put her hand over the tracker for a moment. When she looked back, the streamer was filming nothing, just an empty car park, with a soft rain falling.

Go to **558**

### **558**

The stream ended and nothing took its place. The silence became oppressive.

Not. One. Sound.

If POSITIVITY is HIGHER than 50, go to **560**

Otherwise, go to **571**

### **559**

A poised newsreader, the strong lighting and hive of movement in the newsroom behind her suggesting this was pre-recorded.

"Scorpio XXIX, the meteor that has been approaching for some time now, will make impact shortly." That vagueness, another clue that this was filmed and kept aside, ready to be deployed at the appropriate moment. Cut to a simulation of the meteor and its path. A huge, pitted rock, blazing with green fire, moving ever closer.

Cut to the latest predicted impact zones. They were

[if POSITIVITY >50] smaller than before. Unexpected. Go to **586**

[Otherwise] larger than ever. Almost half the world was an angry red blotch, like a spreading bloodstain. Go to **571**.

### **560**

In the METEOR IMPACT section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'None'.

Check what is written beneath 'Shelter' on your STATUS SHEET.

'Ward' Go to **561**

Otherwise, go to **562**

### **561**

Alix sat down on the bed, unsure how to proceed. Should she go outside, try to follow Annie somehow? Should she call someone? What had just happened?

[If 'WARD' IS ticked in the PET section] petname still seemed mesmerised by Annie's actions – his/her eyes were glued to the gaping hole in the side of the room. Once again, Oju provided the answer, her clear voice suggesting: "This breaking news matched your recent interests."

Alix quickly accepted the bulletin. A busy news room, but apparently no audio. "Sound up, Oju," she said, to no avail. She tapped hurriedly through the tracker's manual menus, pressed the volume button to the max. Nothing. Unless...  
Go to **562**

### 562

The image on the tracker screen had changed. It was a live feed, there was no audio, no voiceover from a kindly news anchor in a safe studio bunker. Just the meteor, the real meteor, not a simulation. A live satellite feed, brought to you somehow by the marvel of technology. It looked so tiny. Alix knew that was down to the distance and capabilities of the satellite's camera, but still.

That was what all the fuss was about? That little cold rock. It wasn't even all that green, far more muted than the recreations and even the sky itself, implied. Greenish white.

If ANNIE's score is HIGHER THAN 45, go to **563**  
If 'Blaze of Glory' IS ticked, **read on**. Otherwise go to **564 now**.  
Then, a tiny speck, streaking towards the meteor, fast and hot, burning orange. It- Annie? Was it really Annie?- made impact with the surface of the meteor and- Nothing. Alix had expected... something! For the meteor to explode, or at least for a cloud to go up as the burning particle hit. Go to **564**

### 563

And then, something else. An orange shooting star coming the opposite way. Blazing towards it at incredible speed. Alix made a small, involuntary noise and squeezed

Billie's fingers even harder.

Billie said "Oww" softly under her breath, but she was too transfixed by the unfolding images to even attempt to retract her hand.

Go to **569**

[If 'Scarf Fetcher' = 'Alix'] the scarf even harder. The tightness of the fabric twisting through her fingers was turning her fingertips deep purple, but she couldn't let it go any more than she could look away. Go to **569**

[If 'Pet Rescuer' = Alix][Fish] petname's travel tank even harder. [Otherwise] petname's shoulders even harder. petname gave her a warning nip and Alix adjusted her grip and patted the poor cat/dog/rabbit/lizard/bird's head by way of apology. Go to **569**

[Otherwise] her own knee caps. Her nails were digging in even through her jeans, but she couldn't feel it, was barely even aware she was doing it. Go to **569**

### 564

The meteor spun on through space, slowly it seemed. Alix held her breath watching it. When it disappeared out of the satellite's view, her tracker's screen went black and she was left gasping for breath.

[If 'WARD' IS ticked in the PET section] petname seemed similarly stunned. Alix wondered whether birds/fish/cats/dogs/rabbits/lizards could sense something in the air, static

electricity maybe? He/she had been utterly silent and motionless for what seemed like a long time now.

Check what is written beneath 'Shelter' on your STATUS SHEET.

'Bus' Go to **565**

'Dietmar's' Go to **566**

'Hospital' Go to **567**

'Apartment' Go to **568**

Otherwise, go to **570**

### **565**

Above, the sky was growing darker and darker, losing its green. The air grew cold and Alix shivered. Time passed.

Go to **570**

### **566**

Around her, everyone had fallen silent. Some shook with noiseless tears. Others locked eyes, sharing in one another's fear and misery. Still others looked at the ground.

There was loud pop and a smash as the champagne cork hit the chandelier. Dookie stood watching the champagne foaming out of the bottle and onto his hand. "Seemed like as good a time as any," he shrugged.

The bottle changed hands for a while.

Go to **570**

### **567**

Around her, everyone had fallen silent. Some shook with noiseless tears. Others locked eyes, sharing in one another's fear and misery. Still others looked at the ground.

A toddler picked up the tiny ceramic bath from the doll's house and began smashing it against the roof, yelling: "BASH BASH BASH!" He looked shocked when his mother burst into tears.

No-one else did or said anything.

Go to **570**

### **568**

Around her, everyone had fallen silent. Some shook with noiseless tears. Others locked eyes, sharing in one another's fear and misery. Still others looked at the ground.

The old guy from upstairs went from person to person offering them home made potato salad. Alix thought it a sweet gesture. She watched him persist, holding out the tupperware container to each person in turn. No -one took any.

His pilgrimage seemed to take forever.

Go to **570**

### **569**

Annie. Annie was there. In her supernova blaze, it wasn't possible to make her out as a human being, but Alix knew that was who it was. She flashed across the sky towards the meteor, gaining speed and brightness until eventually she met with its cold pale

surface. Alix expected a huge sonic boom, or a cataclysmic earthquake, but there was no sound. Just a bright flash and then the meteor fell apart, chunks spinning off into space.

Go to **591**

### 570

Alix wasn't sure precisely much time had passed. Just long enough for her to unclench her aching muscles, to doubt, one more time, the accuracy of the news footage. It was then that there was a deep rumble. The ground shook, slightly at first, then more and more until it became too much for Alix to retain her balance, and she dropped to her knees as the sky roared and total darkness fell.

Go to **591**

### 571

In the METEOR IMPACT section of your STATUS SHEET tick 'Big'.

If 'Apartment' is written beneath 'Shelter' on your STATUS SHEET, go to **572**

If 'Scarf Fetcher' or 'Pet Rescuer' is Maude/Simon, go to **573**

If 'Scarf Fetcher' or 'Pet Rescuer' is Billie, go to **574**

If 'Pet Rescuer' is blank, go to **575**

Otherwise, go to **576**

### 572

In the ALIX section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Escaped'

Go to **576**

### 573

In BOTH the PET AND RELATIVE sections of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Dead'

Go to **576**

### 574

In BOTH the PET AND BILLIE sections of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Dead'

Go to **576**

### 575

In the PET section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Dead'. Go to **576**

### 576

[If 'Shelter' = 'Bus'] The sky flashed bright white green, like a chemistry experiment Alix had done in school with some boron. Or maybe barium. She couldn't remember, could only remember that the flash made her take a step a back and cover her eyes, just like she was doing now. Some of her classmates had laughed. Go to **577**

[Otherwise] Go to **577**

### 577

If 'Shelter' is blank, go to **578** now. Otherwise, read on.

Then, a sound like rain. Fine droplets falling hard and fast against the roof of the shelter. Next, a roaring, building and growing louder and closer, until the shelter shook and the crack in the concrete widened.

Go to **578**

### 578

Alix surprised herself by bursting into tears. She'd never considered herself the kind of person who might do that.

Now it seemed it was becoming something of a regular occurrence.

When her dad died, she'd cried of course, but when Annie was first hospitalised, Alix had felt only numb. A spreading coldness in her belly that turned to guilt when her mother's condition worsened. She had expected more of that. Not this. Had there been something wrong with her then? Or now? Which was the right way to be?

Billie looked surprised too, but was soon hugging her, forehead pressed against Alix's so firmly it almost hurt. Alix was so grateful for the companionship. Without Billie she would likely be falling apart altogether.

Go to **579**

[if 'Pet Rescuer' = 'Alix']|Fish/Lizard]She tried to focus on petname instead, but that just set off a new line of worries about whether the travel tank would be sturdy enough to withstand whatever the meteor might throw at them. Go to **579**

[Otherwise]As if sensing her discomfort, petname snuggled more closely against Alix's chest. Alix was so grateful. Without petname, she would likely be falling apart altogether. Go to **579**

[Otherwise]Go to **579**

## 579

Check what is written beneath 'Shelter' on your STATUS SHEET.

'Bus' Go to **580**

'Dietmar's' Go to **582**

'Hospital' Go to **583**

'Apartment' Go to **581**

Otherwise, go to **584**

## 580

Alix felt she should run, but where to? The shelter creaked and groaned, but it seemed to be holding, whereas when she looked towards the city, she could see buildings falling, masonry tumbling into the rumbling streets. Nowhere was safe. In fact, she seemed some distance from the epicentre here.

[If 'None' is ticked next to METEOR IMPACT]For now. Go to **591**

[Otherwise]No sooner had that thought crossed her mind than the ground shuddered with such force the bus shelter was dislodged from its foundations and came CRASHING down on top of her. In the ALIX section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Escaped'. Go to **591**

## 581

[If POSITIVITY <15]None of Alix's neighbours came to comfort her. She wondered if she'd done something to offend them.

[Otherwise]The potato salad guy came and tentatively put his arm around Alix. She felt bad for knowing him only as potato salad guy.

Go to **583**

## 582

Alix watched the chandelier shedding crystals like snowflakes,

falling, glittering, into Jodie's hair, and had a sudden vision of the meteor strike passing uneventfully only for the light fitting to come loose and crush her friend to death. She took Jodie's elbow and led her hurriedly back over to the bar.

Go to **584**

and for some reason it reminded her of Jodie. What if Jodie was up there, judging them because they hadn't even had a funeral for her yet? What if she was the one shaking the chandelier, specifically to make Alix feel bad?

Go to **584**

### **583**

The light fittings shook. All the children in the shelter began crying pretty much simultaneously. Maybe it was some kind of resonance thing, Alix thought, wiping her nose. Although why had it affected only the children and her? Was she defective in some way? Developmentally stunted?

Go to **584**

### **584**

[If 'Shelter' is 'Ward' AND 'Blaze of Glory IS ticked] Would Annie be able to breathe up there, in the atmosphere? How would she know where she was going? Was she going anywhere at all, or just away?

Strange, the things you worry about when the world is ending.

Go to **585**

### **585**

They say bad things come in threes. The roof, which moments ago had seemed so sturdy, so reliable, shuddered and caved in, and Alix was able to test the trinity of badness as she breathed brick dust, tasted blood and blacked out.

Go to **591**

### **586**

In the METEOR IMPACT section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Small'.

Check what is written beneath 'Shelter' on your STATUS SHEET.

'Ward' Go to **587**

'Bus' or blank, go to **588** Otherwise, go to **589**

### **587**

The AI fell silent for a moment, making the distant rumbling seem like it was right there in the room.

"Impact imminent," intoned the AI. "Please adopt the brace position. Impact im-" and on it went with its new refrain.

Go to **590**

### **588**

Overhead, the sky rumbled.

Alix had expected it to go dark, but instead, the sky flared brighter, like an early electronic screen with a faulty backlight.

Go to **590**

### **589**

Outside, the sky rumbled.

The emergency lighting flared bright for a moment, then went out.

Not this again.

The shelter warden went to flip the breaker switch, but it did nothing.

Go to **590**

### 590

The rumbling intensified, louder and with a screaming edge to it, until Alix was no longer sure whether it was still happening, or whether the sound was in her own ears. Her ears kept popping, which made it worse. Her skin prickled, and she worried that she was about to discharge like a weathervane in a lightning storm.

"My ears keep popping," said Billie in a whisper. "Are you getting that too?" Alix could only nod, swallowing frantically in an effort to dislodge the swollen feeling around her eardrums.

One long, loud boom. Everything shook, once, briefly, like a dog trying to twitch a flea off its back. Then silence.

Go to **591**

### 591

*Welcome to wiff.net, the Writers' Independent Fiction Forum.*

*The following extract was submitted by Lixxil. We thank you for taking the time to read it.*

Check the METEOR IMPACT on your STATUS SHEET.

If 'None' is ticked, go to **592**

If 'Small' is ticked, go to **593**

If 'Big' is ticked, go to **594**

### 592

Everything had been leading up to this moment. At least, that is what we'd all been led to believe. In the end, there was no end. We didn't go out with a bang, because she did. She got to shine one last time, which was all she wanted, really. She got not one, but two commemorative statues. One outside the hospital, in place of that ugly old shape that made no sense, and one on the hill overlooking the city. Everyone said it was only fitting that she had two statues - one that everyone could see for miles around, and one linking her to the hospital that had nursed her through her final days. Some people chose to forget that they had protested the naming of the hospital wing only six short months ago. Group amnesia. Selective remembering.

But we're all guilty of that. At the funeral, I told everyone how wonderful she had been, how brave, how strong. And the mourners nodded and smiled their agreement into their handkerchiefs. But the truth of it was in how she dealt with that meteorite. A fire that brought tears to your eyes, furious and terrible and beautiful and unstoppable. A thing to be admired from a safe distance, not cuddled, or rebuked.

My mother killed a meteorite, not the other way around.

Go to **595**

### 593

Once upon a time, there was a girl called Alice. Not that one. This Alice's land was far from wondrous. The sky had been wrong for a long time. Now it was wronger still. And not just the sky, but the land too. There were craters where buildings had been, piles of rubble blocking roads and pavements, lakes displaced so that wet places were dry and dry places were wet. It seemed like an ending. And yet, it wasn't.

Because there were people amongst the rubble, and most still had hands and minds and memories and they used those to rebuild. They could no longer look to their wrists for guidance, so instead they looked to each other. And when their devices were eventually restored to them many months later, they appreciated them and each other, all the more.

Alice appreciated her friend Ermintrude most of all.

She had come so close to losing Ermintrude, now she knew how much she meant, and that she would never let her go again, even if another meteor came. They would always live happily ever after.

Go to **595**

### 594

Becoming aware of the smell of your own body is a strange way to realise you're not dead. The panicked sweat, the last vestiges of hastily applied body spray, they mingle in the nostrils with the brick dust and the blood. Each breath is a reminder that you're alive, not because of the act itself, but the scent it carries. My ghost would probably still breathe, I think, as futile as the gesture might be. But it wouldn't smell. Somehow, I know this.

When a hand reaches through the rubble, that has its own smell too. Disinfectant and the cold tang of outside air. There is still air outside. Insides are still inside. The rescuer clears away the worst of the rubble and suddenly I feel like a charlatan, like I was playing at being buried. And in a way, I am. I'm not buried for real, forever. Not like her.

I'm sorry.

I miss you.

I wish we could do back and start this all over again with what I know now.

Maybe you will.

Go to **595**

### 595

*Thank you for reading. Please now rate the piece on a scale of 1-10. (With 1 representing 'What the hell is this crap?!' up to 10 'The finest creative work since time immemorial.')*

Write your rating out of 10 in 'Rating 4' on your STATUS SHEET.

[if ALIX >50]I've come to value your opinion, you know. Really. Go to **596**  
[if ALIX <20]What makes you think I care about your opinion? Jerk. Go to **596**  
[Otherwise]Like water off a duck's back. Am I the water or the duck? Go to **596**

**596**

## A WEDNESDAY...?

Check your STATUS SHEET. If BILLIE is not 'Dead' or 'Gone', you may resume reading **Green** text. If RELATIVE is not 'Dead', you may resume reading **Gold** text. Compare your scores for the FAMILY, CAREER and DREAMS statistics under ALIX's STATISTICS on your STATUS SHEET. If the HIGHEST SCORE IS FAMILY, go to **646**; if the HIGHEST SCORE is CAREER, go to **597**; if the HIGHEST SCORE IS DREAMS, go to **614**. If two or more scores are the same, you may choose which section to go to, but you must stick with that same high score (e.g. DREAMS, CAREER or FAMILY) for all remaining HIGHEST SCORE choices.

**597**

"Hey, get a shot of this," says Dietmar, skipping up the kerb.

"Can we stick to the shooting schedule, please?" Elizabeth asks, referring to her clipboard. Paper notes, because the network is still too jittery to rely on. Their new office is a converted carpet shop on a former retail park, [if METEOR IMPACT = 'Big' or 'Small'] outside the worst of the blast radius. The car park's a little cracked, but no-one has a car, so it doesn't really matter. Elizabeth painted their company logo in the window to deter looters, she says, but Alix worries it'll have the opposite effect.

Go to **598**

cheap and cheerful.

One wall is dominated by a large framed photo of Jodie, doing that pose she loved with one shoulder to the camera and her chin tilted downwards to make her eyes look bigger. They still don't talk about her much. It's too painful.

Go to **598**

**598**

If the PET section of your STATUS SHEET is blank, or 'DEAD' IS ticked go to **599** now. Otherwise, **read on**.

[Fish]petname comes to the office in his/her carry tank when Alix is there. Elizabeth stencilled the logo onto that too. He/she's on a warning at the moment though, because he/she'd been doing his/her old tidal wave trick and soaked a stack of brand new notepads. Go to **599**

[Otherwise]petname has the run of the office when Alix is there, and his/her own special workplace food and water bowls complete with company logo too. He/she's in Elizabeth's bad books right now though, because he/she got up on Alix's desk and chewed on some of the brand new notepads before Alix could stop him/her.

Go to **599**

**599**

[if 'Rock Received' IS ticked] At least all that paper gives Alix an excuse to use Billie's rock as a paperweight. A bittersweet reminder of those loved and lost.

The paper bears their company logo as well, because Elizabeth insists on the importance of good branding. "We went over this at the office," she says, growing more exasperated. "We need to get this thing finished!"

What thing? Go to **600**

Never mind, carry on. Go to **601**

### 600

The thing in question is their first project together as a studio.

[If 'Video' is NOT blank next to PROJECT] They were using some of the footage Alix had shot for her video,

[If 'Video' = 'Pet'] playing around with petname,

[If 'Video' = 'Hospital'] a series of interviews with the doctors, nurses and porters at DJ memorial,

[If 'Video' = 'Expo'] screengrabs and video capture of actual MyBoxx fan comments,

[Otherwise] some talking heads from Maude/Simon's last party, including Alix's many aunts, uncles and other extended Protectorate family,

[Otherwise] They had already done some pieces to camera back at the office,

but are now filming additional segments to turn it into

[If METEOR IMPACT = 'None'] a full-blown comedy sketch.

[Otherwise] a serious news piece.

[If 'Lost Job' IS ticked] So much for Chad Chen trying to torpedo her career with his demonetisation.

Dietmar keeps running off ahead and coming back with footage of locations they haven't discussed. Elizabeth is trying her hardest to keep them to the shooting schedule.

"As I've said before," Elizabeth barks, "we're running out of time to get this done!"

Go to **601**

### 601

[If METEOR IMPACT = 'None'] "We have literally all the time in the world!" says Jodie.

Her wrist is bare where her tracker used to live.

Go to **602**

### 602

Alix glances down at her wrist. The basic functions of her tracker have been restored, although Oju is still mostly silent. She never realised how much she would miss that tinny robot voice.

Almost as much as she misses

[Check 'Dead' ticks and write in as applicable] Billie/Maude/Simon/petname/Jodie and

Annie.

Ouch.

The thought is still like being hit by falling masonry. Alix flinches.

If your HIGHEST SCORE is CAREER, go to **603**  
If your HIGHEST SCORE is DREAMS, go to **624**  
If your HIGHEST SCORE is FAMILY, go to **657**

### 603

"You okay?" Dietmar asks, taking a break from  
[if METEOR IMPACT = 'None']trying out a variety of silly voices and faces into his tracker.  
[Otherwise]filming endless mood shots of scaffolding and Environment Agency cordons.

Alix looks up at the sky. It's no longer green, so there's that.

[If METEOR IMPACT = 'None']But it isn't blue yet, either.

[If POSITIVITY >50]Alix remains hopeful.

[Otherwise]Alix holds out little hope that will ever happen.

[Otherwise]Instead, the air has a thickness to it. Breathable, but inhale too sharply and you can feel the grit in your lungs.

[If 'Escaped' is ticked]She never told them how she really made it out of the levelled shelter. It seems like a dream now. There was heat and light and next thing she knew, she was hovering above the devastation, emanating orange light.

[If 'Blaze of glory' IS ticked]Like mother, like daughter.

[If RELATIVE = 'Dead']She tries not to think about how Maude/Simon would be here to see that sky if Alix hadn't sent him/her running off back to her apartment, but the thought haunts her.

Elizabeth catches Alix's expression and throws an arm around her shoulders, squeezing her. "We have each other," she says, pointedly ignoring Dietmar's puke noises. "*We* made it through."

"I know, I know," says Alix. "I just... I suppose I never thought it would end up like this." She gestures

[If METEOR IMPACT = 'Big']to the skyline where her apartment block once was, Environment Agency crews in their hi vis jackets and hard hats clambering over the rubble even now, assessing and recording and clearing. Go to **604**

[If METEOR IMPACT = 'Small']to the people passing by them, back to their daily lives almost as if nothing had ever happened. Go to **604**

[Otherwise]in the direction of the hospital where the Annie Akerman memorial statue stands guard, replacing that ugly pelvis thing. Go to **605**

### 604

[If 'Blaze of glory' IS ticked]"Annie tried to save us. She punched a fucking meteor, and it's like it made no difference. Everything ended up the same."

[If PROJECT is 'Scarf']She twiddles with the silken tassels of the purple scarf. She wears it as a belt most days now.

Go to **605**

### 605

If POSITIVITY is HIGHER THAN 50, **read on**. Otherwise, go to **606**

"End?" sniggers

Jodie lifting her tablet to continue filming the first major project from Bunker Dunk Studios. "Alix, we're just getting started."  
Go to **607**

Dietmar lifting his tablet to continue filming the first major project from Bunker Dunk Studios. "Alix, we're just getting started."  
Go to **607**

### 606

"Enough of us are still here to make a difference," says Jodie.  
[If 'Blaze of Glory' IS ticked]"We probably wouldn't have made it without her smashing the meteorite into smaller pieces," Jodie continues. "Isn't that enough of a difference?"

"Who says this is the end?" says Elizabeth.  
Go to **607**

### 607

[If BILLIE is 'Dead' or 'Gone']"Not Billie, though," says Alix quietly, almost to herself. "Billie's not here."

"Oh, honey," says Elizabeth, coming to a stop and pulling Alix into a hug. "I'm sorry."  
[If BILLIE is 'Gone' or BILLIE's MOOD is 'Angry'] It's the fact they parted on bad terms, that's what's really getting to her. "If I could go back and do it all over, I would," she sniffles into Elizabeth's t-shirt.

Go to **612**

[If BILLIE's MOOD is 'Love']It was the fact that they had seemed to be really going somewhere, the two of them. As in, towards happy coupledness. Why had she wasted so much time on things that didn't matter when she could have spent more of it with Billie? "We were supposed to end up together!" Alix sobs into Elizabeth's t-shirt, aware that she's making a scene, go to **613**

[Otherwise]It just didn't seem right. Alix was supposed to be a superhero, and Billie was her trusty sidekick. They were meant to make it through together.

"Nothing seems to turn out how we expect no matter what we do," says Elizabeth. Alix assumes that's supposed to be comforting, but it really isn't. She sighs and moves away from Elizabeth. Perhaps this is it. Perhaps this is the end? Go to **611**

Alix's tracker buzzes. Video calls aren't functioning these days - 'transmission interference' the error messages say. Billie has sent a note instead.

[If BILLIE's MOOD is 'Love' or 'Bestie']Hurry home or the bin gets your dinner x.

[If BILLIE's MOOD is 'Love']Alix's heart soars. She can't wait to get home to her amazing girlfriend. Go to **609**

[If BILLIE's MOOD is 'Bestie']Alix grins. Go to **609**

[If BILLIE's MOOD is 'Angry']Any anger Billie may have harboured over their previous exchanges is long gone. A near-miss with a meteorite will do that for you. Really puts things in perspective. Go to **608**

If POSITIVITY is HIGHER THAN 50, go to **610**  
Otherwise, go to **611**

### 608

Already planning my next visit.

Alix grins. Billie speak for 'made it home safe.' One less thing to worry about.

"Just because we went with your name for the studio, doesn't mean you get any special perks," says Elizabeth. "Get off your tracker and get on with the million and one things we need to sort out!"

Go to **610**

**609**

Billie's an excellent cook, even if her flavour combinations are a little off the wall sometimes.

[If METEOR IMPACT = 'Big'] Since the meteor had levelled Alix's apartment and grounded Billie's flight home indefinitely, they'd both needed somewhere to live, so finding a place together had started out as a convenience thing. But

[If BILLIE's MOOD = 'Love'] one thing led to another and they've now been dating for almost two months.

[Otherwise] now Alix couldn't imagine living on her own ever again. They have fun even though they're technically living through an apocalypse right now.

[Otherwise] Flights will resume soon, but in the meantime, Billie had needed a place to stay, and Alix's apartment was cramped, but better than a prolonged stay in a shelter.

[If BILLIE's MOOD = 'Love'] Given the recent developments in their relationship, a hell of a lot better. In fact, now that Alix thinks about it, Billie hasn't checked the flight updates in over a month...

[Otherwise] It would be strange when Billie moved out, but Alix had seen so much change over the last few months, it didn't seem to terrifying any more.

Go to **610**

**610**

Her friend's right. They're just getting started.

# THE BEGINNING

**611**

Who says this is

# THE END?

**612**

Dietmar and Jodie remain remains at an awkward distance, pretending to be hard at work.

Elizabeth strokes Alix's hair.

"Sorry chick," she says, "Life just doesn't work like that."

Alix closes her eyes and wishes for another life.

# THE END?

613

aware that Dietmar has  
and Jodie have

begun checking over their filming equipment with an intensity that verges on desperate.

"I just wish we had more time, y'know?" she says, quieter, only to Elizabeth, because who else would be listening?

"I know," says Elizabeth, holding her close like Annie never did. "I know."

# THE END?

614

[If METEOR IMPACT = 'Big'] Alix keeps her scarf pulled up over her nose. The air's still thick with meteorite dust, and although the environment agency has confirmed it's not carcinogenic, they advise against getting a lung-full of it too.

[If 'Blaze of glory IS ticked] Sometimes Alix wakes gasping in the night. Her dreams are often set in space, struggling to breathe against the void like Annie must have. She wonders again what could possibly have prompted Annie to attempt to take out a meteorite.

[If RELATIVE = 'Dead'] Sometimes her nightmares are about Maude/Simon. They're lying there together, pinned under the concrete of Alix's collapsed apartment, and rescuers come and free her, but not Maude/Simon. On those nights, she wakes herself up yelling: "No, go back, he/she's still in there!"

Go to 615

[Otherwise] Alix had almost forgotten what natural sunlight looks like, untainted by meteorite green. Was it always this bright?

Go to 615

615

Check the BILLIE section of your STATUS SHEET.

If 'Dead' is ticked, go to 602

If 'Gone' is ticked, go to 616

Otherwise, go to 617

Otherwise, go to 618

616

Alix still regrets the way things turned out with Billie, but as the network is

[If POSITIVITY >50] slowly regaining coverage, she hopes some day they might rekindle their online friendship if nothing else.

[Otherwise] still patchy and unreliable, she doesn't hold out much hope for them ever getting in touch with one another again.

Go to 602

617

At her side, Billie picks her way through the rubble, keeping a watchful eye on

[if PET = is BLANK, OR PET is 'Dead' AND METEOR IMPACT = 'Big' OR 'Small']the tumbledown remains of supermarkets and off licenses.

[if POSITIVITY >50]Looters are rare, but it doesn't hurt to be careful.

Go to **602**

[Otherwise]Moribund is crawling with looters, and places which might house tinned goods and alcohol are their natural habitat. Go to **602**

[if PET = is BLANK, OR PET is 'Dead' AND METEOR IMPACT = 'None']the uneven ground, mindful of turning an ankle. Go to **602**

[If Fish AND METEOR IMPACT = 'Big' or 'Small']the tumbledown remains of supermarkets and off licenses, mindful of looters.

Go to **620**

[If Fish AND METEOR IMPACT = 'None']the uneven ground, mindful of turning an ankle. Go to

**619**

[If METEOR IMPACT = 'Big' OR 'Small']petname clambered/fluttered over the debris. Alix lets petname loose a lot more these days. It isn't as if he/she has anywhere better to go – even a cat/dog/lizard/rabbit/bird likes to know where his/her next meal is coming from.

Go to **602**

[Otherwise]petname. Go to **621**

## 618

Check your STATUS SHEET.

If PET is a Fish and the METEOR IMPACT was 'None', go to **619**

If PET is a Fish and the METEOR IMPACT was 'Big' or 'Small', go to **620**

If you have any other pet and the METEOR IMPACT was 'None', go to **621**

If you have any other pet and the METEOR IMPACT was 'Big', go to **622**

Otherwise, go to **602**

## 619

petname is in his/her tank back at Alix's apartment. She'd installed an air bubble pump and a little diver and petname seems to love them both more than Alix would've thought it possible for a fish to love anything. She feels oddly guilty for not bringing him/her along today. They have been through so much together, even if he/she is only a fish.

Go to **602**

## 620

In the PET section of your STATUS SHEET, tick 'Dead'.

It was looters who killed petname. Since Alix's apartment was almost totally levelled, she was keeping her fish in the portable tank at her temporary accommodation. They had broken in and smashed everything breakable, including the tank, and Alix returned from a meeting with Dietmar and Elizabeth to find petname glistening and lifeless on the concrete floor. To survive the meteor and then die that way seems cruel, but that wasn't the only cruel loss of life, of course.

Go to **602**

## 621

The city centre is returning to the swing of things, but out here in the suburbs, recovery is still slow. Which means there's no harm in one bird/dog/cat/lizard/rabbit running loose.

Go to **623**

## 622

The devastation wrought by the meteor has one small advantage - petname can now run freely without fear of being run over or trampled underfoot by careless passer by. Even so,

Go to **623**

### 623

Alix had the strangest feeling when she first set petname down on the ground, like she was letting him/her go free, to fend for him/herself in this new, 'safer' world. But all that happened was petname ran/flew off, then stopped and waited for Alix to catch up.

He/she's been doing that ever since.

Go to **602**

### 624

For a moment she wishes she'd stayed home. Out here it's too big, too wide, too unknown. She's not even 100% certain this is the right way. She's avoided coming out here until now.

[If 'Escaped' is ticked in ALIX's section]The story goes that Alix made it out of the collapsed shelter because she was under a buckled piece of metal from the roof and it protected her from being completely flattened. But that's not true. Alix punched her way out of there with an explosive blast that somehow didn't

[If Pet is blank]turn her blood to steam.

[Otherwise]burn petname to crisp.

[If 'Blaze of Glory' is ticked in ANNIE's section]She can't help but worry that she'll end up like Annie. Too hot to handle. She feels safer indoors these days. Perhaps it's having the hazard foam within easy reach.

Fortunately Billie seems to know the way onwards, even if Alix is unsure.

[If 'Dead' is NOT ticked in RELATIVE section]Maude/Simon was busy hosting a party, so he/she made some sandwiches for the trip instead. They're in a lunchbox in Alix's backpack and they bounce reassuringly against her back as she walks.

The city becomes more distant, the road narrows and eventually they're/she's able to leave it for a footpath through the fields.

[If METEOR IMPACT = 'None']This green Alix is glad to see.

[Otherwise]The grass is yellowed and scorch-marked, littered with smaller scorpions.

[If POSITIVITY >25]Even out here, small crews of Environment Agency workers collect the debris in wheelbarrows and take it away to who knows where.

[Otherwise]No-one doing clean-up work out here.

The ground rises, the incline growing steeper and steeper until they're/Alix is bent forwards for balance, gasping for breath.

[If PET is not 'DEAD' or 'Fish']petname

[Bird]naturally has no difficulty with the climb, fluttering on ahead and landing on a branch at the summit.

[Cat]runs on ahead, coming to a stop at the summit to wash him/herself with a paw.

[Dog]is panting heavily too, tail wagging endlessly.

[Lizard/Rabbit]scampers away, giving Alix that sense of unease again that this is it, the time petname runs free. But as soon as he/she reaches the summit, petname comes to a halt in a patch of sunlight and lies down, stretching out his/her long hind legs in order to properly enjoy it.

**[If METEOR IMPACT = 'None']**The sight of the statue up close takes Alix's breath away. She had stayed away from the official opening ceremony and although the statue was visible from most of Moribund, she generally avoided looking at it. Now, she wonders why she did that. Annie in bronze, young and healthy, one hand raised, fingers poised to crush the chunk of meteor nestled in her palm.

**[If purple text is active, go to 625 now. Otherwise, read on]**It's a shame Jodie never got a statue, but maybe her fans will see to that. They're a resourceful bunch. Go to **625**

**[If METEOR IMPACT = 'Big']**On the hilltop, the smog is thinner. Looking down across Moribund, and further, to the city, the extent of the devastation is visible, even when partially cloaked in dust clouds. The skyline is forever changed. The tallest tower blocks, Dietmar's and Alix's included, are all gone. Environment agency workers in their hi-vis jackets look like radioactive ants in the wasteland.

Alix spreads out a blanket on the thin grass. Go to **626**

**[Otherwise]**On the hilltop, the sun is bright, and the views of Moribund and the big city are expansive. The worst of the damage is already repaired. In terms of bricks and mortar, at least.

Alix pulls a blanket from her rucksack and spreads it on the ground. Go to **626**

## 625

"Do you think she'd like it?" Billie asks, looking up at the imposing figure.

"She'd say: 'Why isn't it gold?!'" says Alix, spreading a blanket at her mother's feet.

**[if 'Scarf' is ticked in ANNIE's section]**She never had got around to giving Annie that scarf. She had thought about putting it in Annie's coffin, but could just imagine Annie's annoyance at having something she hadn't picked herself as part of her final ensemble. Now seems the right time and place. Alix stands on tiptoe and loops the scarf round statue Annie's neck. Maybe she can come and replace it each year, make a tradition of it.

She nods to herself, and sits down, cross-legged.

If PET is blank, or 'Dead' is ticked, or PET is a 'Fish, go to **632**

Otherwise, go to **633**

## 626

**[If purple text is NOT active]**It's one Jodie got for a lipstick promotion, so it has red sequinned lips all over it. Alix plucks at one absentmindedly and misses her friend.

Billie sits and pats the blanket beside her.

**[If PET is NOT blank, 'DEAD' or 'Fish']**petname takes that as an invitation, and rushes to get onto the blanket. Alix sits, scooping petname up into her lap.

**[If BILLIE is 'Dead' or 'Gone']**There's an empty space next to her where Billie should be.

**[If BILLIE is 'Dead']**Billie's death was harder than Annie's in some ways. The crematorium was working overtime and even if any of Billie's relatives had survived the Lifun disaster *and* the network failures had allowed Alix to contact them, flights were grounded. Billie deserved more of a funeral than that, deserved more in general.

Alix wipes her eyes. Go to **634**

**[Otherwise]**Maybe once the network was back, they might be able to- Alix didn't even dare finish the thought. She sits in tortured silence so long, you begin to feel uncomfortable. You have to say something.

Go to **634**

[If BILLIE'S MOOD is 'Smitten'] Billie's head drops onto Alix's shoulder. Neither plans on moving for a while.

[If METEOR IMPACT is 'None'] Go to 627

[Otherwise] Go to 631

[If BILLIE'S MOOD is 'Love'] Billie turns to gaze into Alix's eyes.

[If METEOR IMPACT = None AND 'Home' is ticked in LOCATIONS VISITED] Go to 628

[If 'Home' is ticked in LOCATIONS VISITED] Go to 629

[Otherwise] Go to 630

Go to 630

627

## THE END?

628

Alix had thought the day they spent together reading comics and wishing in the fountain was the best she would ever feel, but now she realises how wrong she was.

Safe beneath Annie's feet they share a kiss, the first of many.

## THE END?

629

Alix had thought the day they spent making wishes in the fountain and buying comics with misprints was the high point of their relationship, but now she knows she was wrong.

They kiss.

Go to 631

630

You're not sure what you expect to happen next. An appearance from Annie's ghost perhaps, glowing white and with fabulous hair? A flashback to her funeral, maybe? Everyone wearing purple instead of black? Neither thing happens. The drawn out silence makes you uncomfortable. You have to say *something*.

Go to 634

631

So much was lost, but the important things remain.

## THE END?

632

petname nestles in her lap, and dozes, as Alix looks out across Moribund. She can see her apartment from here.

Go to **631**

**633**

Together they sit,  
[If BILLIE'S MOOD is 'Smitten' or 'Love'] fingers interlinked, (go to **645**)  
[If PET is NOT 'DEAD' or Fish] petname nestled between them and (go to **645**)

Alix reaches into her backpack again, taking out her laptop. She turns it on and opens it, and after logging in, somehow, she looks through the screen and straight at you. Her eyes are soft, faintly amused as she registers your alarm.

"Why so shocked?" she asks.

[If ALIX >20] "Thought I didn't notice all the help you've been giving me?" Her smile turns sad. "It's a shame you couldn't help her too." Go to **634**

[Otherwise] "Feeling bad about everything you've done to me?" She looks away for a moment. "Although I suppose I can't blame you for Annie. Not entirely." Go to **634**

**634**

I was just trying to progress the story... Go to **635**.

I'm sorry. Go to **639**.

If I had known, I might have done things differently. Go to **644**.

**635**

Add together all ratings from the RATINGS section of your STATUS SHEET, and check ALIX's score.

If ALIX's score is HIGHER than 20 go to **636**

If your RATING total is HIGHER than 20, go to **637**

Otherwise, go to **638**

**636**

"Well, I'm glad that you did. Thank you, really. But our time together is almost over. Are there any final words you'd like to say to me?"

Write your message to Alix here:-

---

—

Alix reads your words and smiles. "I thought you might say that," she says.

# THE END?

**637**

"The ratings were nice I suppose. I appreciate you reading my work. But the other stuff? What do you have to say about that?"

Write your excuse here:

---

Alix reads your words, her eyes blank and hollow. After what seems like an eternity, she says only: "Do better next time," and logs off.

# THE END?

**638**

Alix sighs and looks away. "So was I," she says. "This is your last chance. Don't you have anything better to say than that?"

Write what you'd like to say here:

---

As you are typing, Alix closes the lid of her laptop. Now, she's smiling. She draws back her arm and flings the laptop down the hill.

The last thing you hear is Billie saying: "Don't you need that?"

# THE END?

**639**

Add together all the RATINGS on your STATUS SHEET, and check ALIX's score.

If BOTH ALIX's score and your RATING total are HIGHER than 20, go to **640**.

If ALIX's score is HIGHER than 20, but your RATING total is LOWER than 20, go to **641**

If ALIX's score is LOWER than 20, but your RATING total is HIGHER than 20, go to **642**

Otherwise, go to **643**

**640**

"For what?" asks Alix, tilting her head. "Bad things happen, but they're not always down to you." She smiles. "You're not quite the omnigod you think you are." She's silent for a moment, letting her words sink in. Her expression is playful. Eventually she shifts her weight, like the laptop's weighing heavy on her legs. "I'm going to miss you, you know." She says.

She kisses her fingers, touches them to her laptop screen, then closes the lid.

A little muffled, you hear Billie say: "Who was that?"

A notification pings in your inbox. A new story's just been posted on wiff.net...

# THE END?

**641**

"For what?" asks Alix, tilting her head. "Those ratings?" She doesn't wait for you to respond. "In the grand scheme of things, what do they matter? I mean, they matter but..." She pauses, scratches her eyebrow. "You were there with me," she says.

"Through all of it. That counts for something."

She holds your gaze as long as both of you can stand it, before finally breaking the connection.

## THE END?

642

"Are you?" She waits just long enough for you to start to defend yourself, then speaks over you. "You could have helped, you know. Not with some of it, of course. It's not as if you could stop a meteor. But the small things. You could have helped with the small things a little more." Tears well in her eyes, but before they can fall, she turns her laptop off.

## THE END?

643

"You'd better be apologising for more than those stupid ratings," she says through gritted teeth. "Do you even know why you're apologising at all?"  
Respond here:

---

Alix reads your words, gives her head an almost imperceptible shake, and flings her laptop down the hill.

## THE END?

644

"Really?" asks Alix. She sounds surprised and hopeful. "Well, then you know what to do." She turns her laptop off, cutting you off abruptly and leaving you to go back to

## THE BEGINNING

645

Annie above them, staring out over Moribund. In the distance, Alix's apartment, Dietmar's luxury tower block, David Jones Memorial, all still standing because of Annie.

Indirectly, because of you.

# THE END?

## 646

The food is like something from another era – misshapen foil-wrapped lumps sprouting little wooden skewers bedecked with lumps of hard cheese, chunks of soggy pineapple and greasy olives. There are hot dogs too and mini pizzas, and fondues of the cheese and chocolate variety, but some things are sacred.

[If 'Party' IS ticked in LOCATIONS VISITED] The karaoke machine is notably absent, though.

Alix can barely contain her delight. She pops a cheese lump off a cocktail stick and tosses it into her mouth.

[If 'Scarf' is ticked AND ANNIE>25] She wipes her fingers on her jeans, careful not to get any cheese grease on the purple scarf tied around her waist. It doesn't go with many of her outfits, but she wears it most days anyway. It's not like she was ever a follower of fashion.

Billie has found the biscuits, tasteless little flat rings topped with brightly coloured sugar icing in pink and yellow. She has one on each finger.

[If METEOR IMPACT = 'Big'] The back wall of the house is still a gaping hole, but there's a tarpaulin sheet in place to keep the swirling dust at bay. Everyone is behaving like there's nothing amiss, like they've just hired a marquee for someone's back yard. It's pretty convincing. Go to 647

[If METEOR IMPACT = 'Small'] Alix sidles over to the kitchen window and looks out into the back garden. The shed over Maude/Simon's bunker is squashed flat. The scoriid rock has been taken away, but no-one has repaired the shed yet. It would have been much worse if the meteor hadn't broken up before impact, of course. Still, Alix makes a mental note to call her friends for a shed-building party. Go to 647

[Otherwise] Go to 647

## 647

The only one missing is

[If 'Dead' IS ticked in RELATIVE section] Maude (Go to 648) Simon (Go to 649)

[Otherwise] Annie. (Go to 650)

## 648

The loss of Annie hurts too, of course, but Maude was always such a fixture at these things. Alix used to get so irritated by her neurotic insistence on checking everyone's drink was topped up, miming drinking at each guest in turn. She'd give anything to see that silly hand motion today.

Go to 653

## 649

Losing Annie hurts too, of course, but Simon is the one Alix is used to always seeing at these things. Alix used to find the way he loitered on the sidelines so creepy. Now she realises he was probably doing exactly what she's doing now. Looking around, noticing who isn't there, wondering how to connect with those who are.

Go to 653

## 650

Not that Annie would be seen dead at one of these things. Alix imagines her in her heyday, strutting in, tossing her hair and strutting straight back out again. *Seen dead!* Alix stifles a strange laugh with another piece of cheese.

If BILLIE is 'Dead', go to **651**  
Otherwise, go to **652**

### 651

Alix's overactive imagination moves on to picturing Billie here. She would have loved it. She'd have charmed them all. The cheese suddenly sticks in Alix's throat and she has to swallow hard. Deep breaths.

If only Alix hadn't sent Billie off to fetch  
[If PET is blank]that stupid scarf.  
[Otherwise]petname.

If only Alix's apartment hadn't been built on the cheap so its foundations crushed the bunker beneath when the building came down. If only Billie had stayed at the hospital and Alix had gone instead. Perhaps Billie would still be here.  
[If 'DEAD' IS ticked in PET]Perhaps petname would still be here too.

Go to **654**

### 652

[If 'DEAD' is ticked in PET]In some ways, she feels even worse about petname, because the responsibility is entirely Alix's own. petname had no say at all about being left behind. None.

Alix is glad to be here amongst what remains of her family. It keeps the sadness at bay a little.

[If 'Gone' IS ticked in BILLIE section]She had hoped she and Billie would get their friendship back on track once things had settled down but  
[If POSITIVITY >50]so far, things are still tense.  
[Otherwise]it seems Billie meant it when she told Alix not to call any more. She's changed her vid ID and unsubscribed from Alix's channel.

Go to **655**

[If BILLIE's MOOD is 'Angry']Things were a little tense between her and Billie for a while after their clash, but it was inevitable tempers might flare given the stress they'd been under, and now their friendship is on the mend. Go to **655**

Go to **655**

### 653

If only Alix hadn't sent Maude/Simon back to the apartment. If only Alix's apartment block hadn't borne the brunt of the meteor strike. If only Maude/Simon hadn't stayed in the apartment's crappy shelter. Perhaps Maude/Simon would still be here.

[If 'DEAD' is ticked in PET]Perhaps petname would be here too.

From this point forward, wherever Maude/Simon appears in the text, write in whichever relative survived the meteorite, (unless context indicates otherwise).

Go to **654**

If only.

[If 'Gone' is ticked in BILLIE section] If only she hadn't had that stupid fight with Billie.

If only.

Go to **652**

A slideshow cycles photos on the living room wall. Alix wonders where Aunt Serita got them all. There are stills from the video she made

[if PROJECT = VIDEO AND 'Pet'] with petname. Close-ups of her beloved cat/dog/bird/rabbit/lizard/fish.

[if PROJECT = VIDEO AND 'Hospital'] at DJ memorial. The nurse with the penchant for dirty books, frozen in mid-laugh. Alix can't remember what she said to make her laugh like that.

[if PROJECT = VIDEO AND 'Expo'] of her daily routine. It's from a joke time-lapse sequence where she sits at her desk eating cheese pops for sixteen hours straight. Hunched over her desk, dimly lit, orange dust all over her chin. Not the most flattering picture.

[If 'Rock Received' IS ticked] You can see Billie's rock on the corner of her desk though, which is cool.

[if PROJECT = VIDEO AND 'Party'] about all the parties just like this one. She felt weird about asking her family to take part, so it's just Alix in a grey wig and a floral shirt even though none of her relatives look or dress like that. She's wearing thick-framed glasses and gurning.

[Otherwise] for the Bunker Song. Alix in a hard hat, doing some semblance of dancing, although in the still image, it looks more like she's flicking gang signs. Good grief.

Alix doesn't even have any stills from that herself.

[If 'Escaped' IS ticked in ALIX section] She still hasn't told anyone how she really made it out of the collapsed shelter. Aunt Serita thinks it was some kind of miracle, the rescuers finding her just in the nick of time. It's a fantasy Alix is keen to encourage, but the truth is, it was down to genetics.

[If 'Blaze of Glory' IS ticked in ANNIE's section] Turns out she has more in common with Annie than expected.

"Everything ok?" asks Billie, offering a biscuit-decked finger.

Alix declines. "Just thinking," she says carefully, "about how things have changed."

She's glad they're here together. One good change. They both made it out with barely a scratch.

At that moment Maude/Simon bursts in with a cake. A chocolate caterpillar with a spine of lit candles. "Everyone!" he/she cries, "HA-." Pauses a moment, obligating everyone to join in. "Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday dear- where's the birthday girl?" The singing carries on for a moment, before tailing off as everyone realises Aunt Serita's not there. Low mumbling. Someone saw her nip to the toilet.

"Here she is! HA-"

Serita returns to a wall of sound, blushing.

Then there's the hip hip hoorays, and someone suggests making cocktails, which naturally leads into karaoke,  
[If 'Party' IS ticked in LOCATIONS VISITED](of course the infernal machine didn't stay missing for long)

Until THE EARLY HOURS OF THE MORNING

\*\*\*

"I haven't been this drunk since Puzzles," says Billie, lolling against Alix. They're on Alix is on Maude/Simon's sofa, pleasantly muzzy-headed from the night's festivities.

If PET is blank, 'Dead' or 'Fish', go to **656** now. Otherwise, read on.

[Bird]petname, previously shut up in Maude/Simon's spare room, is now fluttering around the living room, landing on discarded paper plates to peck at crumbs, and sidling up to discarded beer cans to inspect them.

[Otherwise]petname, previously shut up in Maude/Simon's spare room, is now roaming the living room, inspecting crushed up beer cans and licking crumbs from discarded paper plates.

Go to **656**

### 656

"Need any help with the clean up?" Alix yells into the ether, but she can't envision getting up right now, never mind stooping over with a bin bag. The cocktails are at war in her stomach, it feels like. Fortunately, when Maude/Simon materialises in the doorway, his/her hands are empty.

"Room for me on there?" he/she asks, and Alix scooches along so her aunt/uncle can sit down.

It means Billie's squashed up against the arm rest, but she doesn't seem to mind.

The slideshow cycles on.

[If 'Relative's House is ticked in LOCATIONS VISITED]Digitised versions of those pictures Alix looked through with Maude/Simon. Alix and her father at the beach. Maude/Simon in his/her bad wig. Annie in her Protectorate bunk with pants on her head. Go to **602**  
[if ANNIE >25]

[if METEOR IMPACT = 'None']Annie in her Protectorate uniform on a hilltop, looking a lot like her commemorative statue. Her hair and stance suggest it's from a Protectorate marketing campaign, which is probably what the sculptor used as reference. Go to **602**

[Otherwise]Annie in her hospital bed, reaching for the camera, angry. Annie in her civilian clothes, glass raised high, making a toast, Alix's father in the background, smiling.

Annie in her Protectorate uniform on parade day, Uncle Simon and dad and all the other fresh-faced recruits standing in a row. Go to **602**

[If PET is NOT blank]petname back when Alix first got him/her, looking tinier than Alix ever remembers him/her being. petname enthusiastically eating pettreats. petname blurred because he/she just couldn't stay still long enough to be photographed. Go to **602**

[Otherwise]Alix and some kids from school she never sees any more. Dad at some other relative's wedding, looking thin and cheerful, his hair oddly long and curly. Alix and Maude/Simon, on this same sofa. Alix wonders who took that one. Go to **602**

### 657

It's painful, of course, but it gives Alix a flash of inspiration too. "Hey Maude/Simon," she says, "Why don't I show you some of my photos?" and as Maude/Simon nods, she commands Oju: "Oju? Photo set one, please."

"It's so sweet that you say please to her," Billie sniggers. Alix sticks out her tongue.

"Who's this?" asks Maude/Simon.

"That's Dietmar."

"Why does he have a traffic cone on his head?"

"He's just-"

[If 'Dead' is NOT ticked in PET section] A very recent one of petname next, but so out of focus, Maude/Simon just squints and nods in response, prompting Alix to quickly skip on.

"Oh, well I know who that is!"

It's Annie.

[If 'Blaze of Glory' IS ticked in ANNIE section] What an incredible woman, underneath it all.

[If METEOR IMPACT = 'Big'] Go to **658**

[If METEOR IMPACT = 'Small'] Go to **659**

[Otherwise] Go to **660**

[Otherwise] Go to **661**

### 658

She faced off against a meteorite, even though she must have known it would change nothing. She had gone out on her terms, facing insurmountable odds to the very last second. Isn't that the best any of us can hope to do, in

# THE END?

### 659

Her actions have saved countless lives. She didn't stop the meteorite, which was no doubt her intention, but she gave it something to think about, breaking it up into a thousand smaller chunks which still hit, but without the catastrophic loss of life a full sized impact would have had.

And here she is, immortalised forever.

Go to **661**

### 660

Going out in a literal blaze of glory, smashing that meteorite to particles of space dust.

You wouldn't think it to see her in this photo.

Go to **661**

### 661

In her hospital gown.

Giving Alix the finger.

Check your STATUS SHEET.

If 'Relative's House' IS ticked in LOCATIONS VISITED AND PET TYPE is 'Dog' and 'Dead' IS NOT ticked in the RELATIVE SECTION, go to **662**

If METEOR IMPACT is 'None', go to **663**

Otherwise, go to **665**

### **662**

Alix stands up. "Actually Maude/Simon, there's one thing I want to do for you. To express my gratitude for everything. All the parties, and the photos, and the hospital visits."

Billie takes her cue and disappears upstairs for a moment.

Go to **664**

Leaving her Aunt/Uncle sitting frowning in confusion, Alix races upstairs to the cardboard box she had to spend every free second of the party checking and shushing. Go to **664**

### **663**

Photo after photo after photo. The final one is of Alix and Maude/Simon cutting the ribbon on Annie's statue, the plaque underneath it unreadable at that distance, but of course, they know what it says.

Gone, but never forgotten.

# THE END?

### **664**

She returns with a puppy, a little ball of fluff, petname in miniature.

Maude/Simon has his/her hands outstretched, tears in his/her eyes. As the puppy is placed in his/her hands he/she says: "It's a little girl isn't it?" Alix nods.

"Then you already know what I'm going to call her, don't you?"

Alix nods again.

petname is turning circles on the rug. He/she can't wait to meet the new puppy. Alix can't decide if Annie would be pleased or pissed off about Maude/Simon's choice of name. Probably a little of each, which makes it an excellent decision.

"Let's take a... do you call them selfies?"

"I believe that's what the kids call them, yes," Alix laughs and they all scrunch in together and order Oju to take their picture. It's nice to look back on old memories, but creating new ones, that's important too.

Alix squeezes Billie closer and smiles for Oju.

# THE END?

665

Like the ending of an old cartoon,

they **all**

both

throw their heads back and laugh. Alix gets why so many cartoons ended that way now.

It feels like a nice way to round things off, pretend that everything's ok, even if it's a little fake.

# THE END?

Appendix E: Full code  
documentation for *Writers Are Not  
Strangers*

## choicescript\_stats

Boxes of chocotweets: `{career}`

Views of that video Dietmar filmed in the toilet: `{positivity}`

Times Billie referenced a really obscure comic book series:  
`{family}`

Karaoke songs murdered: `{dreams}`

Reverie interruptions: `{billie}`

Certainty that none of this actually means anything: `{annie}`

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*[i]Cover image by Mahkeo at Unsplash[/i]*

*[i]Choicescript coding language by Dan Fabulich[/i]*

*[i]Save system by CJW[/i]*

*[i]Game hosting by Dashing Don[/i]*

*[i]Stat management subroutines inspired by Gower[/i]*

*[i]Title inspired by Graham Joyce[/i]*

*[i]With special thanks to my supervisors Professor Phil Leonard and Dr Sarah Jackson, everyone on the Choicescript forums, the creators of the invaluable CSIDE, and my team of beta testers: The Hello Wordsers (especially Elizabeth, John and Leigh), Ant Clark, Sam Garton, Alice Whipple, Kelly Vero, Paul Wake, Becky Cullen, Jo Dixon, Hannah Cooper-Smithson, Richard Bromhall, Sian Liddle, Sofia Aatkar, and Tim Hannigan.[/i]*

## startup

```
*comment Copyright 2010 by Dan Fabulich.
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an
*comment "AS IS" BASIS, WITHOUT WARRANTIES OR CONDITIONS OF ANY
KIND,
*comment either express or implied.

*title Writers Are Not Strangers
*author Lynda Clark
*scene_list
    startup
    rating
    ch1
    rating_outcome
    ch2
    rating2
    ch3
    rating_outcome2
    ch4
    rating3
    ch5
    rating4
    epilogue

*comment tab these back out if they need adding back in for any
reason (e.g. the CS compiler) - at present if they are tabbed, the
scene list attempts to read them despite being commented out, and
throws up an error
*comment choicescript_stats
*comment opening_archaeologist
*comment opening_centipede
*comment opening_fighter
*comment opening_flowergirl
*comment opening_invaders
*comment opening_man
*comment opening_marine
*comment opening_plumbers
*comment opening_soldier
*create career 5
*create positivity 5
```

```

*create family 5
*create dreams 5
*create billie 5
*create annie 5
*create rating 0
*create rating2 0
*create rating3 0
*create rating4 0
*create billie_present false
*create billie_mood ""
*comment Billie's mood may be angry, happy, smitten, love,
not_love, or bestie. Smitten differs from love in that Billie has
feelings for Alix, while Alix may or may not return her feelings.
Love and not_love refer to when Alix has declared her love, and
Billie either reciprocates, or doesn't. Besitie means they are best
friends, obvs!
*create coffee false
*create billie_drinks false
*create billie_waiting false
*comment billie_waiting may be suitable to change to a temp stat
within the section - check
*create billie_gone false
*create billie_dead false
*create myboxx1 false
*create hospital1 false
*create party1 false
*comment these 3 determine what activities Alix has undertaken in
Chapter 1. Are set to true once visited to prevent circular paths
forming.
*create writing1 false
*comment is set true if Alix's project is a short story. I made
this before I realised what string variables were. May convert to
string at a later date.
*create video1 false
*comment is set true if Alix's project is a video. See above
comment!
*create awards false
*create visit false
*create daytrip false
*comment these 3 determine what activity Alix undertakes in Chapter
3
*create auntmaudeadvice false
*create alix 5
*create jodiealive true
*create job_lost false
*create alix_supernova false
*create relative ""
*create relative_gender_him_her ""
*create relative_gender_he_she ""
*create relative_gender_his_hers ""
*create relative_dead false
*create pet_type ""

```

```
*comment pet_type may be "cat" "dog" "rabbit" "lizard" "bird" or
"fish"
*create pet_gender ""
*create pet_pronoun_him_her ""
*create pet_pronoun_he_she ""
*create pet_pronoun_his_her ""
*create pet_pronoun_selves ""
*create petname ""
*create pettreat ""
*create pet_dead false
*create shortstorytype ""
*comment determines the content of the short story set in
(writing1). May be "gamey" - a story about Tetris blocks hurtling
to earth, or "new" - a story where Alix attempts to contact a
reader by leaving coded messages in short stories posted to the
web.
*create anniescarf false
*create videotype ""
*comment videotype may be "pet", "hosp" (hospital), "boxx" (Day in
the Life of a Myboxxer), or "party".
*create rock false
*create simonsecret false
*create anniejoker false
*create awardwin false
*create survivalkit false
*create meteor_impact ""
*comment meteor impact may be "big", "small" or "none"
*create annieblazeofglory false
*comment *sm_init mygame | 2
*comment testing save system, remove or comment out before
submission to CS
```

```
[i>Welcome to wiff.net, the Writers' Independent Fiction Forum.[/i]
*line_break
[i]The following extract was submitted by [/i][b]Lixxil[/b][/i]. We
thank you for taking the time to read it.[/i]
```

```
*goto_random_scene
    opening_hedgehog
    opening_invaders
    opening_centipede
    opening_archaeologist
    opening_fighter
    opening_flowergirl
    opening_marine
    opening_man
    opening_soldier
    opening_plumbers
```

```
*comment - update finish buttons to say 'Finished reading' if
possible.
```

## opening\_hedgehog

\*comment Opening 2

As Ogilvie Maurice awoke one morning from overcast dreams, he found he'd transformed in his bed into a monstrous hedgehog. He was lying on his spiked, as it were spiny, back and when he lifted his head a little he could see his smooth, pale cream belly which the bed quilt had partially slid off. His legs were pitifully thin compared to his upper body, and he wore bright red running shoes he had no recollection of purchasing.

What has happened to me? he thought. Unsure whether it was a dream, he considered tucking his nose into his belly, sleeping a little longer and forgetting this nonsensical situation, but found it could not be done. His quills were stuck fast in his mattress and however violently he attempted to roll into a more comfortable sleeping position, he remained impaled in place. He tried over and over, clenching his teeth in frustration, convinced such a move must be possible and eventually his efforts were rewarded. His body rolled in on itself in a way he had never experienced before and he thought he heard a high-pitched whirring as somehow he built up an incredible momentum, spun out of his bed, out of the bedroom door and down the stairs at high speed.

\*goto\_scene rating

## opening\_invaders

\*comment Opening 3

It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they disintegrated the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in the city. I'm stupid about invasions. The idea of being disintegrated makes me sick, and that's all there was to read about in the papers.

It had nothing to do with me at that point, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves.

I thought it must be the worst thing in the world.

Perhaps that is why I became so committed to quelling the invasion. My involvement was cursory at first. I would make suggestions to Buddy, a young fighter pilot tasked with pushing back the waves that hovered ominously above the city like swarms of misshapen flies, about strategies he might consider employing. My proposal to attack the mystery ship that swooped above their ranks, seemingly unconnected to their murderous endeavours, resulted in a huge and unexpected tactical advantage, which in turn led to the military taking me on as a civilian advisor. I still rarely piloted the fighter jets myself, but devised the now universally-recognised tactic of blasting a small hole in the roofs of the stationary defence bunkers that they may afford cunning pilots with both shelter and an opportunity for attack.

\*goto\_scene rating

## opening\_centipede

\*comment Opening 4

Antennae protruded from the top of the fleshy balloon of a head. Behind followed similarly bulbous segmentations, each one making a satisfying stomping sound as the stick-like legs made contact with what was presumably the ground, although the surrounding blackness made that difficult to determine. The centipede's small supercilious bright eyes looked out through the field of mushrooms at the prospective hunter, studying them for any signs of discernible strategy. Several of their shots, the centipede noticed, were wild enough and misplaced enough to be considered offences against aim and technique. Plugging shots randomly into surrounding mushrooms only reflected a person's lack of tactics and geometry; it could even cast doubts upon one's soul.

The centipede moved lazily from one mushroom to the next, slivers of the fungus still caught in his mandibles, idly watching as the hunter strafed uselessly at passing fleas and scorpions, apparently oblivious to his own encroachment. It looked as if today he wouldn't even need to rely on his ability to deputise to a secondary head.

\*goto\_scene rating

## opening\_archaeologist

\*comment Opening 5

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a wealthy globetrotting archaeologist must be in want of a husband.

"But my dear," said her father to her one morning, "you must be aware that the Earl has now been waiting for a considerable period. It is most unseemly."

Engaged as she was in securing a selection of short knives in her hiking socks, she had neither the will nor the inclination to give this statement the contempt it truly deserved.

"Father," returned she, lowering her foot from the chaise longue. "You know as well as the Earl does that I have an important expedition scheduled in C\_\_\_\_\_ and I leave on the hour. T\_ P\_\_\_\_\_ may crumble to dust if I don't get to exploring it post-haste, the Earl, however, will not." Unfortunately, she thought, but did not say.

"I wish you would not persist in squandering our fortune for foreign trinkets you dig out of dirty holes."

"Those 'dirty holes' contain sights you would not believe."

"Quite right. I would not believe in yetis and dinosaurs and the reanimated remains of mummified cats."

She turned on her heel and left the drawing room. At times, she detested her father and dreamed of an arrangement whereby she could have access to his money without having to endure his endless wittering.

\*goto\_scene rating

## opening\_fighter

\*comment Opening 6

She had the kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by a spinning bird kick. Her upper arm musculature was so finely formed that she could not wear sleeves; and though small in stature, gained the more dignity from her ferocious fighting style, which by the side of provincial fighters gave her the impressiveness of an ancient kempo expert, - or one of the day's leading wushu practitioners, - demonstrating the power of a hundred rending legs. She was usually spoken of as being remarkably clever, but with the addition that she could punch through the engine block of a Ford Cortina.

She had long feared that street fighting and law enforcement could not be brought into accordance with one another. Her attempts to balance a career built around pursuing the criminal gangs involved in her father's demise with pummelling a misshapen Brazilian for the pleasure of a bunch of chicken-choking shop-workers had proved exhausting. She worried she could not reconcile the anxieties of a righteous life involving legal consequences, with a keen interest in combat and violent demonstrations of supremacy. Perhaps some day she could retire to a normal life and a normal occupation, teaching young children martial arts - or a desk job, shuffling papers while the rookies attend to crime syndicates and narcotics dealers - something safe and sedentary. In her heart, she knew that if this happened at all, it would not happen for many, many years.

\*goto\_scene rating

## opening\_flowergirl

\*comment Opening 7

It was the day the city exploded. I sat in the church nursing my aching head and I reflected that it always seemed to be recovering from terrible injuries that put me back on the right path. The flower girl was there again, kneeling beside me, plucking large, fragrant blooms from the flowerbed that broke my fall. She didn't seem too concerned about the fact I just crashed through the roof of her church, or that I should probably be suffering from more than mild concussion, or even that I fell at the exact moment there was an enormous, city-shattering explosion on the plate overhead. In fact, she seemed more interested in showing me some trinket her mum gave her and securing my services as a bodyguard.

As she lay dying in my arms a week later... or was it five years ago... were they my arms at all?... I remembered that time in the church, those heavy white and pink blooms she loved so much, the way the sunlight fell through the broken stained glass windows to illuminate the flower beds she tended so lovingly. It was the flowers she loved most of all, I remembered, as I gave her to the water and returned to my friends.

\*goto\_scene rating

## opening\_marine

\*comment Opening 8

This is the baddest-assest story you have ever heard. We had known the demons of Mars for fourteen cycles with a detached intimacy-- or, rather with an acquaintanceship as distant and cautious and yet as potentially desirous as with a grenade. My chaingun and I knew spectres and cacodemons as well as it was possible to know any enemy, and yet, in another sense, we knew nothing at all about them. Six months ago I had never been to Phobos, and, certainly, I had never sounded the depths of a Hell dimension. I had known only the shallows.

I don't mean to say that we were not acquainted with many hellspawn. Living, as we perforce lived, in a Martian military base, and being, as we perforce were, hardened marines, or at least, I was, (it is hard to say how far a chaingun may be considered a member of the marine corps, even if he is the only other remaining 'soldier'), we were thrown very much into the path of the lesser hellspawn. Mars, you see, was our home, or the only home remaining to us following the betrayal of our fellow marines and destruction of all communications arrays. Thank goodness for chaingun. Chaingun I could trust.

\*goto\_scene rating

## opening\_man

\*comment Opening 9

I am an essential man. No, I am not throw-away fodder like those who cross the battlefield, answering the call of duty; nor am I one of those ethereal, formless, androgynous avatars, a blank slate for you to draw on as you please, even if it pleases you to draw a woman. I am a man of substance, of manliness and machismo, testosterone and y-chromosomes--and I might even be said to possess a beard. I am essential, understand, simply because people refuse to do without me. Like the mirrored mazes you see sometimes in seaside attractions, it is as though I have been surrounded by sheets of bright, reflective glass. When they approach me they see only my image, themselves, or figments of their imagination--indeed, everything and anything but women.

My story is the key, a huge, phallic, throbbing, three-pronged key that opens a door women may only scratch at with their manicured nails. I am irreplaceable, eternal, because without me, whole worlds would crumble. The mirrored funhouse would collapse in on itself, leaving only jagged shards of the patriarchy, and my reflected selves would make everyone bleed for the injustice of it. Enjoy my presence then, relish it, and together we will steal cars and run over women of the night and pretend that all of this is inescapable and right.

\*goto\_scene rating

## opening\_soldier

\*comment Opening 10

It was the best of wars, it was the worst of wars, it was the age of intelligence, it was the age of massacre, it was the epoch of aborted missile strikes, it was the epoch of detonated nuclear warheads, it was the season of freedom fighters, it was the season of terrorists, it was the Arab spring, it was the nuclear winter, we had the use of a Sikorsky MH-53, we had nothing but our bare hands, we were all getting evaced to safety, we were all left to die in the field.

On your headset, some fifteen-year-old in a foreign country called you a 'noob whore bitch'; on your headset you told some fifty-year-old in your own country to 'go straight to Hell and then die'. In both countries it was clearer than crystal that online gamers in general were fucking shitheads. Hidden behind a screen, hefting a virtual gun, all national borders dissolved into a multicultural Babel-babble of profanity and abuse. Strange to relate, but it seems these exchanges come closer to Biblical notions of global unity than anything NATO or the UN could have conceived.

\*goto\_scene rating

## opening\_plumbers

\*comment Opening 1

All happy plumbing families are alike; each unhappy plumbing family is unhappy in its own way. Everything was in confusion in the plumbers' house. The younger brother had discovered that the older brother was carrying on with a princess, a real peach, by all accounts. This position of affairs was some step up from his previous girlfriend, Pauline, and the younger brother, still a bachelor, was painfully conscious of it. Even the term 'younger brother' seemed somewhat risible to him. He was younger by a mere two minutes and yet that two minutes may as well have been an eternity. Two minutes away from having his name grace the family business, two minutes away from being the one to fix a princess's piping and win her enduring affections. Little did he realise, though, that these two minutes were a blessing in disguise. For truly, he was two minutes away from a life spent chasing after a woman kidnapped with suspicious frequency, a woman who likely preferred the thrill of a commoner's attention to the banal reality of settling down with a man who spent the majority of his life elbow-deep in u-bends.

\*goto\_scene rating

## rating

[i]Thank you for reading. Please now rate the piece on a scale of 1-10. (With 1 representing 'What the hell is going on?!' [/i][i]up to 10[/i] [i]'The finest creative work since time immemorial.')[/i]

\*input\_number rating 1 10

\*finish Submit

ch1

```
*comment *image Ch1_Thu.png
*gosub_scene csideimg_ch1_thu
*if rating <4
    *goto hospital
*elseif rating >6
    *goto myboxx
*else
    *goto party
```

```
*label myboxx
*set myboxx1 true
```

The air-conditioning blew blasts of icy air down the back of Alix's neck. It seemed a little overboard given the time of year, although the seasons had been erratic for some time now. The convention centre staff had obviously cranked it up even further to combat the rising heat emitted by the jostling throng of fans. Alix watched them with their Boxxpo caps and their Boxxpo t-shirts. Teams of merchandisers lay in wait at the convention centre entrance, hundreds of over-priced t-shirts sealed in plastic cases like insect eggs, numbers dwindling like their real world counterparts. They'd be a quarter of the price come the end of the day. She couldn't blame them though, those eager kids. She'd fallen for it too, back when the platform was MySoapBoxx and the expo was Soapex, and the t-shirt eggs were in their thousands.

MySoapBoxx and Soapex had become MyBoxx and Boxxpo. Essentially the same platform, but without the archaic name and the fan convention that sounded like a cleaning product. Most of the Boxxers from the Soap days now had proper jobs in global communication corporations, their glib wit and slick presentation skills applied to soothing the public's concerns. But some went the distance, their subscribers up into the multi-millions, and that was something, wasn't it? Being 'true' to their 'art'.

Jodie Tiddlywinks, FairyCake and DookiDonut. The make-up artist, the chef and the gamer. Their signatures were on her first Boxxpo program, now framed above her desk at home. She hadn't actually known who Fairy was, but had been too shy to say anything, accepting the cartoon smiley cupcake joyously anyway, because to be noticed was novel and wonderful.

Five years later and she was on the other side of the signing table. Jodie and Fairy and Dooki at her elbow, scrawling thousands of those same signatures that had once seemed like gold dust. It still felt weird. Calling them Jodie, Elizabeth and Dietmar felt weirder still. Five years and so many things had changed. For her, for the world.

Numbers had dropped of course, but

```
*if career < 10
    their queues were still far longer than hers.
    *goto queue
```

```

*else
    her queue was still the longest by far.
    *goto queue

*label queue
*if positivity > 10
    Not that it mattered to her anyway. The important thing was
    the kind of people her videos attracted. Wonderful, warm, funny
    people who baked her cookies iced like meteors and made cross-
    stitch pictures of her channel logo.
    *set career +5
    *goto nerves
*else
    She hadn't really expected anything else. Her viewers were
    obsessive weirdos, nihilists who mistook her comedy and satire for
    a genuine desire to see the world end. Seeing any number of them
    together made her doubt her career choices.
    *set career -5
    *goto nerves

*label nerves

Swallowing her nerves, Alix pasted a bright smile on her face. The
first girl in line had a shock of bright green hair the exact same
shade as Alix's logo, the same as the streaks running through
Alix's own hair. The girl held out a piece of paper, flapping
violently from her fearful juddering. A painstaking drawing of
Alix, mouth open, hands spread wide. Alix supposed from the hard
hat that it was drawn from a still of the Bunker Song video, so she
grinned and wrote: "Let's hunker in that bunker!" and drew a smiley
with a hard hat on the girl's program.

As the girl stammered her thanks, Alix wondered if she should maybe
have asked her name, tried to personalise it more.

*choice
    #Sometimes the best thing to do was just keep your head down.
    *set dreams -5
    *set career -5
    *set positivity -5
    *goto next_in_line
    #These people were her livelihood, after all.
    *set career +10
    *goto next_in_line
    #Appreciation was always welcome.
    *set career +5
    *set positivity +5
    *set dreams +5
    *goto next_in_line

*label next_in_line

```

As it turned out, she didn't need to ask the name of the next person waiting to see her.

"Billie!" she stood, wanting to throw her arms around her friend, but ending up just patting her awkwardly. "Why the hell did you queue?!"

```
*if positivity > 15
```

```
    "I didn't want to be the jerk who cuts the line claiming to know the star. And I wanted to surprise you."
```

```
    *goto blush
```

```
*elseif (positivity < 15) and (career >15)
```

```
    "You're kind of a big deal. I wasn't sure you'd even remember me."
```

```
    *goto blush
```

```
*else
```

```
    Billie shrugged.
```

```
    *goto blush
```

```
*label blush
```

Alix felt her cheeks colouring. She felt like there was an accusation in there somewhere, but maybe that was just paranoia. These weren't the circumstances she'd imagined for their first meeting in the flesh. Billie was as smiley and friendly as she always looked during their video chats. She was a little shorter than Alix had imagined and her hair was wilder. Alix guessed some of the stray frizz was usually masked by the screen's lack of graphical fidelity.

She glanced around Billie to the queue behind, where the waiting fans shuffled their feet and rustled their Boxxpo goodie bags. She couldn't just leave them waiting there while she caught up with Billie. She wasn't sure what to say.

```
*choice
```

```
    # "Pull up a chair, Billie."
```

```
        Billie didn't need asking twice. Beaming, she threw her rucksack under the signing table and grabbed a spare folding chair from the hands of a nearby steward.
```

```
            "I'll be your pen caddy."
```

```
                She took a pack of coloured gel pens out of her pocket and flipped it open. Alix laughed.
```

```
                    "You came all the way here to sit handing me pens?"
```

```
                        "What do you think?"
```

```
                            *set billie +10
```

```
                            *set positivity +10
```

```
                            *set billie_present true
```

```
                            *page_break "I think I'd better get signing!"
```

```
                            *goto afterwards
```

"We should meet for a coffee sometime soon."

Billie smiled.

"Sure, that'd be great, I know just the place. I'll call you later."

Alix nodded, smiling sheepishly as she took the proffered notebook from a guy with braces and a hard hat.

These were her fans.

\*set billie +5

\*set career +5

\*set coffee true

\*page\_break Sixty signatures later...

\*goto afterwards

"Sorry, I have to get back to this."

Alix focussed on the notebook shoved under her nose by a guy with braces and a hard hat. She preferred not to see Billie's expression. Would it be sadness, or relief? Sure, Billie was a friend, but an online friend. Maybe things were different in the flesh. Maybe Alix was a disappointment. Again.

\*set billie -5

\*set alix -5

\*page\_break Sixty signatures later...

\*goto afterwards

\*label afterwards

The queues had all died down and security were encouraging the last few hangers on to find another place to be. Alix leaned back in her chair and looked around the convention centre. Soon their chairs and tables would be cleared and the stage would be erected for tomorrow's closing event, the Boxxpo Awards. Last year she'd won Best Newcomer. She wondered if they'd be awarding Best Newcomer this year. It hardly seemed to matter now, if the scientists were right. Not that most people believed that. It seemed like huge swathes of the world were in denial about what was happening. At first Alix admired that optimism, shared it. Now she wondered if the tabloids were right - they were naive and foolish and wasting time when they could be making preparations.

"Can you believe these kids?!" Dietmar asked loudly, intruding on her thoughts. "I can't. I can't believe them. I thought no-one would come this year. They're, like, so inspirational, y'know?"

"No more inspirational than us!" said Jodie. "We're here too aren't we?"

"I know, but," Dietmar shrugged. "We're getting paid, I guess."

"For all the difference that makes." Elizabeth shook her head and her cupcake deely-boppers bounced around until she took them off in annoyance. "What good is money now, really, to anyone?"

Dietmar looked down at his hands.

\*if (billie\_present)

Billie had carefully arranged all the gel pens into the order of the rainbow. She seemed less sure of herself here than on Alix's vid screen. Alix supposed she'd have to be the one to say something.

Alix made up her mind and spoke up.

\*choice

#"What if this isn't the end? They've been wrong about things before..."

\*set positivity +10

\*set dreams +5

\*goto happydietmar

#"Dietmar's right. People coming together like this should be celebrated, now more than ever."

\*set positivity +15

\*set family +5

\*set career +10

\*goto happydietmar

#"Sorry Dietmar, the reality is, we're all just wasting our time with this."

\*set positivity -10

\*set dreams -10

\*set career -10

\*goto saddietmar

\*if (billie\_present)

#"Well, aren't you a bunch of Debbie Downers?"

\*set billie +5

\*goto happydietmar

\*label happydietmar

Dietmar, looking faintly surprised, sat up straighter in his chair.

"Exactly! Alix gets it."

Jodie rolled her eyes. "Didn't have you down as a dreamer, Alix," she said. "Thought you were into, y'know, reality."

Alix shuffled uncomfortably in her seat. She couldn't tell them that secretly, madly, she still thought her dad might save them all. Swooping in wearing his Protectorate uniform, giving them an ironic salute, telling them it would all be okay, he was here now, he'd handle everything.

\*if (billie\_present)

"Are you ok?" Billie touched her arm, bringing her out of her reverie.

Alix shook her head. "Sorry. Can't help being hopeful."

"There is no hope," Elizabeth said gravely. "Fairy cake?" She thrust a tray under Alix's nose. It had mostly been picked clean by her fans, eager to sample that famous baking. There was one cake left, the icing of its smiley mouth a little smooshed, so it looked uncertain. Alix smiled and reached for it. As she did so, the bright numerals of her tracker glowed at her from her wrist.

```
*if (billie_present)
```

```
    "Shit look at the time. We should go."
```

```
    "Is it something bad?" Billie looked worried.
```

```
    "Not really," said Alix, already feeling guilty for what was sure to be a thankless trip across town for Billie. She'd planned on doing this alone...
```

```
        *page_break They could talk on the way, at least.
```

```
        *goto skip
```

```
*else
```

```
    "Shit. It's later than I thought."
```

```
    *page_break Time to go...
```

```
    *goto skip
```

```
*label saddietmar
```

Dietmar sank down in his seat. Alix almost wished she could take it back, but there were more important things she'd take back first if she had the power. Instead she rose, brushing crumbs from Elizabeth's fairy cakes onto the floor.

```
"I should be going."
```

```
*if (billie_present)
```

```
    "Can I come with?" asked Billie.
```

```
    Oblivious,
```

Alix stared round at the blank, hopeless faces of her fellow Boxxers. A lone cleaner pushed a single discarded program across the floor with a mop. This would probably be the last expo. It could even be the last time they were all together. Alix couldn't stand long goodbyes.

```
*if (billie_present)
```

```
    "Sure," said Alix. Then, to the others:
```

```
"Later."
```

```
*page_break A lie.
```

```
*goto skip
```

```
*label skip
```

```
Wait...
```

```
*choice
```

```
    *if not (billie_present)
```

```
        #What did all that have to do with the writing I rated?
```

```

        *set alix -5
        *finish
    *if not (hospital1)
        #If Alix has a hi-tech tracker, how come she's always
late?
        *set alix +5
        *goto hospital
    *if not (party1)
        #Where's Alix rushing off to?
        *set alix +5
        *goto party
    *if (((hospital1) and (party1)) and (billie_present))
        #Where's Alix dragging Billie off to?
        *set alix +5
        *set billie +5
        *goto club

```

```
*label party
```

```
*set party1 true
```

Everything was awful. The food was something from another era. Misshapen foil-wrapped lumps sprouted little wooden spines, each cocktail stick skewer bedecked with lumps of hard cheese, chunks of soggy pineapple and greasy olives. The music veered between sentimental nostalgic caterwauling and cliched 'uplifting' power ballads. Her relatives were the ones who organised this, who wanted it, and yet they seemed just as dispirited about the whole thing as she was.

Worst of all was the enormous hole in proceedings left by her parents, a gaping portal of nothing everyone viewed her through. She could tell by their expressions they found her lacking.

```
*if (billie_present)
```

```
    *set coffee true
```

Alix wished she'd been able to bring Billie along, that they'd been able to spend more time together, but she wasn't about to subject her to this, not yet. She'd told Billie more than most about her family, and everything else was common knowledge, but knowing it and seeing it, or rather, its aftermath, were two different things. Instead they'd parted at Billie's hotel with promises of coffee and cake tomorrow, once Alix had performed her familial duties.

Uncle Simon sidled over. He wasn't a real uncle, just someone Annie and Dad knew from the military. He'd been discharged early and Alix always suspected he'd done terrible things, no matter how much Dad assured her it was just PTSD. His hair was slicked into a severe side parting, exposing a thin line of shiny red scalp, like the blood channel in a sacrificial altar.

"Good to have everyone together again, eh?" he asked, rocking back on his heels. Alix made a non-committal noise, hoping he'd go away.

```

*if career >10
    "How are your little videos going? Still doing those?"
    *goto implications
*else
    "What are you doing these days? For work?"
    *goto implications

*label implications
Always the implication that her videos weren't proper work. That
they were something small and inconsequential.
*choice
    #"Still making videos that might change the world someday."
        *set career +10
        *set positivity +10
        *goto simon
    #"Just small, inconsequential videos that are essentially
futile."
        *set positivity -5
        *set family -5
        *goto simon
    #"Oh, y'know, kind of... but really I'm a writer."
        *set positivity +5
        *set career -5
        *set dreams +10
        *goto simon

```

```

*label simon

```

Simon smiled indulgently, but it didn't really matter what Alix said to him. People who thought every day might be their last weren't as liberated as motivational posters might have you believe. Everyone, or everyone in Alix's family, at least, walked constantly on egg shells, fearful their last words might be ones of anger or unkindness. No-one wanted to part on bad terms. Perhaps that was why no-one visited Annie any more.

Besides, Alix already knew what everyone here thought of her career choices. Ad revenue wasn't wages in her family's eyes. Two million views were just two million wasters who should be doing something more productive with their final days. Like organising endless family parties to have conversations about nothing so no-one missed out when the day came. FOMO times a million.

As if to prove her point, Simon made his excuses and slipped away to peruse the buffet table, not that there was anything unmissable on there.

Alix leaned back against a wall and wished fervently for the power of camouflage, or invisibility, or even incendiary vision so she could ignite Aunt Serita's pot plant and set the hazard foam dispensers off. She revelled for a moment in the idea of everyone running around with the protective, but foul-smelling foam thickly coating their hair and eyes, bumping into doorways, wondering if

this is it, if this is the day. She could make a decent video out of that. Dietmar's building had a foam dispenser, she was sure of it, and he was so rich they'd let him set it off if he wanted to, emergency or not. She dug into the pocket of her jeans for her stylus and made a quick airnote.

Alix pocketed the stylus again and stepped away from the wall. Had she endured this long enough? Could she slip away? She had other places to be, other people to eke out time with. And last she'd seen, Aunt Serita was heading up to the attic to look for the karaoke mics, because that 'Might be fun.' Uncle Simon was on his way back, eyes fixed on her, so she couldn't even slip out unseen.

\*choice

```
#Singing in front of people. Yikes.
    *set family -5
    *set positivity -5
    *goto sayuncle
#It actually might be fun. Maybe.
    *set positivity +10
    *goto karaoke
#There must be some appropriate excuse...
    *set dreams +5
    *set positivity +5
    *set relative "Uncle Simon"
    *set relative_gender_him_her "him"
    *set relative_gender_he_she "he"
    *set relative_gender_his_hers "his"
    *goto excuses
```

\*label sayuncle

Worse still, Simon was on his way back, a fistful of olives dripping oil onto the carpet. He was casting around for someone to bore with his reminisces of the sky when it was colours other than green, and Alix didn't want to be that someone. Simon didn't have the monopoly on midday blue, or twilight mauve, or sunset orange. Alix remembered those too, sitting under grandma's kitchen table and looking out the patio doors, staring up at the heavens, waiting for Annie and Dad to come home.

That nailed it. She'd served her time. Before Simon could reach her, she was out of the door of Aunt Serita's apartment, striding down the hallway, looking to all intents and purposes like she was going somewhere.

```
*page_break Freedom!
*goto partyend
```

\*label karaoke

Fun wasn't really the word. Watching Simon scream the chorus to a falsetto power ballad with a mouthful of half-chewed cheese lumps was stomach-churning, but joining the whole family in a rousing

rendition of a rock classic, well, that was cathartic if nothing else.

As they reached the closing lines, Aunt Maude leaned hard on Alix's shoulder, and Alix was surprised by the density of that little bird-body. Glancing at her Aunt, Alix wondered if Maude ever thought of her brother, ever regretted not joining him in the program, or perhaps dissuading him from joining. Alix wondered if Maude resented Annie. Without Annie, he might never have joined up.

Maybe that was why they gave Alix sidelong glances at these gatherings, not because of her own failings, but because of Annie's. Maybe subconsciously Alix dressed the way she did in an attempt to deny their shared DNA. And there was always a question mark over Alix's DNA anyway, thanks to the program.

The final notes died in the speaker and Alix was left gripping her Aunt's slight waist with both arms. Maude looked surprised and then pleased. She stroked Alix's arm.

"There, there, petal," she said.

Alix's tracker beeped.

\*choice

```
#"I should go."
    *set relative "Aunt Maude"
    *set relative_gender_him_her "her"
    *set relative_gender_he_she "she"
    *set relative_gender_his_hers "her"
    *goto excuses
*if not (hospital1)
    #"I have to visit Ann- ...Mother."
        *set family +10
        *goto maudebond
```

\*label excuses

"So," Alix rubbed the back of her neck, trying to act casual.

"My...

\*choice

```
#...cat...
    *set pet_type "cat"
    *set pettreat "sardine"
    *goto petgender
#...dog...
    *set pet_type "dog"
    *set pettreat "bone biscuit"
    *goto petgender
#...rabbit...
    *set pet_type "rabbit"
    *set pettreat "carrot"
    *goto petgender
```

```

#...fish...
    *set pet_type "fish"
    *set pettreat "fish flake"
    *goto petgender
#...lizard...
    *set pet_type "lizard"
    *set pettreat "meal worm"
    *goto petgender
#...bird...
    *set pet_type "bird"
    *set pettreat "sunflower seed"
    *goto petgender

*label petgender
...I should really get home to...
*choice
    #...him."
        *set pet_gender "male"
        *set pet_pronoun_him_her "him"
        *set pet_pronoun_he_she "he"
        *set pet_pronoun_his_her "his"
        *set pet_pronoun_selves "himself"
        *goto rellyresponse
    #...her."
        *set pet_gender "female"
        *set pet_pronoun_him_her "her"
        *set pet_pronoun_he_she "she"
        *set pet_pronoun_his_her "her"
        *set pet_pronoun_selves "herself"
        *goto rellyresponse

*label rellyresponse
"You have a ${pet_type}?" ${relative} asked, glancing behind
${relative_gender_him_her} to the clock, no doubt trying to ensure
${relative_gender_he_she} spent an appropriate amount of time with
each family member.

"Yeah," Alix smiled, "${pet_pronoun_he_she}'s called...
*input_text petname
*if ("${petname}" != "${petname}")
    *set petname "${petname}"
    *goto moreexcuses

*label moreexcuses
*if ((pet_type = "lizard") or (pet_type = "fish"))
    "...${pet_pronoun_he_she} has a horrible habit of leaping
out of ${pet_pronoun_his_her} tank."

    ${petname} had literally never done that.
    *goto course
*else
    ...${pet_pronoun_he_she}'s only a baby, so..."

```

Alix had owned \${petname} for two years.

"\${pet\_pronoun\_he\_she} gets anxious when left alone too long."

If anything \${petname} was more at home in the apartment than Alix.

\*goto course

\*label course

"Oh, yes, yes of course," said \${relative} absently, eyes already darting around the room for someone else to pass time with.

"You run along. Take good care of \${petname}."

And just like that, Alix was free, with none of the awkwardness that would have undoubtedly arisen if she'd told the truth about her destination. She'd have to remember to pick up some \${pettreat}s on the way back. They were \${petname}'s favourite.

\*page\_break

\*goto partyend

\*label maudebond

Expressions flashed across Aunt Maude's face, difficult to make out, like green fireworks exploding in a bright green sky. Pity? For Alix, or for Annie? Regret? Alix couldn't be sure, so she waited it out until Maude said: "Of course dear, give her my..." Maude looked uncomfortably across at the buffet table. "Tell her I said..." Her gaze alighted on the music system. "...Try not to upset her,"

\*set auntmaudeadvice true

she finished, striding over and turning the volume dial until any thoughts or protests were lost in a maelstrom of song. Old lyrics about not needing another hero that were as untrue now as they'd doubtless been back then.

Alix zipped up her jacket and

\*page\_break left the party.

\*goto hospital

\*label partyend

Hold on...

\*choice

#I still don't know what the deal is with the writing I rated.

\*set alix -5

\*finish

\*if not (hospital1)

#What's going on with Alix's parents?

\*set alix +5

\*set family +5

\*page\_break Well...

\*goto hospital

```
*if not (myboxx1)
    #What [i]does[/i] Alix do for work?
    *set alix +10
    *set career +5
    *page_break Well...
    *goto myboxx
```

```
*label hospital
*set hospital1 true
```

The David Jones Memorial Hospital had an unremarkable exterior. As if in acknowledgement of this fact, the grass traffic roundabout out front sported a huge bronze modern art sculpture. Alix always puzzled over it. It resembled a pelvis, but the plaque beneath said 'Hope' so she supposed it must be something else. The hospital was the tallest building for miles around, apart from the multi-storey car park nestled alongside it like a conspirator. The grounds were all purple gravel and stunted palm trees unsuited to the climate. If you could call intermittent monsoons, freezing hail and periods of drought a climate.

It was one of the few hospitals that stayed lit at night, but even here they were on emergency lighting from a back-up generator, giving the whole building an eerie greenness. Couldn't the emergency lights have been some other colour? Alix crunched across the gravel

```
*if ((billie_present) and not (coffee))
    barely listening as Billie chattered excitedly about the
    expo.
    *goto hours
*else
    and worried.
    *goto hours
```

```
*label hours
```

Late for visiting hours again. The nurses were nice about it to her face. They knew Annie didn't have a lot of time, and she could tell from their forced smiles that they felt Alix [i]did[/i] and she should be spending it here rather than making daft videos.

Annie was never nice about it. Alix wondered which approach it would be this time. The soft, sarcastic sighs of:

'Well, I know you're busy...' head turned away, ever the martyr, or the narrowed eyes and shrill fury of: 'You'd think a girl could find the time to see her dying mother!'

```
*page_break Go Inside
```

```
*if ((billie_present) and (coffee))
    Alix had been close to calling Billie, but she felt like
    she'd already messed her friend around enough. A little of Billie's
    cheerful noise would have been really welcome right now, though.
    *goto distant_buffing
*elseif (billie_present)
```

"You okay?" Billie asked. "You look worried." She'd been great about this whole thing - dragged to the hospital when they should be sharing stories over drinks in some dive bar.

"Yeah," Alix said. She stopped, watching a cleaner shine the corridor's floor with a buffing machine. The man came out from behind the machine for a moment to clean under a row of seating with a grey mop that stank of disinfectant. The machine didn't seem to notice his absence. The whir of the circular cleaning pad faded into the distance before she spoke again.

\*choice

#"Would you mind waiting here?"

"Annie, that is, my mother, can be a little-"

Billie clearly expected Alix to finish the thought. When she didn't, Billie gave her a lopsided smile. "Sure," she took a seat and rifled through the pile of ancient paper magazines on the neighbouring coffee table. "Old articles about paternity tests are my jam." She held up a piece entitled 'WHO'S THE FATHER?!' accompanied by a picture of a shocked couple with outdated clothes and hairstyles.

Alix smiled.

\*set billie\_waiting true

\*page\_break Billie was the greatest.

\*goto mother

#"This could take a while."

"I really appreciate you coming here with me, but I don't expect you to wait around. Why don't we meet tomorrow for coffee?"

\*if Billie <15

Billie zipped up her coat and smiled.

"Of course. I'm pretty tired anyway." She stifled a yawn Alix was pretty sure was fake. "Note me a good coffee place, yeah?"

Alix nodded, sincerely hoping she remembered.

\*page\_break [i] Try to remember [/i]

\*set coffee true

\*goto mother

\*else

"Alix, will you quit worrying about me all the time?" She indicated the pile of magazines on a nearby table. "I have some ancient relics to explore." They were so old, they were paper. There wasn't even a newsagent installed in the table. It was just a regular wooden table.

"I mean, if you're sure..."

Billie held up a magazine called  
[i]Natter[/i] with the lead story 'MY SISTER WAS MY MOTHER!' "One  
hundred percent. I'll take you up on that coffee later, though."

```
*page_break Billie was so great.  
*set billie_waiting true  
*set coffee true  
*goto mother
```

```
*else  
    *goto distant_buffing
```

```
*label distant_buffing
```

The only sounds were the drone of a distant buffing machine erasing  
dirty footprints from corridor floors and the soft background hum  
of the lighting's power supply. A single nurse was at the reception  
desk, eyes locked on a tablet. Alix read the top line before she  
looked up.

[i] ... urgently Stasia caressed his throbbing...[/i]

Yikes. The nurse smiled and Alix worried for a moment that she'd  
said that aloud, but it turned out she was just pre-empting the  
inevitable apology.

"It's okay Alix," she said. "Go on through." Alix felt bad that she  
couldn't remember the nurse's name. Maybe Betty? Jackie? Who was  
she kidding, she couldn't even remember the face, so she just said:  
"Thank you, Sister," feeling even more awkward than if she'd just  
said 'Nurse'.

```
*goto mother
```

```
*label mother
```

Alix's mother was on a private ward in a special wing of the  
hospital. She hurried past the sign, not wanting to see the name of  
it. It had been initially dedicated to the care of the ex-  
Protectors, but now there was just Annie, her ward-neighbours  
politicians and minor celebrities.

Alix swiped her fob at the base of the keypad and slipped into the  
room. Annie was facing away from her, breathing soft. Sleeping.

Thank whoever!

Alix slid into the leather armchair at her mother's bedside as  
silently as possible. Her mother's skin was mottled, her hair  
thinning. She looked fragile. Impossibly so.

The lights on the medical AI unit above Annie's bed flashed blue.  
It was probably greeting her, but Annie always kept it muted.

Alix

\*choice

```
#reached out and stroked the faded chestnut locks.  
    *set annie +10  
    *set family +10  
    *goto annie  
#uttered Annie's name.  
    *set annie +5  
    *set family +5  
    *goto annie  
#remembered the woman Annie had once been.  
    *set family +10  
    *goto annie_past  
#thought about Dad.  
    *set family +10  
    *set dreams +5  
    *goto dad
```

\*label annie

Annie rolled towards Alix with a swiftness that made her gasp. Not sleeping after all. Her green eyes snapped open, and just like that, any fragility was banished.

"So, you haven't just left me here to rot, then?"

Alix sighed.

\*if (auntmaudeadvice)

What was it Aunt Maude had said? 'Try not to upset her.' How was that even possible when upset was her default?

```
*goto anniecross
```

\*else

She was trying, she really was. But even when Annie had been well, and Alix had lived at home and seen her every day, Annie always expected more.

```
*goto anniecross
```

\*label anniecross

\*if annie <15

```
"Haven't you got a tongue in your head, girl?"
```

Annie tried to sit up and winced. She was so acerbic it was easy to forget her poison masked her pain.

"Let me help you, Mother." Alix gently lifted her upwards and forwards, plumped her pillows and settled her back down at a more upright angle. Annie protested, not at the assistance, but at being referred to via a parental label. Alix wasn't sure why she'd said it. Maybe just to needle Annie.

It was shocking

\*choice

```
#to see the great Annie Akerman looking so vulnerable.
```

```
*set annie +5
*goto annie_past
#to have her help accepted.
*set annie +5
*set family +10
*goto annie_now
#to think Dad would've ended up like this too.
*set family +5
*set positivity -5
*goto dad
```

```
*label annie_past
```

"Your mum is so fit," this lad at school, Ryan Bellows, always used to say. Annie would pick Alix up from school with an open trenchcoat over her protectorate uniform and her hair flowing past her shoulders. It was embarrassing. Yes, the protectorate uniform was close fitting, but she didn't have to wear it like that, with the thigh-high boots and all the bangles in various shades of purple and a matching headband. Nona's mum didn't dress like that. She paired her uniform with trainers and an over-sized leather jacket and did her daughter the courtesy of putting jeans on over it when she did the school run.

And sometimes they'd be walking home and just as Alix was in the middle of telling Annie about her day, Annie'd put her finger to her ear in that way that meant she was getting directives into her earpiece and she'd nod even though the controller couldn't see her, and she'd say: "Sorry chicken, something's come up at work," and they'd jog over to Aunt Maude's and Alix wouldn't see her mother again for hours, sometimes days.

```
*goto extra_choice
```

```
*label dad
```

As a child, Alix was convinced her dad was a superhero. He'd come to the dinner table, deep purple uniform still dusty from the war zone. When Alix was very little, she'd point to the dust and ask: "What's that?" and her father would smile and his eyes would crinkle and he'd say: "Flour. I've been baking bread all day!" and fold her into a tight hug, and she'd run her fingers over the raised carbon fibre Protectorate emblem on his chest.

When she was a little bigger, she'd ask:

"Where did you get that on you?" And he'd look grave and say: "A building collapsed. I was dragging survivors clear." And she'd fold him into a hug, and smell the ashes and gunpowder in his hair.

When she was almost an adult, she'd ask: "What happened?" and he'd say: "More killing, more dying," and avoid her eyes and she couldn't hug him no matter how much she wanted to.

```
*goto extra_choice
```

```
*label extra_choice
```

Looking at her mother lying in that bed, Alix realised

\*choice

\*if (auntmaudeadvice)

#Aunt Maude was right.

\*set family +10

\*set annie +5

\*set positivity +5

\*goto annie\_now

\*if (billie\_present)

#she couldn't deal with this right now.

\*set family -5

\*set annie -10

\*set positivity -5

\*goto alix\_run

\*if family >20

#Annie had really been through it.

\*set family +5

\*set annie +10

\*goto annie\_now

#she had to get out of there.

\*set annie -10

\*goto alix\_run

#she had always blamed Annie.

\*set annie +5

\*set family -5

\*set positivity -5

\*goto annie\_now

\*label annie\_now

Maybe it was time to put aside the old resentments and festering blame. She'd never had chance to say goodbye to Dad, but Annie was right there in front of her.

\*if family >20

She reached across and squeezed Annie's hand.

\*goto annie\_reaction

\*else

\*goto smalltalk\_check

\*label annie\_reaction

\*if annie >15

Annie looked faintly surprised.

\*goto smalltalk\_check

\*else

Annie grimaced and moved her hand out of Alix's reach.

Another small rejection. Alix wondered how many more of those she could take.

\*set positivity -5

\*goto smalltalk\_check

\*label smalltalk\_check

\*if petname = ""

\*set petname "my friend, Dietmar"

\*set pet\_gender "male"

```

        *set pet_pronoun_him_her "him"
        *set pet_pronoun_he_she "he"
        *set pet_pronoun_his_her "his"
        *goto smalltalk
*else
        *goto smalltalk

*label smalltalk

"...so, ${petname} did the funniest thing yesterday!"

"Doesn't surprise me. ${pet_pronoun_he_she}'s an absolute idiot."

Alix quickly related the most recent bout of silliness.
*page_break After all that uncomfortable small talk...

She drew to a close, fidgeting in her seat,
*if billie_waiting
        aware Billie had better things to do than sit around in a
hospital waiting room.
        *goto visits
*else
        eager to be out of there.
        *goto visits

*label visits
*if pet_type = "fish"

        "...I guess maybe I'd be frightened by something that big
looming over my tank, though," she finished lamely.
        *goto visitscont
*else
        "${pet_pronoun_he_she} ended up covered in cake mix," she
finished lamely.
        *goto visitscont

*label visitscont

She wanted to make these visits better, less excruciating, more
meaningful, but she didn't know how.
*if Annie <15
        Annie barely seemed to care whether she visited or not
anyway.
        *goto whatsup
*else
        Annie co-operated, in her way, but it was hard.
        *goto whatsup

*label whatsup

"What've you been up to?" Alix asked, after Annie's breathing had
evened out a little, and it seemed she might be capable of
answering.

```

"Lying around dying, mostly. You?"

"Oh, you know. Same old cycle of shit parties, shit videos and hanging around this place."

Annie's eyes narrowed. "But mostly the first two."

Alix sighed. "Yes, I suppose. Mostly the first two."

Annie closed her eyes and settled her head back against her pillow.

```
*if annie >20
```

```
  *set dreams +5
```

```
  "What about your writing? Do you still write?"
```

"...I," Alix was completely wrong-footed. She felt her cheeks colouring, ridiculous as that was. "Oh, you know, this and that, nothing good, really."

"You should let me read it sometime. It'll give me something else to do besides staring at the ceiling and trying to guess what the porter's had for dinner from his farts."

"Yeah, yeah, sure I guess."

```
  *page_break Once all conversational topics were exhausted...
  *goto almost_hospend
```

```
*elseif (annie > 15) and (positivity < 15)
```

```
  "What about ${petname}? How's ${pet_pronoun_he_she} getting
  on?" Trying not to let the shock show in her face, Alix settled
  down in her chair and related ${pet_pronoun_his_her} antics again,
  slower this time.
```

```
  *if (billie_waiting)
```

```
    *if billie >15
```

```
      Billie wouldn't mind waiting a little longer.
```

```
      *gosub dietmar_check
```

```
      *goto hospend
```

```
    *else
```

```
      Billie would have to go on waiting.
```

```
      *gosub dietmar_check
```

```
      *goto hospend
```

```
  *else
```

```
    As if that made a difference.
```

```
    *gosub dietmar_check
```

```
    *goto hospend
```

```
*else
```

```
  *goto hospend
```

```
*label almost_hospend
```

Annie's responses came slower and fewer, until eventually she was silent.

```
*goto hospend
```

```
*label hospend
```

Alix waited until she was certain Annie had fallen back into a deep sleep, then slipped away, duty done for another day.

```
*if (billie_waiting)
```

Billie had fallen asleep in the waiting room, one of the trashy magazines draped across her lap. Alix tapped her gently and she jerked in her seat. The magazine dropped to the floor.

"I'm awake!" she said quickly, stretching. "Totally awake. Raring to go."

```
*choice
```

```
#"Nice try."
```

"I think we'd both better call it a night, don't you?" said Alix. "But I'll walk you back to your hotel. It's on my way back. And tomorrow's another story!"

```
*if billie >15
```

```
    "Sounds good," said Billie. "I [i]am[/i] pretty beat. We can get coffee tomorrow instead."
```

```
    *set coffee true
```

```
    *set billie +5
```

```
    *finish Roll on tomorrow
```

```
*else
```

```
    "I can see myself back, thanks," said Billie flatly. "I hope your mum gets better soon."
```

There was no getting better for Annie, but Billie didn't seem in the mood to hear about it, and Alix wasn't in the mood to tell it anyway, so she just nodded weakly and watched Billie's retreating back for a moment before starting back herself.

```
    *set billie_mood "angry"
```

```
    *set billie -5
```

```
    *if petname = "my friend, Dietmar"
```

```
        *gosub dietmar_check
```

```
        *finish Alone.
```

```
    *else
```

```
        *finish Alone.
```

```
    #"Tomorrow, one hundred percent."
```

Alix was worried Billie would be cross at her for flaking yet again. Not that Billie could say anything with Annie's impending death ticking between them like the clicking of a metronome. Whatever she felt about it, Billie just smiled and gave Alix thumbs up.

```
    "One hundred percent," she echoed.
```

```
    *set coffee true
```

```

        *set billie +5
        *if petname = "my friend, Dietmar"
            *gosub dietmar_check
            *finish 99.9% at least.
        *else
            *finish 99.99%, anyway.
    #"Great! Let's hit the town!"
    Calling it a town was perhaps overly generous.
    *set billie +5
    *if petname = "my friend, Dietmar"
        *gosub dietmar_check
        *goto club
    *else
        *goto club
*else
    *if petname = "my friend, Dietmar"
        *gosub dietmar_check
        *goto hospchoice
    *else
        *goto hospchoice

*label hospchoice
*choice
    #Sleep looked inviting to Alix too.
    *set alix +10
    *finish
    #What the hell does this have to do with that writing I
rated?!
    *set alix -5
    *finish
    *if party1 = false
        #One family member taken care of, fifty more to go.
        *goto party

*label alix_run
Alix rose quickly, the leather armchair screeching back behind her.
"I'm sorry," she blurted, hurriedly looking towards the door as her
eyes grew hot and wet. "There's somebody waiting for me. I have to-
" she was out of the door and running down the corridor before she
had time to think about it, her mother's pitiful croaks for her to
come back receding into the distance. Annie Akerman was easier to
ignore these days.

*if ((billie_present) and (coffee))
    *goto alix_ending

*elseif (billie_present)

    Billie looked up as Alix came thudding down the corridor. She
threw her magazine back onto the stack, and rose.

    "What happened?"

```

Alix shook her head, clenching her eyes in that way she'd developed to stop the tears falling.

"Let's just go somewhere, okay?" Alix asked.

\*page\_break Anywhere but here

\*goto club

\*else

\*goto alix\_ending

\*label alix\_ending

Alix ran past the sign saying 'Protectorate Pledge Wing' that someone had gouged and scratched with a knife or a screwdriver. She ran past the nurse whose name she should know but didn't, past the cleaner who had moved on to cleaning the glass panels by the door with a spray that smelled of chemical lavender. She ran past the stupid purple gravel and the ugly deformed palm trees and over the small road that led to the colossal car park and she dropped to her knees in front of that ridiculous bronze pelvis and cried until she could stand.

\*finish Which was a long time.

\*label club

\*set billie\_drinks true

\*set billie +5

Moribund High Street wasn't exactly known for its buzzing nightlife, but now plenty of people were trying to drink away the apocalypse, so there was always some wine bar or cocktail place ready to cash in.

"The Cat's Whiskies or Vinotage?" asked Alix, looking up at the glowing signs, unchanged since her youth.

"Anywhere you'd recommend?" Billie had already brought up both on her tracker, seen that neither had particularly good ratings.

"You won't find anything above two stars in Moribund," said Alix. "People here don't like anything, and even if they did, there's not much to like."

"Oh, we'll find something to like," said Billie with a grin.

"There's always something to like!"

And she grabbed Alix's hand and tugged her through a nearby doorway Alix had taken for a disused fire exit, but that was apparently the entrance to an underground club. Inside was decorated with fairylights and guys their age served drinks in pitchers with flower petals floating on the surface. The petals seemed oddly muted against the unnatural glow of the brightly coloured cocktails.

\*finish Drink, dance, forget

\*label dietmar\_check

```
*set petname ""
*set pet_gender ""
*set pet_pronoun_him_her ""
*set pet_pronoun_he_she ""
*set pet_pronoun_his_her ""
*return
```

```
*comment may be able to change gosubs to gotos later depending on
function
*comment also may reduce number of created functions in startup by
using temps, depending on how often they are needed.
*comment (eg. use temps for pronouns etc)
*comment may be an idea to add a coffee option at the hospital too
if billie is present, rather than just asking her to wait
*comment around. Done.
```

## rating\_outcome

```
*temp petnoise ""
*temp petmovement ""
*temp bodypart ""
*temp skintype ""

*if pet_type = ""
    *goto apartment
*elseif pet_type = "cat"
    *set skintype "fur"
    *goto apartment
*elseif pet_type = "dog"
    *set skintype "fur"
    *goto apartment
*elseif pet_type = "rabbit"
    *set skintype "fur"
    *goto apartment
*elseif pet_type = "lizard"
    *set skintype "scales"
    *goto apartment
*elseif pet_type = "fish"
    *set skintype "scales"
    *goto apartment
*else
    *set skintype "feathers"
    *goto apartment
```

## \*label apartment

By the time Alix got back to her apartment, it was dark. There were no streetlights anymore, but the green glow of the sky meant it no longer got pitch black anyway.

```
*if (billie_present)
```

```
    *comment make sure this works for all 'billie present'
    instances. If not, add a 'billie drinks' exception
```

```
    *if billie_mood = "angry"
```

Billie hadn't messaged to say she'd made it back to her hotel safely, but perhaps that wasn't so surprising given the way they'd spent their brief time together.

```
        *goto check_news
```

```
    *else
```

On the walk back to her hotel, Billie had said it reminded her of home. Perhaps the meteorite's effects were less scary for the Iseyjans with their long days and aurora borealis.

```
        *goto check_news
```

```
*else
```

```
    *goto check_news
```

## \*label check\_news

Alix checked the news ticker on her tracker. The latest estimate was fourteen months. That seemed both forever and nothing. A small band of vocal meteor deniers insisted it wouldn't hit at all. Most experts were agreed the threat was real, but calculating the speed

and trajectory was incredibly difficult and when parts broke off, everything changed and had to be recalculated.

She turned the ticker off. More than enough of that.

```
*if not (hospital1)
```

```
    She had a nagging feeling there was somewhere else she should have gone. Her tracker was set for something, something important, and yet she hadn't acted on it. It was weird.
```

```
    *goto fob
```

```
*else
```

```
    *goto fob
```

```
*label fob
```

```
As she threw her fob onto the table,
```

```
*if pet_type = ""
```

```
    *goto silence
```

```
*if pet_type = "cat"
```

```
    *set petnoise "meowed"
```

```
    *goto petwelcome
```

```
*if pet_type = "dog"
```

```
    *set petnoise "barked"
```

```
    *goto petwelcome
```

```
*if pet_type = "rabbit"
```

```
    *set petnoise "hopped over to Alix's desk and chewed on the base of her wheely chair"
```

```
    *goto petwelcome
```

```
*if pet_type = "fish"
```

```
    *set petnoise "blew gravel against the side of  
${pet_pronoun_his_her} tank"
```

```
    *goto petwelcome
```

```
*if pet_type = "lizard"
```

```
    *set petnoise "scrabbled at the front of  
${pet_pronoun_his_her} vivarium"
```

```
    *goto petwelcome
```

```
*if pet_type = "bird"
```

```
    *set petnoise "squawked"
```

```
    *goto petwelcome
```

```
*label petwelcome
```

```
!${petname} ${petnoise}, eager to be fed.
```

```
*if pet_type = "fish"
```

```
    *goto notickle
```

```
*else
```

```
    Alix went over and scratched her adorable ${pet_type}'s head affectionately.
```

```
    *goto notickle
```

```
*label notickle
```

```
"Later, greedy guts," Alix reassured ${pet_pronoun_him_her}. "With extra ${pettreat}s for being such a good baby." !${petname} continued to clamour for food regardless.
```

```
*goto exhaustion
```

```

*label silence
the loudness of it emphasised the apartment's silence. Alix
shuddered. Times like this, she wished she had a pet of some kind
for company. Some little sign of life to come home to.
*goto exhaustion

*label exhaustion

Alix felt drained from
*if (party1)
    the party...
    *goto expo
*else
    *goto expo
*label expo
*if (myboxx1)
    the expo...
    *goto hosp
*else
*goto hosp

*label hosp
*if (hospital1)
    the hospital...
    *goto drinks
*else
    *goto drinks

*label drinks
*if (billie_drinks)
    drinks with Billie...
    *goto main
*else
    *goto main

*label main
*if not (hospital1)
    Shit! Visiting hours! That was where she was meant to be.
Well, it was too late now, and she was too tired for the apologetic
vid call.
    *set Annie -5
    *goto exhausted
*else
    *goto exhausted

*label exhausted

```

Exhausted, but her brain was buzzing. She needed a distraction. Her gaze came to rest on the drawer where she stowed her laptop when she wasn't home. Probably not the most relaxing diversion, but...

She unlocked the drawer, and lifted the laptop out onto the desk, lowering the blind against the relentless greenness as it whirred to life.

\*page\_break Logging in...

A message flashed in her WIFF.net inbox. A rating! Someone had read and rated her work. She hovered her mouse over the weird little rectangular symbol that represented an unread message. She had to open it, but...

What if they didn't like her stuff?

What if they'd left a comment, telling her how childish and stupid her writing was?

\*if positivity >20

    No, no, it'd be fine. It wasn't the best story in the world, but it had its merits.

        \*goto clickon

\*else

        \*goto clickon

\*label clickon

\*page\_break Open message

\*if rating >6

    Alix felt a flush of relief. They liked it. Not enough to leave a comment, but enough to give it a good rating.

        \*set positivity +10

        \*set dreams +10

        \*set career +5

        \*if petname = ""

            \*goto keepreading

        \*elseif pet\_type = "fish"

            \*goto keepreading

        \*else

            She ran across to \${petname}, scooped \${pet\_pronoun\_him\_her} up, and waltzed around the lounge with \${pet\_pronoun\_him\_her} until \${pet\_pronoun\_he\_she} wriggled free from Alix's grasp and returned to sit pointedly by \${pet\_pronoun\_his\_her} food bowl. Alix hastily filled it, gave \${petname} an absentminded pat, then raced back to her desk.

            \*goto keepreading

        \*label keepreading

    She stared again at the number on the screen, expecting it to have morphed into some lower figure. Happily, it hadn't. Some distant person she didn't even know and would likely never meet liked her writing! They'd liked it enough to read it, and then think about it, and then assign it a numerical value! Alix's cheeks hurt from smiling.

```

    *if pet_type = "fish"
        She threw a handful of fish flakes in for ${petname}
without taking her eyes from the screen.
        *goto caresforgotten

    *else
        *goto caresforgotten

    *label caresforgotten

    All other cares forgotten, she sat and wrote until the early
hours of the morning.
    *set writing1 true
    *finish Bliss

*elseif rating <4
    Oh. Well. As she blinked away tears, the number remained
seared into her mind's eye. It floated in front of her, taunting.

    They hated it. Hours of her life, of her work, pondering the
right word, the right phrase, and this person, whoever and wherever
they were, thought it worthless. She spent less time deliberating
over the content of her videos and they had tens of thousands of
views and upvotes.

    *if positivity >20
        It hadn't always been that way, though. The first videos
had a few hundred views, and more downvotes than upvotes. But she
kept going, because a few hundred people had watched. And a handful
even upvoted. She'd kept going for them, and for herself and her
videos had gotten better, and so had her viewcounts. She dried her
eyes on the back of her hand.

        She'd start something new, something better than before,
something they just couldn't help but rate highly.
        *set positivity +5
        *set dreams +10
        *set career +5
        *goto caresforgotten
    *else
        Slowly, she closed the laptop lid. Maybe she'd upload
one of her other stories later, see if they liked that any better.
For now, she was done. That was all her heart could take right now.
        *if petname = ""
            *goto empty
        *else
            *if (((pet_type = "cat") or (pet_type = "dog")) or
((pet_type = "rabbit") or (pet_type = "lizard")))
                *set petmovement "clambered"
                *set bodypart "lap"
                *goto petlove
            *elseif pet_type = "bird"
                *set petmovement "flew"

```

```

        *set bodypart "shoulder"
        *goto petlove
    *else
        *goto video
*label petlove
    ${petname} ${petmovement} onto Alix's ${bodypart} forcing
    Alix to stroke ${pet_pronoun_him_her}. She smiled in spite of
    herself.

    "Hey lovely," she said, running her fingers over the soft
    ${skintype}. "Why don't we make a video together instead? Might be
    fun, huh?"
    *if pet_type = "dog"

        ${petname} wagged ${pet_pronoun_his_her} tail.
    Everything's fun to a pupper.
        *goto setup
    *elseif pet_type = "cat"

        ${petname}'s purr thrummed deep in
    ${pet_pronoun_his_her} chest. Alix took that as agreement.
        *goto setup
    *elseif pet_type = "bird"

        ${petname} made a scraping noise with
    ${pet_pronoun_his_her} beak, then nibbled Alix's earlobe.
        *goto setup
    *elseif pet_type = "rabbit"

        ${petname} stopped with ${pet_pronoun_his_her}
    incessant nose-twitching for a moment, which Alix took as
    agreement.
        *goto setup
    *elseif pet_type = "lizard"
        ${petname}'s eyes half-closed in contentment, enjoying
    having ${pet_pronoun_his_her} neck scales scratched.
        *goto setup

*label video

    She glanced over at ${petname}, still plucking hopefully at
    the surface of the water as if there might be more flakes invisible
    to the naked eye. ${pet_pronoun_he_she} wasn't exactly the most
    thrilling viral video star, but Alix could do a funny voiceover or
    something.
    *goto setup

*label setup

    Alix got to work setting up her video camera. It was clunky,
    but the audio quality was better than on her tracker. Cute pet
    vlogs were always popular, even with non-subscribers. If she was

```

going to have something entertaining to upload by morning, she had a lot of

```
*set positivity +5
*set career +5
*set video1 true
*finish work to do.
```

```
*else
```

She stared at the rating, trying to marshal her feelings.

```
*if positivity >15
```

It wasn't so bad. Room for improvement, but not horrible. And they'd thought enough of it to finish reading it and give it a rating, that was something.

```
*if positivity >20
```

Deep breath. Okay.

She sat down at her desk, mind made up, filled with a sense of purpose. She'd write something new to keep her enthusiasm up, and then go back to the offending story and polish it up.

```
*goto caresforgotten
```

```
*else
```

```
*goto petcheck
```

```
*else
```

Well, that was that with that story, she supposed. Maybe she'd upload one of her other stories later, see if they liked that any better. For now, she was done. That was all her heart could take.

```
*goto petcheck
```

```
*label petcheck
```

```
*if (((pet_type = "cat") or (pet_type = "dog")) or ((pet_type = "rabbit") or (pet_type = "lizard")))
```

```
*set petmovement "clambered"
```

```
*set bodypart "lap"
```

```
*goto petlove
```

```
*elseif pet_type = "bird"
```

```
*set petmovement "flew"
```

```
*set bodypart "shoulder"
```

```
*goto petlove
```

```
*elseif pet_type = "fish"
```

```
*goto video
```

```
*else
```

In the stillness and silence of her apartment, Alix put on her pyjamas. She knew she should probably eat something but her appetite had deserted her.

```
*goto empty
```

```
*label empty
```

```
*if positivity <15
```

She sat up in bed for a long time, thinking about nothing but her own emptiness and sadness, until eventually sleep claimed her.

\*set positivity -5

\*set dreams -5

\*finish Sleep

\*else

She sat up in bed a while, mind churning. Maybe tomorrow would bring something better. Her eyes grew heavier, and when sleep finally claimed her, she dreamt of flames and ashes.

\*finish Sleep

## ch2

```
*comment *image Ch2_Fri.png
*gosub_scene csideimg_ch2_fri
*temp diceroll 0
*temp petnoise ""
*temp newpet false
*temp count 1
*temp petmovement ""
*temp petmouth ""
*temp alixfame false
*temp billiecall false
```

A knock at the door woke Alix from a fitful sleep. The bedsheet had wrapped around her legs during the night and she struggled to free them, expecting the knocking to intensify, to disturb the neighbours. It didn't.

```
*if petname = ""
    *goto nopet
*else
    *goto pettycheck

*label pettycheck
*if pet_type = "cat"
    *set petnoise "mewed"
    *goto petreaction
*elseif pet_type = "dog"
    *set petnoise "barked"
    *goto petreaction
*elseif pet_type = "rabbit"
    *set petnoise "pounded ${pet_pronoun_his_her} hind feet
against the floorboards"
    *goto petreaction
*elseif pet_type = "fish"
    *set petnoise "jumped clear of the surface of the water,
splashing back down into ${pet_pronoun_his_her} tank again and
again"
    *goto petreaction
*elseif pet_type = "lizard"
    *set petnoise "dug furiously at the corner of
${pet_pronoun_his_her} vivarium"
    *goto petreaction
*else
    *set petnoise "whistled a decent imitation of Alix's tracker
alarm over and over"
    *goto petreaction

*label petreaction
${petname} wasn't about to let her go back to sleep though, even
if this mystery visitor was. ${pet_pronoun_he_she} ${petnoise}
until Alix left the bedroom.
*goto nopet
```

```

*label nopet

Alix rubbed her eyes.
*if (videol)
    Filming all night had left them dry and crunchy.
    *goto headcheck
*elseif ((positivity <15) and (rating <5))
    Crying all night had left them puffy and raw.
    *goto headcheck
*else
    *goto headcheck

*label headcheck
*if (billie_drinks)
    Her head was spinning from the night before. And her knees
hurt. Why did her knees hurt?
    *goto frontdoor
*elseif positivity >15
    She should really get an early night at some point this
century.
    *goto frontdoor
*else
    She wished she could snap out of this funk.
    *goto frontdoor

*label frontdoor

When she reached the front door, she could see from the entry
screen there was no-one outside, just a cardboard box.

"Great work, delivery guy," Alix muttered, opening the front door.
*if petname = ""
    *goto box
*else
    *if (((pet_type = "cat") or (pet_type = "dog")) or (pet_type
= "rabbit"))
        ${petname} tried to run out into the corridor, but Alix
swung her leg over ${pet_pronoun_him_her} keeping
${pet_pronoun_him_her} inside with one foot.
        *goto box
    *elseif pet_type = "bird"
        ${petname} escalated ${pet_pronoun_his_her} trilling
into a thousand decibel screech, yet made no effort to flutter off
${pet_pronoun_his_her} perch, let alone out into the hall with
Alix.
        *goto stop
    *elseif pet_type = "lizard"
        ${petname} forced ${pet_pronoun_selves} up onto
${pet_pronoun_his_her} back legs against the side of the vivarium,
threatening to clamber out.
        *goto stop
    *else

```

\${petname} leapt higher than ever, creating a mini tidal wave that surged over the edge of \${pet\_pronoun\_his\_her} tank, dripping onto Alix's dresser and the carpet below.

    \*goto stop

\*label stop

"All right, \${petname}, I get it, you're agitated," Alix yelled over her shoulder. "Give it a rest!"

\*goto box

\*label box

She crouched in her hallway, paused, her hand on top of the box. Dietmar'd had trouble before, with the online hate group who thought he made too much money from his videos. Jodie and Elizabeth had both received threats. They came to nothing, but they were scary, online fury seeping offline, a non-lethal contaminant. What if this was her turn? A pig's head, a dog turd?

\*if positivity <20

    ...There had been a lot of downvotes on that last video.

    \*goto box2

\*else

    ... More likely she'd just ordered something and forgotten about it.

    \*goto box2

\*label box2

\*if petname = ""

    The box moved. Didn't it? Now it was still and Alix wondered if she'd just kicked it as she adjusted her crouching position.

    \*goto openit

\*else

    She suddenly recognised the large, childlike handwriting on the address label. The little hearts instead of dots over 'i's and 'j's.

    \*set rock true

    \*goto openit

\*label openit

That was it, she had to

\*page\_break open it.

Inside the box, nestled among the foam packing peanuts was

\*if petname = ""

    \*rand diceroll 0 6

    \*if diceroll = 0

        \*goto nothing

    \*elseif diceroll = 1

        \*set pet\_type "kitten"

        \*set pettreat "sardine"

```

        *set petnoise "mewed"
        *set newpet true
        *goto surprise
    *elseif diceroll = 2
        *set pet_type "puppy"
        *set pettreat "bone biscuit"
        *set petnoise "barked"
        *set newpet true
        *goto surprise
    *elseif diceroll = 3
        *set pet_type "rabbit"
        *set pettreat "carrot"
        *set petnoise "pounded ${pet_pronoun_his_her} hind feet
against the floorboards"
        *set newpet true
        *goto surprise
    *elseif diceroll = 4
        *set pet_type "bowl with a fish in it"
        *set pettreat "fish flake"
        *set petnoise "jumped clear of the surface of the water,
sploshing back down into ${pet_pronoun_his_her} tank"
        *set newpet true
        *goto surprise
    *elseif diceroll = 5
        *set pet_type "lizard in a glass vivarium"
        *set pettreat "meal worm"
        *set newpet true
        *goto surprise
    *else
        *set pet_type "cage with a bird in it"
        *set pettreat "sunflower seed"
        *set petnoise "whistled a decent imitation of her
tracker's alarm over and over"
        *set newpet true
        *goto surprise

```

\*else  
 a strange lump of rock, black and pockmarked. For one crazed moment, Alix thought it was a lump of meteor, that she had slept through everything and by some fluke her apartment building was left standing, while the surrounding neighbourhood was nothing but a smoking crater. As she stared, her brain slowly dragged itself out of slumber mode and acknowledged that if all her neighbours had been obliterated, the likelihood of someone chipping off and gift-wrapping a chunk was close to zero.

She lifted the rock out and hefted it in her hand, ignoring \${petname}'s best efforts to

```

    *if pet_type = "bird"
        pierce her eardrums.
        *goto note
    *elseif ((pet_type = "lizard") or (pet_type = "fish"))
        draw her attention with ${pet_pronoun_his_her} escape
attempts. Alix hadn't thought ${pet_pronoun_him_her} capable, but

```

`{pet_pronoun_he_she}` seemed determined to prove Alix wrong.  
Clearly there was a first time for everything.

`*goto note`

`*else`

`dob {pet_pronoun_his_her} nose all over it.`

`*goto note`

`*label note`

Underneath was a note, also in Billie's cute, loopy handwriting.

`*comment *image billie_note.png`

`*gosub_scene csideimg_billie_note`

Alix blinked. Checked the date on the label. Billie had signed it over a week ago. Perhaps she'd expected the package to arrive before she did. Alix clasped the rock in both hands for a moment.

Did this mean Billie didn't hold Dad responsible? Maybe the local press were wrong. Maybe the whole of Iseyja wasn't buying for protector blood after what happened.

`*goto treasure`

`*label surprise`

`*set positivity +5`

a `{pet_type}` and a small sealed container of `{pettreat}s`.

"Well," said Alix. "That was unexpected.

`*if pet_type = "bowl with a fish in it"`

`*set pet_type "fish"`

`*goto naming`

`*elseif pet_type = "cage with a bird in it"`

`*set pet_type "bird"`

`*goto naming`

`*elseif pet_type = "puppy"`

`*set pet_type "dog"`

`*goto naming`

`*elseif pet_type = "kitten"`

`*set pet_type "cat"`

`*goto naming`

`*elseif pet_type = "lizard in a glass vivarium"`

`*set pet_type "lizard"`

`*goto naming`

`*else`

`*goto naming`

`*label naming`

I guess I'll call you...

`*input_text petname`

`*if ("_{petname}" != "_{petname}")`

`*set petname "_{petname}"`

`*goto gendering`

`*label gendering`

```

...little...
*choice
    #...man."
        *set pet_gender "male"
        *set pet_pronoun_him_her "him"
        *set pet_pronoun_he_she "he"
        *set pet_pronoun_his_her "his"
        *set pet_pronoun_selves "himself"
        *if pet_type = "rabbit"
            *set petnoise "pounded ${pet_pronoun_his_her} hind
feet against the floorboards"
            *goto treasure
        *elseif pet_type = "fish"
            *set petnoise "jumped clear of the surface of the
water, splashing back down into ${pet_pronoun_his_her} tank"
            *goto treasure
        *elseif pet_type = "lizard"
            *set petnoise "dug furiously at the corner of
${pet_pronoun_his_her} vivarium"
            *goto treasure
        *else
            *goto treasure
    #...lady."
        *set pet_gender "female"
        *set pet_pronoun_him_her "her"
        *set pet_pronoun_he_she "she"
        *set pet_pronoun_his_her "her"
        *set pet_pronoun_selves "herself"
        *if pet_type = "rabbit"
            *set petnoise "pounded ${pet_pronoun_his_her} hind
feet against the floorboards"
            *goto treasure
        *elseif pet_type = "fish"
            *set petnoise "jumped clear of the surface of the
water, splashing back down into ${pet_pronoun_his_her} tank"
            *goto treasure
        *elseif pet_type = "lizard"
            *set petnoise "dug furiously at the corner of
${pet_pronoun_his_her} vivarium"
            *goto treasure
        *else
            *goto treasure

*label treasure
Alix took her new treasure into her apartment, leaving the box
outside in the hall.
*page_break Shower, Hair, Clothes
*goto breakfast

*label nothing

```

```

nothing.
*if positivity <20

    Another cruel trick from the universe.
    *set positivity -5
    *goto thanks
*else

    Whatever.
    *goto thanks

*label thanks

Thanks universe.
*page_break Thanks a lot
*goto breakfast

*label breakfast
After slurping the last mouthful of chocotreets from her spoon,
Alix drank the chocolatey milk from the bowl. Annie hated it when
she did that, hated chocotreets full stop, said they were for
grubby little kids. Now she had her own place, Alix's cupboard was
filled exclusively with children's cereal.

*if petname = ""
    *gosub attributecheck
    *goto attributerresult
*else
    She glanced at ${petname}. Her ${pet_type} was
    *if pet_type = "fish"
        subdued for now, contenting ${pet_pronoun_selves} with
sucking on gravel and spitting it noisily against the side of the
tank.
        *goto owner
    *elseif pet_type = "lizard"
        reclining languidly under ${pet_pronoun_his_her} heat
lamp, blinking slowly.
        *goto owner
    *else
        under the table, obsessing over a tiny patch of the rug
that clearly had an interesting smell or taste.
        *goto owner

*label owner
*if not (newpet)
    *goto owner2
*else
    Alix supposed she'd have to get used to that kind of thing.
    She was a ${pet_type} owner now.
    *goto owner2

```

```

*label owner2
*if not (newpet)
    *goto owner3
*else
    Turned out she was
    *if positivity >5
        right to wish for a pet.
        *goto owner3
    *else
        wrong to wish for a pet.
        *goto owner3

*label owner3
Having ${petname} around made her feel
*if positivity >5
    better. Someone else to worry about, a distraction from Annie
and Myboxx and... all that other stuff.
    *set positivity +5
    *gosub attributecheck
    *goto attributerresult
*else
    worse than ever. Another little life she couldn't shield from
the horrors of the world.
    *gosub attributecheck
    *goto attributerresult

*label attributecheck
*temp mainstat
*set mainstat "family"
*temp mainstatval
*set mainstatval family
*if career > mainstatval
    *set mainstat "career"
    *set mainstatval career
*if dreams > mainstatval
    *set mainstat "dreams"
    *set mainstatval dreams
*return

*label attributerresult

She wiped her mouth on her dressing gown.
*if mainstat = "dreams"
    *if rating <4
        Despite last night's rating horror show,
        *goto writingregardless
    *elseif rating >6
        Thanks to last night's rating,
        *goto writingregardless
    *else
        Mediocre as last night's rating was,
        *goto writingregardless
*elseif mainstat = "family"

```

```

Maybe it was that
*if rating >6
    good
    *goto writingfeeling
*elseif rating <3
    terrible
    *goto writingfeeling
*else
    mediocre
    *goto writingfeeling
*else
    Alix sat down at her desk.
    *if (video1)
        She'd got some great footage of ${petname} last night.
        It shouldn't take too much to edit it into something decent. She
        just needed to come up with a script for the voiceover to make it
        really awesome.
        *set videotype "pet"
        *goto getwriting
    *else
        She'd seen and done a lot over these past few days,
        surely there was something she could turn into a video idea?
        *choice
            *if (hospital1)
                #Perhaps she could get clearance to film
                something at DJ Memorial?
                    It might be hard to be funny around IV
                    drips and catheters, but maybe the nurses would appreciate the
                    chance for some levity.
                        *set videotype "hosp"
                        *set annie +5
                        *set family +5
                        *goto ideas
            *if (myboxx1)
                #Maybe she could go meta - do something
                about being a Boxxer?
                    The fans always loved to see
                    themselves reflected in her videos, she could get them to send in
                    their expo footage, get something collaborative going.
                        *set videotype "boxx"
                        *set career +10
                        *goto ideas
            *if (party1)
                #Perhaps she could draw inspiration from
                Maude's parties?
                    Her family were so mad and
                    embarrassing, her fans would surely get a kick out of that.
                        *set videotype "party"
                        *set family +10
                        *set career +5
                        *goto ideas

*label ideas

```

Okay, so she had a very basic premise. Now she needed to flesh it out, brainstorm, start working up a script.

\*page\_break Alix sat down at her desk.

\*goto getwriting

\*label writingfeeling

review score, but for some reason, Alix felt she should do something nice for Annie. Maybe buy her something? Annie was meticulous about her appearance, got frustrated that she couldn't primp and preen to her heart's content in the hospital. Alix couldn't do much about that, but maybe she could order some small accessory, something to help Annie feel more like her old self?

\*if not (hospital1)

And, if Alix was being completely honest with herself, something to assuage the guilt of not visiting.

She sat down at her desk. Their tastes were so different, and Annie was so particular about the things she liked. This was going to take time, effort, research.

\*set anniescarf true

\*page\_break Focus

\*goto getwriting

\*label writingregardless

Alix was itching to get back to her writing. But what to write? She sat down at her desk.

\*choice

#Maybe she should develop her early ideas further?

\*set shortstorytype "gamey"

\*set dreams +10

\*goto getwriting

#Probably best to start something completely new.

\*set shortstorytype "new"

\*set dreams +5

\*goto getwriting

\*label getwriting

\*hide\_reuse

Alix got up from her desk. Inspiration, that was what she needed. Good, old fashioned inspiration. She looked around her small apartment.

\*choice

#Perhaps there was something on TV?

\*set count +1

\*set alix +5

\*goto TV

#She could check her messages, see if inspiration struck naturally?

\*set count +1

\*set alix +5

\*goto messages

```
#Looking out of the window? An interesting passer-by might
spark something.
```

```
*set count +1
```

```
*set alix +5
```

```
*goto window
```

```
#She should gather supplies for her stash in the basement.
Being prepared was important.
```

```
*set count +1
```

```
*set alix +5
```

```
*set survivalkit true
```

```
*goto basement
```

```
*if ((pet_gender = "male") or (pet_gender = "female"))
```

```
#Playing with ${petname} could be just the thing.
```

```
*set count +1
```

```
*set alix +5
```

```
*set positivity +5
```

```
*goto play
```

```
*if count >2
```

```
#JUST GET ON WITH IT!
```

```
*goto notebook
```

```
*label TV
```

```
Alix twisted her stylus and the large black screen made a low-
pitched sound, a bright pinprick of colour appearing at its centre
and expanding outwards until the image filled the screen. The news
channel. It was hard to get away from infographics of the predicted
impact zone, trajectory projections. [i]Six thousand square miles...
nineteen major cities... seven months until...[/i]
```

```
*if positivity >15
```

```
The human interest stories, they were the ones that mattered.
They were the ones with the power to hurt and inspire. She flicked
through the channels until she found people being interviewed,
regular people, not scientists or politicians. A woman saying via
subtitles that borders had been closed to prevent any more refugees
leaving the impact zone. The neighbouring countries couldn't cope,
and couldn't say with any certainty that they'd be unaffected
anyway. She sat back down at her desk and made some quick notes
while her stomach twisted at the realisation that this woman could
be her, could be Billie, could be Annie, if not for a trick of time
and geography.
```

```
*page_break Sit down
```

```
*goto getwriting
```

```
*else
```

```
How could she be expected to come up with anything against
this background radiation of predicted death tolls and best case
scenarios and aftermath simulations? She knew what a collapsed
school looked like, had seen enough in the news reports about Dad,
she didn't need them blasted into her eyeballs every five minutes.
Did people really have so little imagination?
```

```
Alix turned off the screen and returned to her desk.
```

```

*page_break Sit down
*goto getwriting

*label messages
Alix pressed the message button on her tracker. Oju's soothing
simulated voice oozed out of the speaker.
*if positivity >20

    "You have one. New. Message. Left. Today. At. Ten AY-em:"That
brief hiss of static they never managed to eliminate, no matter how
hi-tech the recording device, and then:
    *if mainstat = "dreams"
        "Hey, it's Billie.
        *if (coffee)
            So, I'm getting ready to meet you at the coffee
shop and
                *goto billieread
        *elseif billie > 5
            *set coffee true
            *goto coffee_preamble
        *else
            *goto billieread
    *elseif mainstat = "career"
        One long scream that made the speakers ripple, followed
by hysterical laughter.

        "That was Dietmar screaming, I just want to make that
clear," Elizabeth's voice was mock serious. "Can you believe we're
going up against each other at the MBVAs? Jodie's getting pissy
because she wasn't nominated this year, but personally, I think
it's greedy of her wanting to win again." There was more giggling
in the background, and sounds of a tussle, which Elizabeth
evidently won, because she came back on the line, louder and more
breathless than before. "Dietmar's going to wipe the floor with us
anyway, but we'll be downing all the free champagne so we won't
give a shit, will we chick?!" All three cheered until it seemed
they'd bust their tracker mic and the recording abruptly fell
silent.

        *set career +5
        *goto endcall2
    *else
        *if relative = ""
            *set relative "Aunt Maude"
            *set relative_gender_him_her "her"
            *set relative_gender_he_she "she"
            *set relative_gender_his_hers "her"
            *goto rellycall
        *else
            *goto rellycall
*else

"You have no. New. Messages."

```

Alix stared at her tracker, wondering how that was possible. She knew people, she had friends, family. In this modern switched on age, everyone messaged everyone on their trackers more than they spoke face to face.

"Everyone except me," Alix told

```
*if petname = ""
```

```
    the empty apartment.
```

```
    *goto endcall3
```

```
*else
```

```
    ${petname}. ${petname} stared at Alix and ${petnoise}.
```

```
    "You would say that," said Alix.
```

```
    *goto nothelpful
```

```
*label rellycall
```

"Is this even recording? I hate these things. The microphone's so small, I don't know how you can possibly hear anything I say into it." \${relative}'s mouth was so close to the mic, Alix had to really concentrate to make out what \${relative\_gender\_he\_she} was saying. There was a breathy burr on every voiceless sound.

"We're taking a break from the family parties for a while. My carpet's had enough hummus trodden into it for the time being." \${relative\_gender\_he\_she} laughed, but it was forced. "Maybe you could come around and just... look at some photos with your old \${relative}?"

```
*if (auntmaudeadvice)
```

```
    Share some memories of Jim and Annie before... before? I hope you went to see your mother, and took my advice. I know she can be difficult, but..."
```

```
    *goto rellyend
```

```
*else
```

```
    "
```

```
    *goto rellyend
```

```
*label rellyend
```

There was a long pause, but \${relative\_gender\_he\_she} didn't say anything further and eventually the line went dead.

```
*goto endcall3
```

```
*label coffee_preamble
```

I'm heading to the coffee shop soon. You can meet me there if you want...

```
*goto billieread
```

```
*label billieread
```

```
*set billiecall true
```

I just read your latest short story, and... Alix, it's really good. Really, really good. And I just wanted to tell you that, regardless of... of anything else.

```
*if billie >15
```

```
    Call me when you get a minute, ok?
```

```
*goto endcall1
*else
    *goto endcall1

*label endcall1
That's all."
*if not (billie_present)
```

Alix felt a little guilty that she hadn't made an effort to catch up with Billie yet. She'd come a long way, and at a time when not many people were travelling.

```
    *if (coffee)
        Alix was glad they'd be getting together soon.
    *if not (coffee)
        Alix vowed to make time to see her soon.
    *page_break Back to the desk
    *set dreams +5
    *goto nothelpful
*else
    *set dreams +5
    *goto endcall2
```

```
*label endcall2
```

Alix smiled. That was nice to hear. No use to her present situation, but nice.

```
*set positivity +5
*page_break Back to the desk
*goto nothelpful
```

```
*label endcall3
Alix sighed. How depressing.
*set positivity -5
*goto nothelpful
```

```
*label nothelpful
```

Okay, so maybe... Alix picked up her stylus, traced the beginnings of words that wouldn't come. Nope. Nothing. So much for that idea as a source of inspiration.

```
*page_break Sit down.
*goto getwriting
```

```
*label window
```

It was a flat, really. The estate agent called it an apartment to give it greater cache and the term had stuck, even though Alix knew it to be a lie. The 'compact and bijou' part was almost true.

She pulled back the curtains.

```
*if positivity >20
    A grey drizzle was falling, making the sky look almost normal. The alpine shrubs in the decorative troughs across the street were no doubt grateful of the rare drink.
```

```

    *goto cyclist
*else
    It was dry and humid but windy. The wind only intensified the
    dryness, whipping up clouds of dusty debris from the gutters. Even
    the scrubby alpine shrubs the council had planted in decorative
    troughs were wilting.
    *goto cyclist

*label cyclist

A man on a bike wobbled down the street, his collar pulled up
against the weather.
*if career >15
    As he neared, he caught sight of Alix, and stared up at her
    as she stared down. Maybe he recognised her from one of her videos,
    maybe he was just a perve, maybe he was another lost soul starved
    of human contact, whatever the case,
    *goto cyclistfail
*else
    She wondered where he was going. Most major industries were
    limiting their production now, running with skeleton crews, biding
    their time until things were more certain. A lot of people had been
    laid off, but maybe he was one of the lucky ones, something deemed
    high priority like food or education or government. Whichever it
    was made no difference to his cycling ability -
    *goto cyclistfail

*label cyclistfail
he lost concentration, his handlebars veered away from him, and his
front tyre connected with one of the heavy concrete troughs,
pitching him off the saddle and into the street. Alix let out a
loud laugh, then clapped her hand over her mouth and dropped to her
knees in case he heard or saw her.

Peeping over the windowsill, she saw him get to his feet, brushing
off his knees and looking around, pride more hurt than he was.

Not necessarily inspirational, but she was glad she'd seen it. Once
he was safely off down the street, she straightened and returned to
her desk.
*set positivity +5
*page_break Sit down
*goto getwriting

*label play
${petname} seemed surprised by the attention, (as far as a
${pet_type} could look surprised, at least) and that made Alix feel
bad.
*if not (newpet)
    She supposed that between keeping her relatives happy, and
    her fans happy and herself
    *if positivity >25
        happy,

```

```

        *goto playcont
    *elseif positivity <5
        going,
        *goto playcont
    *else
        adequate,
        *goto playcont
*else
    Who knew what kind of life ${pet_pronoun_he_she}'d had up til
now? ${pet_pronoun_he_she} could have ended up anywhere. Lucky
    ${pet_pronoun_his_her} loser former owner dumped
    ${pet_pronoun_him_her} outside Alix's apartment.
    *goto laser

*label playcont
there hadn't been a whole lot of time for ${petname}.
*goto laser

*label laser

Alix used the laser pointer feature on her stylus to keep
${petname} entertained. She shone it on the wall behind ${petname}
and
watched as the silly ${pet_type}
*if (((pet_type = "cat") or (pet_type = "dog")) or ((pet_type =
"rabbit") or (pet_type = "lizard")))
    *set petmovement "chased"
    *set petmouth "mouth"
    *goto chase
*elseif pet_type = "bird"
    *set petmovement "fluttered"
    *set petmouth "beak"
    *goto chase
*elseif pet_type = "fish"
    *set petmovement "swam"
    *set petmouth "mouth"
    *goto chase

*label chase
${petmovement} after it, back and forth, trying to get it in
${pet_pronoun_his_her} ${petmouth} but never quite managing.
*if not (newpet)

    ${petname} had been a surprise gift from Annie, of all
people. Alix picked ${pet_pronoun_his_her} name of course, but
Annie picked ${pet_pronoun_him_her}.
    *goto anniegift
*else

    The tracker was a gift from Annie, a heavy hint to be better
at staying in touch.
    *goto anniegift

```

\*label anniegift

She wasn't sick back then, still spent hours teasing her hair into the desired style. It was one of Annie's many gripes that she wasn't permitted her hair sprays, clays or waxes in the hospital. Nothing flammable, just in case. Anyway, it was when Alix hadn't long moved in to the apartment, was just getting settled, still finding a place for every knickknack and doodad, and there was a knock at the door.

Alix had expected

```
*if relative = ""
    *set relative "Elizabeth"
    *goto anniegiftcont
*else
    *goto anniegiftcont
```

\*label anniegiftcont

`\${relative}` with the customary house-warming pot plant, but there was Annie, totally out of place in the drab hallway, like a glorious parakeet in a concrete multi-storey carpark. She'd touched her hair, and if it had been anyone other than Annie, Alix would have said she seemed nervous.

Annie didn't get nervous. Alix supposed Annie had probably just been preoccupied by the smell of damp in the corridor.

They'd exchanged pleasantries like strangers, and then Annie had handed over the cardboard box. She'd looked around the apartment, never meeting Alix's eye as she said: "I don't really know why I picked it up. I felt like it was something Jim would've bought you." And then she'd strode over to Alix's desk, picked up her paperweight and sneered: "Oh, who even uses these anymore!"

\*page\_break Typical Annie.

`\${petname}` suddenly gave up on the laser and made a playful lunge for Alix's fingers

```
*if pet_type = "fish"
    as they trailed too close to the water,
    *goto snatch
*elseif pet_type = "lizard"
    leaping half out of the vivarium and
    *goto snatch
*else
    *goto snatch
```

\*label snatch

nearly snatching them into `\${pet\_pronoun\_his\_her}` `\${petmouth}`. Alix laughed despite the interruption to her reverie.

"All right, buddy, you win!" She fed `\${petname}` a handful of `\${pettreat}`s as a reward, and returned to her desk.

```
*if relative = "Elizabeth"
```

```
*set relative ""
*page_break Sit down
*goto getwriting
*else
*page_break Sit down
*goto getwriting
```

```
*label notebook
```

Okay, enough stalling. It was time to get down to the task at hand. Alix dug her notebook out of the bottom drawer of her desk. The cover and leaves were real paper, handmade. It was her dad's, given to him as a gift, presented by the police commissioner for services above and beyond the call of duty. Alix had sneaked it out of his office after he died, right before Annie went crazy and smashed everything and

```
*if relative = ""
```

```
*set relative "Aunt Maude"
*set relative_gender_him_her "her"
*set relative_gender_he_she "she"
*set relative_gender_his_hers "her"
*goto anniefit
```

```
*else
```

```
*goto anniefit
```

```
*label anniefit
```

{relative} had to come round and prise the neck of the whisky bottle from her clenched bleeding fingers.

The front contained his own handwritten notes, small, closely written lines, like he was aware of the preciousness of writing with a real pen on real paper, and none of the rough cream surface should be wasted. Alix wished she'd found the pen, so she could hold something else he'd held. She thought often about reading his words, his thoughts committed to the page, but so far she'd resisted. What if he was unhappy? What if he hated her and Annie? What if the things he'd seen and done, been forced to see and do, had made him into someone Alix wouldn't like or recognise?

She only used the book for important projects, for things and ideas that really mattered. Everything else went in the tracker as an airnote. She was hesitant about using the notebook now. Did this count? Was this special enough?

```
*choice
```

```
#Yes.
```

```
*set alix +5
*set positivity +10
*goto outcome
```

```
#No.
```

```
*set alix -5
*set positivity -10
*goto outcome
```

```
*label outcome
```

It had to be. If it wasn't special already, it would become special, she would make it special by putting it in the book.

It was strange. To create an airnote, you waved your stylus around, literally writing in air like a wizard, and then Oju (who was basically a disembodied spirit living in your tracker) turned it into a file. And yet that whole process seemed so mundane. Pen on paper was different. Mystical. Real magic. Outlining her plans in the book would be like formulating an incantation, actually

```
*if (anniescarf)
    buying the scarf
    *goto spell
*elseif ((shortstorytype = "gamey") or (shortstorytype = "new"))
    writing the story
    *goto spell
*else
    finishing the video
    *goto spell
```

```
*label spell
would be casting the spell.
*page_break So cast it.
*goto billiecheck
```

```
*label billiecheck
*if (coffee)
    *goto coffeetime
*else
    *finish
```

```
*label coffeetime
*set billie_present true
Alix raced into the coffee shop, weaving through the closely
grouped tables. She'd ended up so caught up in her new project
again, she'd lost track of time. Her bag rattled a tray of drained
cups settled between a young couple obviously in for the long haul.
*if positivity >25
```

"So sorry!" Alix called over her shoulder, and they smiled and made accepting noises.

```
*goto famecheck
*else
```

Alix plunged onward muttering apologies, but could feel their angry eyes burning into her back. Good job they didn't have incendiary vision.

```
*goto famecheck
```

```
*label famecheck
*if career >15
    *set alixfame true
```

"Don't we know her from somewhere?" the guy asked the girl, hunching low over the table as if that somehow made his voice carry less.

Billie was in the corner, occupying a huge brown leather armchair, reading the penultimate book in that epic fantasy series. It'd always seemed unlikely that series would ever get finished, now it was surely impossible. There was a small stool opposite for Alix.

As Alix tried to manoeuvre herself onto the stool without knocking any more crockery or dragging furniture to the floor with her bag,  
\*if billie >10

Billie dropped her book on the table and stood, folding Alix into a tight hug. Alix did her best to hug back, but it didn't come naturally. Blame Annie for that.

\*if (billiecall)

"Thanks for what you said about my story," Alix said, apparently hellbent on making an awkward moment awkwarder.

"Oh, hey," Billie grinned. "I meant it! That was really great! You got any more I can read?"

Alix shrugged and mumbled and deepened in colour.

\*set positivity +5

\*set dreams +5

\*goto latte

\*else

\*goto latte

\*else

Billie said: "How's it going?" and carefully placed a bookmark between the pages of her book.

\*goto latte

\*label latte

"Got you a caramel latte," Billie pushed it towards her. "Hope that's ok. Although after yesterday, an espresso might be more appropriate!"

\*if (billie\_waiting)

"I know. I'm so sorry about the hospital, my mother can be really difficult sometimes..." Alix trailed off, unsure whether to expand on that most awkward of subjects.

\*goto partycheck

\*else

\*goto partycheck

\*label partycheck

\*if (party1)

"The family party, too... I mean, I know you would have come with me, but, they're so boring and everyone is so... y'know?"

\*goto sympathy

\*else

\*goto sympathy

\*label sympathy

Alix realised her mumbled excuses probably sounded pretty weak. Sure, Billie was nodding sympathetically now, but...

\*if (billie\_drinks)

"And the dive bar." Alix forged on. "That's why I'm late actually. My head's still banging and I took longer getting ready than intended."

"Same!" Billie laughed, but she looked as if she'd done nothing but drink spring water and sleep soundly last night. "What was that last place called again?"

"Puzzles," said Alix, sipping at her latte.

The caramel syrup made the coffee sweeter than Alix would've liked, but Billie's own drink was a double hot chocolate with all the trimmings, so maybe this was as close to low sugar as she got. Billie picked up a teaspoon and ate the melting marshmallows, cream and sprinkles off the top like it was a dessert.

The silence stretched between them until Alix felt compelled to fill it.

\*choice

#"I don't know if you know about Annie...?"

\*set billie +10

\*set family +10

\*set annie +5

Billie's eyes widened.

"I mean... I know she's Annie Akerman. How could I not? And..." Billie looked down at her hands, rubbing the neck of the teaspoon like she was trying to bend it. "I saw some of the tabloid stuff. But I know they make all that up. They like to have someone to blame."

Alix sighed. Of course. There was no way Billie couldn't have heard of Annie's exploits and the ensuing backlash, even from cold, distant Iseyja.

"But who cares about any of that anyway?" Billie continued. "What about now? Is she going to be okay?"

Alix shook her head. "Who can say? The so-called specialists certainly don't. The government won't release full details of what was in the serum, so they're trying to figure it out from her bloodwork, but--"

"Whoah," said Billie. "I figured all the scare stories about the serum were just that."

Alix had come home from college to find Annie on her back on the kitchen floor, blood pooling at the corners of her eyes, trickling from her ears to the slate tiles, running out of her mouth and down her chin to add another colour to the beaded necklace at her throat.

"No," Alix admitted. "That part was true. We were supposed to be getting another payout but..."

"They're trying to use the meteor as an excuse not to bother?"

Alix nodded.

This was getting her down. A change of topic was in order.

\*choice

#"How's the meteor being reported in Iseyja?"

\*set billie +10

\*set career +5

\*goto iceland

\*if (billie\_drinks)

#"So, that guy in the club..."

\*set billie +15

\*goto puzzles

#"Any plans for today?"

\*set billie +5

"Well, here's a pretty radical idea..." said Billie, wadding up her napkin and stuffing it into her now empty cup. "But since I came here to visit you, I was thinking maybe we could hang out? What d'you say?"

\*choice

#"Of course, that'd be great!"

\*set billie +15

\*set billie\_mood "happy"

\*goto plans

#"Actually, I'm kinda busy..."

\*set billie -20

\*goto billiefallout

#"Do you have family back in Iseyja?"

\*set family +5

Billie shook her head. "All worked in Lifun."

Alix's stomach clenched.

"Oh, Billie, I'm so sorry."

Billie stirred her hot chocolate, almost losing the teaspoon, and shrugged. "Your Dad-"

\*if not (rock)

\*if family >15

"It wasn't his fault!" Alix snapped.

Billie's teaspoon clattered onto her saucer.  
The couple at the next table looked round.

"Sorry, I'm just-" Alix let the words trail away. She couldn't explain her outburst without picking at old scabs, and she already felt delicate and scarred.

```
*set billie -5
*set positivity -5
*page_break Behind them, the espresso
machine roared.
```

```
*if billie <15
    *set billie_mood "angry"
    *goto plans
*else
    *goto plans
*else
```

Alix's expression was enough to stop Billie in her tracks. After a moment's awkward silence, she took the hint and changed the subject.

```
*goto plans
*else
    Alix could only nod. This conversation was just
getting worse.
```

Billie seemed to sense her discomfort and changed the subject.

```
*goto plans
#"Weren't you scared to fly over with... everything that's
happening?"
```

```
*set billie +5
*set positivity -5
*goto iceland
*if (rock)
    #"Thanks for the rock."
    *set billie +15
    *set positivity +10
    *set dreams +5
    *goto rock
```

```
*if (billie_drinks)
    #"Remember that guy in the club?"
    *set billie +15
    *set positivity +5
    *goto puzzles
```

```
*label iceland
```

"It's not so bad. Iseyja is treating it like the volcano was preparation, making this something everyone can understand, something we've survived before." She sucked her top lip thoughtfully. "Except we didn't all survive before. Maybe they're in denial, I don't know.

```
*if positivity >20
```

They're already talking about how we'll rebuild after the dust settles."

```
*goto impact
*else
"
```

```
*goto impact

*label impact
*if positivity >20
```

```
"Well, Iseyja is pretty well outside the impact zone."
*goto zone
*else
*goto zone
```

```
*label zone
```

Alix pictured the wobbly red shape they always showed on the news updates, its indistinct edges being redrawn on a daily basis as the GSA recalculated. Always growing, never shrinking, an angry amoeba threatening to eat the world.

```
*if billie >20
```

```
"You know..." Billie dabbed her lips with a paper napkin.
"You could always come and stay with me. It's beautiful and
probably safer than here."
```

```
*goto sadalix
*else
*goto sadalix
```

```
*label sadalix
```

Alix smiled sadly.

```
*choice
#"Mum's ward is like a fortress..."
*set family +10
*set annie +10
*goto illbethere
#"If flights are still running..."
*set billie +10
*set dreams +10
*goto illbethere
#"This is my home..."
*set billie -5
*set career +10
*set positivity +5
*goto illbethere
```

```
*label puzzles
```

The club was a retro-themed dive bar. No specific era, just generic 'retro', a mishmash of music, decor and drinks that had been popular once. A pool table, some neon wall art in the shape of flamingos, egg chairs, a Bakelite phone. Billie and Alix had been

playing pool for about half an hour when the guy came over. He was drunk, but sober enough to

```
*if (alixfame)
    recognise Alix as "That girl from the net!"
    *goto sonnets
*else
    attempt to charm them into accepting a drink or two.
    *goto sonnets

*label sonnets
```

When his half-remembered romantic sonnets prompted fits of giggles rather than acquiescence to his request for a shoulder massage, he changed tack, insisting he'd leave them alone if only one would allow him to kiss their hand.

```
*if billie >30
    Billie took that hit.
    *goto nipper
*else
    Alix took that hit.
    *goto nipper
```

```
*label nipper
```

It was only when her hand was close to his lips that he bared his teeth and nipped at the skin.

"We should've broken a pool cue over the freak's head!" she said, rubbing the back of her hand at the memory. Thankfully he hadn't broken the skin.

They laughed again. It felt good to laugh. Rare.

```
*if billie >25
    *set billie_mood "happy"
    *goto plans
*else
    *goto plans
```

```
*label plans
```

```
*if ((billie_mood = "happy") or (billie_mood = "" ))
```

"So, I was thinking during my stay we should go to that comic shop you're always raving about? And I read about that clock, the one with the fountains and the little brass people that dance around it on the hour? I know it's probably old news to you, but I'd love to see it, and maybe we could go back to your place at some point and I could get to see where all the videos are made, and- am I babbling? I'm babbling aren't I?"

Alix laughed, glad of this glimpse into Billie's stream of consciousness. "Yes, but it's fine."

```
Sounded like it would be a good day.
*set positivity +15
```

```

        *finish And it was.
*else

        Alix moved the empty cups onto the tray and reached for her
bag.

        "It's been so amazing catching up with you," she said,
pushing back her chair.
        *if billie >10

                As they were exchanging a parting hug
                *goto famecheck2
*else

                As Alix made to leave,
                *goto famecheck2

*label famecheck2
*if (alixfame)
        the young couple, evidently biding their time or building
their confidence, leapt between Alix and the door.

        "Could we get a selfie?" asked the girl, holding her stylus
under Alix's nose like it was a microphone. Perhaps she [i]was[/i]
recording.

        "We've watched all your videos," said the guy. "You replied
to one of my comments once! I'm ShyGuy999!"

        Alix posed, wondering how the image would turn out, whether
Billie would be visible in the background.
        *goto billiechair
*else
        a large group of teenagers jostled inside, swarming around
Alix, loudly discussing what they might order. A boy with a feather
earring trod on her toe and
        *if positivity >20
                apologised profusely.
                *goto disoriented
        *else
                didn't even notice.
                *goto disoriented

*label disoriented
Eventually they cleared, leaving Alix feeling lost and disoriented,
like she no longer knew which way the door was.
*goto billiechair

*label billiechair

She looked over at Billie's chair.
*if billie >10
        Billie gave a small wave.

```

```

        *goto leave
*else
    Billie had gone.
    *goto leave

*label leave

Alix left the cafe, trying hard not to feel like she'd messed up
somehow.
*finish Had she?

*label illbethere
.... I guess that's where I'll be when it... happens."
*if billie >20

    Billie gave her arm a reassuring pat.
    *goto cringe
*else
    *goto afterwards

*label cringe
*if positivity <15
    Alix cringed away. She just couldn't help herself.
    *goto afterwards
*else
    *goto afterwards

*label afterwards
*if positivity >10
    Somehow, just making plans for afterwards felt good. An
    acknowledgement that there would be an afterwards.
    *if (party1)
        Maybe that was what was so annoying about ${relative}'s
        parties - they were a goodbye, an acceptance of fate.
        *goto plans
    *else
        *goto plans
*else
    *goto plans

*label billiefallout
*set billie_mood "angry"
*if billie <10
    Billie's cheeks flushed, her eyes blazed.

    "I guess this is goodbye, then," she snapped, gathering her
    things in quick, angry movements. Her voice was loud. People were
    staring.
    *goto plans
*else

    "Maybe I can get an early flight back to Iseyja," Billie
    said, her voice barely audible.

```

```

    *set billie_present false
    *goto plans

*label rock
*if billie <10
    Billie shrugged. Alix sensed she regretted sending it now.
    *goto rock2
*else
    *goto rock2

*label rock2
"Just a little something I picked out of the rubble."

Alix flinched. "I'm so sorry," she said quickly. "I never even
thought to ask. Your family-"

Billie submerged her last few marshmallows and cut Alix off
quickly.
*goto iceland

*label basement

Alix retrieved an assortment of tins from her cupboards, some
bottles of water, a blanket and a small bag of toiletries.
*if petname = ""
    *goto adult
*else
    She even remembered some ${pettreat}s for ${petname}.
    *goto adult

*label adult
*set positivity +5
She was killing it! Some seriously good adulting. No first aid kit
yet, but there was still plenty of time for that, and the landlord
had to provide one by law anyway.

She took everything down to the lockers in the basement, binned the
flask of foul-smelling something she'd left in there last time
she'd gone on a responsibility kick, and sprayed a squirt of air
freshener around to cover her tracks. Job done, she strolled back
upstairs to her apartment and sat down at her desk once more. Time
to get started.
*page_break No excuses
*goto getwriting

```

## rating2

[i>Welcome to wiff.net, the Writers' Independent Fiction Forum.[/i]\*line\_break

[i>The following extract was submitted by [/i>[b]Lixxil[/b][i]. We thank you for taking the time to read it.[/i]

\*if shortstorytype = "new"

    \*goto newstory

\*else

    \*goto gameystory

\*label newstory

She looked up at the sky. It had never looked so flat, so nothing. It almost made her miss the green. Ash drifted down from the sky, slowly, lazily, like feathers on the breeze, or petals. She once drank a cocktail with petals floating in it, back when she thought the world was ending. Now she realised

\*if positivity >20

    it wasn't ending but changing. A stark change, frightening even, but life would go on.

    \*goto ash

\*else

    it had ended long ago, before the protests and the car bomb, before the sickness and the meteor, it had ended when a man made a mistake, a fatal mistake that turned a school to rubble, left its playground a smoking crater.

    \*goto ash

\*label ash

The ash reached her, coating her skin, her hair, her clothes. She'd expected it to be hot, to scald as it landed, but it felt almost weightless, like a butterfly alighting on her outstretched fingertips. She tried to catch as much of the ash as she could as if

\*if positivity >20

    it was falling snow, and she was a child again, spinning around and around catching snowflakes in her hands and on her reaching tongue. The ash tasted unpleasant, like sand mixed with blood, but she paid it little mind because for now she had survived.

    \*goto shelter

\*else

    it would be currency in this new, failed world. What else was there? The meek had inherited the earth and the earth was a crumbling, dust-filled shit hole.

    \*goto shelter

\*label shelter

She supposed she should find shelter, because as harmless as this stuff seemed, who knew what it was doing to her as she breathed it

in? She imagined her lungs filling with sand like a newly tipped hourglass. No. Better to find shelter and just wait for this to be over.

\*goto rate

\*label gameystory

\*if positivity >20

It is said that "beauty is in the gaze of the beholder". I have no need of beauty, for my lineage has made me unwearying, a navigator, I fight from the front - all power, terror, revenge - attributes which are not beautiful, according to rule; but they were more useful to me: father imagined His daughter needed rescuing - as if one so motherless could not survive being fatherless too.

He has sent his servant after me, a slave, a pet He has transformed to suit the purpose. I too have much changed since He saw me last, then a girl, bright-eyed, now, a goddess, owl-eyed, fierce. Yet when I compared me with mine enemies, I had no fear in them: I could imagine that most observers would suppose me weak, girlish, virginal; while they would pronounce them monstrous, powerful, terrifying. I saw them rise, attack - it was nothing: the hair torn from my scalp had as much weight in it as their claws; the remains of my robe as much significance as their flailing limbs. I saw myself change - my hands grew bloody and hard, my body bruised yet stronger than ever before, a scream of fury danced from my mouth as easy as breathing. Something in my brain and heart, in my blood and nerves had done this to me and I knew I would never be human again.

\*goto rate

\*else

It is said that "beauty is in the gaze of the beholder". I pray that that is true, for the shifting features my master has given me, the wolf-like visage, the scales of the dragon, the golden eyes of the tiger, the massive jaw of the bear - all power, terror, revenge - are not beautiful, according to rule; but they were more useful to me: His daughter had no hope of rescue with me lying cold and dead in the ground - yet how could she look upon me now?

I was much changed since she had seen me last, then a soldier, a person, now, I know not what. A servant to my god, a slave to my own base impulses, awakened in me by the transformation He wrought. Yet when I compared me with mine enemies, I had no fear in them: I could imagine that most observers would call them monstrous, grotesque, abominations; while they would pronounce me in those same terms at once animalistic and relentless. I saw them rise, attack - it was nothing: the soil of my grave had as much weight in it as their bite; the remains of my armour as much significance as their flailing limbs. I saw myself change - my hands grew long and clawed, my wings burst from my back and spread,

lightning danced from my mouth as easy as breathing. Something in my brain and heart, in my blood and nerves had done this to me and I did not know if I could ever be human again.       \*goto rate

\*label rate

[i]Thank you for reading. Please now rate the piece on a scale of 1-10. (With 1 representing 'What the hell is this crap?!' [/i] [i]up to 10[/i] [i]'The finest creative work since time immemorial.')[/i]

\*input\_number rating2 1 10

\*finish Submit

ch3

```
*comment *image Ch3_Sat.png*gosub_scene csideimg_ch3_sat
*temp jodietoilet ""
*temp topic ""
*temp winner ""
*temp wish ""
*temp walk false
*temp pethome ""
*temp petmove ""
*temp petlocation ""
*temp petliner ""
*temp petnoise ""
*temp daytriploc ""
*temp storm false
*temp lights false
*temp photopacket ""
*temp boredom false
*temp mess false
```

```
*gosub attributecheck
*goto attributerresult
```

```
*label attributecheck
*temp mainstat
*set mainstat "career"
*temp mainstatval
*set mainstatval career
*if dreams > mainstatval
    *set mainstat "dreams"
    *set mainstatval dreams
*if family > mainstatval
    *set mainstat "family"
    *set mainstatval family
*return
```

```
*label attributerresult
*if mainstat = "career"
    *goto awards
*elseif mainstat = "dreams"
    *goto daytrip
*else
    *goto visit
```

```
*label awards
```

```
*set awards true
```

The champagne fizzed to the top of the glass. Alix motioned for Elizabeth to stop, but she shook her head. "It's rare to get anything for free in this life. You grab it with both hands girl, especially if it's in alcohol-form." That wasn't strictly true. Her friends got free things all the time. Elizabeth had companies falling over themselves to give her free pots and pans and kitchen utensils. Jodie received boxes of clothes and make-up daily. Dietmar hadn't had to pay for a videogame for three years.

\*if not (myboxx1)

Making content for MyBoxx was weird like that. Companies only wanted to give you free stuff once you'd reached a point where you could easily afford it yourself.

Maybe if Alix had a clearer brand, she'd get free stuff too, although what exactly she couldn't imagine.

\*if (myboxx1)

Hard hats and hi-vis jackets if her fans' cosplaying efforts were anything to go by.

"Good year," said Dietmar, nodding towards the date printed on the foil label. Alix couldn't tell if he was joking. It was recent, the champagne. Maybe the event organisers were trying to save money, maybe you just couldn't get vintage any more.

\*if positivity <25

Why put something away for a rainy day when more days, rainy or otherwise, weren't guaranteed?

\*goto noncommittal

\*else

Many of the distilleries had been repurposed, some voluntarily.

\*goto noncommittal

\*label noncommittal

She gave a non-committal smile and reached for her glass.

"Wait!" Jodie's eyes were glassy and reddened, and she kept fiddling with the underwiring beneath her bodycon dress. "We should have a toast!" She held her glass aloft but didn't say anything further.

\*if (billie\_present)

Alix wondered what Billie was making of all this. She'd rolled up the sleeves of her tux and was chomping on a breadstick like she went to award ceremonies all the time.

\*if ((coffee) and ((billie\_mood = "angry") or (billie <15)))

She hadn't spoken to Alix much since the coffee shop, so Alix was fretting over the state of their friendship. She had agreed to come here, at least..

Dietmar and Liz exchanged a glance, clearly waiting on Alix to come up with something.

\*choice

#"To friendship!"

\*set positivity +10

\*set career +5

\*goto clink

#"To better times!"

\*set positivity -5

\*set career +5

\*set annie +5

\*set family +5

```

        *goto clink
#"To the meteorite!"
        *set positivity -10
        *set career -5
        *goto awks
*if (billie_present)
        #"To evil!"
            *set positivity +5
            *set billie +5
            *set dreams +5
            *goto clink
*if positivity <25
        #Let Jodie come up with a toast. She was the one who
brought it up.
            *set positivity -5
            *set career -5
            *set billie -5
            *goto awks

```

```

*label clink
*if (billie_present)
    Billie,
    *goto restclink
*else
    *goto restclink

```

```

*label restclink

```

Dietmar and Liz grinned and echoed Alix's words at the top of their voices. As their glasses clinked together, Jodie's head lolled to her chest, and she said something that may have been "GnnnfgH!" Maybe her next make-up tutorial should be on how to hide the tell-tale signs of a hangover.

Alix sat back and looked around the room. She hadn't been around for the first MyBoxx awards, of course, but Dietmar had told her it was a single bottle of fizzy wine sipped from plastic cups in a dingy basement at Myboxx HQ.

Today they'd packed out the Oppidan Central Theatre. The building was old, creaking, plaster peeling and the Royal Box was in such an advanced state of disrepair it had been cordoned off with red and white tape.

```

*if positivity <25
    (Although who needed a Royal Box now, right?)

```

But as public buildings went, it was still very grand, and Alix spent quite some time imagining her father receiving his medals on the stage, even though he got them in the Grand Hall in Shuto City. Alix had only seen it in videos, but the Hall was a monument to modern technology, all glass and neon, not some faded memory like the Central. She stared up at the ornate plasterwork of the light fittings. Each was grand in its own way, she supposed.

```
*if (((billie_present) and (billie_mood = "")) or (billie_mood = "happy"))
```

```
    "It's a fairytale building, isn't it?" asked Billie, following Alix's gaze to the crystal chandeliers.
```

```
*goto ssh
```

```
*label ssh
```

```
"Sssh, sssh!" Dietmar yelled,
```

```
*if not (billie_present)
```

```
    even though no-one at the table was talking.
```

```
    *goto starting
```

```
*elseif (billie_mood = "angry")
```

```
    even though no-one at the table was talking.
```

```
    *goto starting
```

```
*else
```

```
    *goto starting
```

```
*label starting
```

```
"It's starting!"
```

Chad Chen took the stage, looking like a granite block, grey suit pulled tight across his square frame.

"Is everyone excited for the awards?" he asked brightly.

All around Alix, MyBoxxers old and new whooped and cheered.

```
*choice
```

```
    #She cheered right along with them.
```

```
        *set positivity +5
```

```
        *goto ceremony
```

```
    #Alix kept quiet, but inside she was yelling louder than Dietmar.
```

```
        *set positivity +5
```

```
        *goto ceremony
```

```
*if positivity <25
```

```
    #She'd seen it all before, and it wasn't like she was going to win anyway.
```

```
        *set positivity -5
```

```
        *set alix -5
```

```
        *set boredom true
```

```
        *goto awardsend
```

```
*label awks
```

They sat in awkward silence, the sounds of drinking and laughter swirling around them. Just as Alix was on the verge of saying something, anything to break the strange, terrible mood that had descended, Jodie leapt to her feet and cried: "To me, to the Boxxies, to everything!" Champagne sloshed from her raised glass onto her bare shoulder, but she didn't seem to notice.

There was a note of hysteria in her voice, and Elizabeth and Dietmar echoed her words, but their eyes were sad as they clinked glasses.

```
*if (billie_present)
```

```
    Billie joined the toast enthusiastically, the same way she seemed to approach everything.
```

```
        *goto nomination
```

```
*else
```

```
    *goto nomination
```

```
*label nomination
```

Alix wondered whether the lack of a nomination had hit Jodie harder than they'd thought, or if it was just the culmination of everything else piling up on her.

```
*choice
```

```
    #Taking Jodie to the ladies was probably the kindest thing Alix could do right now.
```

```
        *set positivity +5
```

```
        *goto ladies1
```

```
    #Being around her friends seemed like the best place for her.
```

```
        *set positivity +5
```

```
        *set career +5
```

```
        *goto ssh
```

```
*label ceremony
```

The first few awards went as expected. Dietmar took Best Channel, Most Subscribers and Most Views. Alix had always found the artificial separation of those last two weird. Was it even possible to have one without the other? At his first speech Dietmar looked bashful, his freshly shaved face transforming him back into the young Boxxer Alix had known only as a viewer. Shy, yet red-cheeked from screaming at the villain of that jumpscare game that was all the rage for about two months. An eternity in MyBoxx years.

By the second and third, he was drunker, louder, more Dookie than Dietmar. He returned to the table and made a tower from the gold cubes of his awards. Elizabeth asked a passing waiter to take away the empty champagne bottles in an effort to avoid breakages.

```
*if (billie_present)
```

```
    "Even better if we could get them switched for some full ones," said Billie, batting her eyelashes.
```

```
    "I like this one, Alix," Elizabeth said, twisting her napkin into a swan to decorate the grounds of Dietmar's awards castle.
```

```
    Billie redirected her eyelash batting towards Elizabeth and Alix, and they both laughed.
```

```
        *if (billie_mood = "angry")
```

```
            Beneath the laughter, Alix felt even guiltier about the way she'd handled things earlier.
```

Jodie, who had been staring into her open clutch for several minutes, abruptly pushed back her chair and tottered away, weaving through the tables, evidently on her way to the ladies.

```
*set jodietoilet "alone"
```

```
*choice
```

```
    #Jodie probably shouldn't be without a chaperone in that state.
```

```
        *set positivity +5
```

```
        *set career +5
```

```
        *goto ladies2
```

```
    #It was almost time for Alix's category, it'd be a shame to miss it.
```

```
        *set career +10
```

```
        *goto awardscont
```

```
    #Surely this thing had to be over soon?
```

```
        *set positivity -5
```

```
        *set alix -5
```

```
        *set boredom true
```

```
        *goto awardsend
```

```
*label awardscont
```

Chad was making a brave effort to pretend like this was a normal awards ceremony, even during Dietmar's standing ovation for Video of the Year, when flakes of plaster fell from the ceiling, and the ushers hurried round urging people to retake their seats and quieten down.

As Alix drained her champagne, her stomach growled. Always too much champagne and not enough food at these things. Tiny squares of crispbread topped with pate or hummus barely qualified as mouthfuls, never mind enough to soak up the booze.

Alix glanced over at Jodie's empty chair.

```
*if jodietoilet = ""
```

```
    *set jodietoilet "alone"
```

```
    Alix hadn't noticed her slip away.
```

Now she came to think about it, Jodie had been gone a while.

"I'm sure you're all excited by this brand new category," Chad was saying, sweat beading his forehead under the lights.

Elizabeth and Dietmar were engrossed in the small castle they'd constructed from his awards. He'd fashioned a princess out of a napkin and she, voiced by Dietmar, was deep in conversation with a knife and fork, puppeteered by Elizabeth.

```
*choice
```

```
    #Jodie had seemed a little out of it, maybe Alix should go and check on her?
```

```
        *set career -5
```

```
        *set positivity +5
```

```
        *set billie +5
```

```
        *goto ladies3
```

#He was literally on the verge of announcing Alix's category.

\*set career +10

\*set billie -5

\*goto awardsend

\*label ladies1

"Jodie," Alix shouted across the table, "I'm going to the toilet, come with?"

"Oh my god!" Jodie looked delighted. "You never let me pee with you!"

Not going to this time either, Alix thought. She knew the kind of weird female-bonding shit Jodie was into. If there was any way to lure Jodie into an environment where Alix could get her to drink water and talk about what was going on with her, this was it.

Jodie hiccupped, her expression changing abruptly.

\*goto ladies2

\*label ladies2

Despite being drunk, and wearing spike heels, Jodie somehow managed to get halfway across the room before Alix had even stood up. Alix hurried after her.

\*page\_break To the toilets!

\*goto ladies3

\*label ladies3

A girl with a mohawk was sitting in the sink, passionately kissing a girl in a t-shirt dress and combat boots. Wet tissue paper trailed from the heel of her cowboy boot and disappeared under the door of the end cubicle. All three cubicle doors were closed. Alix hesitated.

\*if positivity <25

She didn't dare disturb the kissing couple.

\*goto cubicle

\*else

\*goto fame

\*label fame

\*if career >25

Mohawk somehow noticed Alix passing and broke free of her kissing partner.

"Isn't that Lixxil?" She said, as if Alix couldn't hear her.

\*goto jodie

\*else

\*goto cubicle

\*label jodie

"You see which cubicle Jodie Torres went into?" asked Alix.

They shuffled apart from one another and stared at her, slack-jawed.

"Tiddlywinks?" she tried again.

Still nothing.

\*goto cubicle

\*label cubicle

A muffled moan emerged from the middle cubicle.

"Jodie?" Alix tapped lightly on the door, turning her back on the couple.

A loud sob was her only answer.

"C'mon," Alix persisted. "Let me in there."

"S'open."

Alix squeezed her way inside, not wanting to open the door too wide in case Jodie was semi-undressed, or snorting coke, or covered in puke. She was none of those things. Just sprawled on the floor, face streaked with mascara and tears.

The lights flickered. Alix froze for a second, expecting the worst, but after a moment they stabilised. The sooner she could take care of Jodie and get her back to the ceremony, the better.

\*choice

#"Is this about the awards?"

\*set career +5

\*set positivity -5

\*set topic "the awards"

\*goto jodiechat

#"There's still time before it hits..."

\*set positivity +10

\*set dreams +5

\*set topic "the meteor"

\*goto jodiechat

#"Whatever this is about, I'm sure talking about it will help."

\*set positivity +5

\*set billie +5

\*set topic "some trivial bullshit"

\*goto jodiechat

\*label awardsend

\*if (boredom)

Alix stifled a yawn. She'd half-dozed her way through the last few categories.

\*goto chad

\*else

```

*goto chad

*label chad

"... differs from the other awards in that it's awarded by a panel
of judges from MyBoxx HQ, rather than subscriber votes." Chad was
saying.

Alix sat up straighter. This was it.
*if positivity <25
    Time to apply her gracious defeat face.
    *goto lights
*else
    Maybe she should have prepared a speech, just in case...
    *goto lights

*label lights
The lights flickered. Alix thought for a moment it was the lighting
technicians attempting to build tension, but Chad's panicked
expression suggested otherwise. He tugged at his collar and had an
urgent eye-conversation with some unseen authority. Eventually
the spotlights brightened and stayed on, and the hushed mutterings
around the room resided.

"Well," Chad recovered himself quickly. "Without further ado - Most
Innovative Video! And the award goes to..."
*page_break How long does it take to open a bloody envelope?!

*if career >30
    *set winner "Lixxil for [i]Apocalyptic Triptych[/i]"
    *goto andthewinneris
*else
    *set winner "Brodericheese for [i]Charlie Bit My Butt[/i]"
    *goto andthewinneris

*label andthewinneris
"... ${winner}!"

Alix took a moment to register the strange Boxxer tag before
*if winner = "Lixxil for [i]Apocalyptic Triptych[/i]"
    realising it was hers. She'd done it. She'd won a Boxxie!
    *goto stage
*else
    joining in with the applause.

    "Who the fuck is that?" said Elizabeth out of the corner of
her mouth, before standing up and yelling: "You go, dude! You go!"
    *goto stage

*label stage

"C'mon and join us on stage!" Chad said, possibly for the third or
fourth time.

```

```

*if winner = "Lixxil for [i]Apocalyptic Triptych[/i]"
    Still stunned, wishing she'd worn better clothes, or prepared
    something to say, or at least let Jodie do her make-up, Alix
    stumbled towards the stage. Chad reached down to her, and she
    couldn't tell whose hand was sweatier as he hoisted her up beside
    him. She looked down at all those expectant faces.
    *goto wheresjodie
*else
    Whoever this winner was, they were incredibly drunk, and had
    an entourage of equally drunk friends, all of whom seemed intent on
    going to the stage en masse.

    "Jesus Christ," muttered Dietmar, sitting back down.
    *goto wheresjodie

*label wheresjodie
*if (jodietoilet = "alone")

    Jodie's seat was still empty. Where the hell was she?

Alix opened her mouth to speak...

*page_break ..and...
*goto lightsout

*label jodiechat
*if positivity >25
    "Thanks Alix, but it's
    *goto chatcont
*else
    "Oh my god! It's
    *goto chatcont

*label chatcont
not about ${topic}! It's the whole world, don't you see?"
*set jodietoilet "saved"

"It's not," said Alix,
*if positivity >20
    and she really meant it.
    *goto chatcont2
*else
    although she hardly sounded convincing.
    *goto chatcont2

*label chatcont2
"There's the bunkers, and the evacuation plans and the impact
zone's really quite small and-"

Jodie was really sobbing now. "But don't you get it, Alix?" She
asked. "That's for people like us. What about everyone else?
Thousands of people will die. Thousands of my subscribers will die.
And I don't mean that in an 'ooh, no, lower subscription numbers'

```

way, I mean that lots of them have airnoted me and sent me gifts and... I just really wish your dad was here. Or your mum. Any of them really." And she sobbed harder than ever. Alix didn't know what to say.

\*if family >25

"I guess I hadn't really thought about other people missing them..."

\*goto chatcont3

\*else

The silence stretched between them.

\*goto chatcont3

\*label chatcont3

Before Alix could think of anything more to add, the lights gave another brief sputter...

\*page\_break ...and...

\*goto lightsout

\*label lightsout

\*comment \*sound storm.wav

\*comment \*image blackout.png

\*gosub\_scene csideimg\_blackout

—  
\*page\_break ... Are we safe anywhere?"

\*if (awards)

\*goto fireexit

\*elseif ((daytrip) and (daytriploc = "apartment"))

\*goto leaveapartment

\*elseif ((daytrip) and (daytriploc = "pavilion"))

\*goto leavepavilion

\*elseif ((daytrip) and (daytriploc = "mall"))

\*goto leavemall

\*elseif (visit)

\*goto bunker

\*label fireexit

There was a mad press towards the fire exits. Ushers waved penlights and shouted themselves hoarse trying to calm everyone, but the fear had created a hivemind intent on breaking out of the ageing building. The first wave stampeded the fire door, breaking it open and leaving it dangling on rusted hinges. The second wave trampled the first, smelling the cold outside air and rushing towards it eagerly. Alix was caught up in the third and penultimate wave, carried along in a jostle of tightly packed bodies, locking eyes with Dietmar who was equally helpless just meters away. They reached out to one another, but a heavysset man with long curly hair put his shoulder to her spine and knocked her out into the world.  
\*page\_break Into the cold.

Alix rubbed her bare arms and wondered where she'd left her jacket. Elizabeth and Dietmar joined her, Dietmar's tux jacket wrapped around Liz's shoulders.

"Sorry, I've only got the one jacket."

```
*if (billie_present)
    *goto billiechecks
```

```
*else
    *goto huddle
```

```
*label billiechecks
```

```
*if (((billie >20) and (billie_mood = "")) or (billie_mood =
"happy"))
```

"Pssht," said Billie, taking off her tux jacket and handing it to Alix. "Where I'm from, this is barbecue weather!"

```
*goto huddle
```

```
*elseif ((billie_mood = "") or (billie_mood = "happy"))
```

"You could wear mine?" Billie offered, although she seemed reluctant to part with it, so Alix shook her head.

```
*goto huddle
```

```
*else
```

Billie folded her arms and looked away.

```
*goto huddle
```

```
*label huddle
```

They huddled together in the cold, staring back towards the building. It was dark, or night at least. True night had been permanently interrupted by that perpetual green glow. White shapes flashed across the green-black expanse.

"Shit," said Liz. "Is that-"

Another streak, a flash, a boom, and the roof of The Central slowly crumbled in on itself. The crowd assembled outside scurried backward as one, fearing further collapse, fearing the Big One, but after a few moments, there was only silence. The meteor shower had stopped. It wasn't the end, just a precursor to it. Dietmar hugged Alix and Elizabeth close, one arm around each of them.

```
*if (billie_present)
```

```
    Billie hovered awkwardly close by.
```

```
    *goto jodiecheck
```

```
*else
```

```
    *goto jodiecheck
```

```
*label jodiecheck
```

"Wait," said Alix. "Where the hell is Jodie?"

Together they scanned the crowd, looking for her long, artfully styled hair, or her sleek, second-skin dress.

```

*if (jodietoilet = "alone")
    "She wasn't in her seat," said Alix, a sick feeling growing
in her stomach.
    *goto jodieoutcome1
*else
    "She was right behind me, I'm sure of it."
    *goto jodieoutcome1

```

```

*label jodieoutcome1

```

Alix looked again at the Central. The outside looked mainly intact. Maybe-

"You can't go back in there," said Dietmar, his arm tightening around her. "Alix, it's not stable."

"I can," said Alix. "I'll be fine, I-" She strained against his grip, knowing that this was the moment, the moment the tabloid press had predicted, where her eyes would glow green and the Protectorate power would flow into her, imbuing her with super strength or laser beam eyes.

Elizabeth

```

*if (billie_present)
    and Billie
    *goto jodieoutcome2
*else
    *goto jodieoutcome2

```

```

*label jodieoutcome2

```

joined Dietmar in restraining her. "You're not like them, Alix-"  
\*page\_break "I am!"

```

*if (jodietoilet = "alone")
    Alix clenched her eyes tight, determined not to let the hot
tears flow. She knew how it went with collapsed buildings. You
    pulled people out quick, or you pulled out corpses. Sure,
there were those miracle cases where days later small children were
    dragged free virtually unscathed, but they were just that,
miracles.

```

```

    *if positivity <25
        She'd seen the news bulletins - the body bags that Dad
couldn't bear to look at.

```

Now she truly understood why.

```

    *goto jodieoutcomedead
*else
    *goto jodieoutcomedead
*elseif (jodietoilet = "saved")

```

"I lost my fucking shoe."

They broke apart from their tense tussle, all grinning broader than they'd ever thought possible. There was Jodie, hair made grey with dust, barefoot and limping, a single stiletto gripped tight in her fist. "They were soooo expensive. I mean, I got them for free for a video, but still-"

She seemed still drunk, unaware that she'd just clambered from the wreckage of a collapsed theatre. As Dietmar and Elizabeth hugged Jodie and fussed around her, helping her shake out her hair and giving her Dietmar's dress shoes, Alix stood staring at the tiny chips of rock littering the ground, hugging herself tighter and smiling.

```
*goto jodieoutcomealive
*else
    *goto jodieoutcomedead
```

```
*label jodieoutcomedead
```

But Alix's nascent powers didn't make themselves known. There was no-one to throw the rubble aside and dig for survivors, no-one to create a telekinetic perimeter to prevent further collapse. The emergency services eventually arrived, but their work was painfully slow, and by the time the crowd had dwindled to small knots of grief, Alix and her friends were forced to admit what they had known as soon as the first bodies were brought out.

Jodie was gone.

```
*set jodiealive false
*if winner = "Lixxil for [i]Apocalyptic Triptych[/i]"
```

Alix still had the award gripped tight in her fist. The jutting corners made her fingers ache.

```
*if positivity <25
    She looked down at it, imagined hurling the worthless
    gold block into the wreckage with the other rubbish, but somehow
    she couldn't let it go.
    *finish She could never let anything go.
*else
    She held it tighter still until she thought the edges
    would pierce her flesh.
    *finish They didn't.
*else
    *finish Just like dad.
```

```
*label jodieoutcomealive
```

Jodie was fine.

```
*finish Dusty, but fine.
```

```
*label daytrip
*set daytrip true
```

The metal squirrels bobbed around on their hourly dance, the gushing water revealing the greenish blue tarnish on their coppery coats.

"The Aqua Horological Tintinnabulator," said Billie, reading from the plaque on the front of the fountain. "Well, there's a name to conjure with." Alix smiled.

```
*if billie_mood = "angry"
```

Things were still a little tense between them after their previous exchange, but Billie seemed to be trying to make the best of it.

```
*if not (billie_present)
```

Billie had come a long way to visit, so Alix hoped their activities weren't too mundane. Spending hours discussing trivialities on the MyBoxx forums, wasn't the same as meeting in person. In fact, this was the first time Alix had ever met an online friend, aside from the regular subscribers who turned up at expos to have their merch signed. And this was different.

They'd spent the morning perusing Comicus, although the shelves were getting sparse now with so many print runs coming to an end. To compensate, the shop owner had dragged boxes of dusty back issues out of the storeroom, some decades old. The reasons they'd gone unsold were mostly self-evident - poor quality printing, speech bubbles filled with indistinct text, colours layered on top of each other incorrectly reducing characters to murky brown blobs. Others sported ridiculous or downright offensive characters leering from the covers - King Cannibal, Sheba the Feminazi, Wolfmanbatturkey. Still others represented movie and game tie-ins that had obviously failed to impress.

Alix had found herself drawn to a foreign language edition called Magister Fortis, no doubt ordered in error, its cover emblazoned with a triumphant purple-costumed man holding a car above his head. Painted in dreamy watercolours, even though the man's costume was as exaggerated and unrealistic as his physique (abs bulging through lycra, a flowing cape that was an accident waiting to happen), the resemblance to her father was undeniable.

"Make a wish?" asked Billie, holding up a shiny penny and interrupting Alix's reverie.

Always with the reverie interruptions.

```
*choice
```

```
  #Wish for dad.
```

```
    *set wish "dad"
```

```
    *set family +5
```

```
    *set billie +5
```

```
    *set positivity +5
```

```
    *goto wishoutcome
```

```
  #Wish for Annie.
```

```
    *set wish "annie"
```

```
    *set family +10
```

```

        *set annie +5
        *set positivity +5
        *set billie +5
        *goto wishoutcome
#Wish for everyone.
        *set wish "all"
        *set dreams +5
        *set career +5
        *set family +5
        *set billie +5
        *set positivity +10
        *goto wishoutcome
*if positivity <25
        #What's the point in wishing?
            *set dreams -5
            *set billie -5
            *set positivity -5
            *goto wishoutcome

*label wishoutcome
*if wish = ""
        Alix shook her head. She'd done it when she was a kid, but it
        seemed kind of stupid now. Billie shrugged and threw the coin
        herself.
            *goto futile
*elseif wish = "dad"
        Alix wished that her dad's enhanced metabolism had caused the
        coroner to make a mistake. She wished he'd actually just gone into
        a hibernation state to repair the damage to his body. She wished
        that his hibernation was over now, and he'd come smashing out of
        his coffin and zooming back to her, strong and smiling as the day
        he'd left.
            *goto futile
*elseif wish = "annie"
        Alix wished that next time she went to the hospital, Annie
        would be up and out of bed. She wished that the doctors would tell
        her her mother had made a miraculous recovery. She wished Annie
        would tell her not only was she going to resume her duties
        immediately, she was going to stop the meteorite and everything
        would be just fine.
            *goto futile
*elseif wish = "all"
        Alix wished that whatever happened, everyone she knew and
        loved would be safe, and everyone she didn't know would be safe
        too. She wished that once they'd rebuilt and reflected, everyone
        would be happier and closer and value everyone else more.
            *goto futile

*label futile

A futile gesture, perhaps. Childish even.
*if positivity >25
        At least she still had hope.

```

```

        *goto lunch
*else
    What was the point in wishing? May as well wish for a million
    in the bank and a flying horse.
    *goto lunch

*label lunch

"So, obviously we should go grab some lunch," said Billie. "But
what then?"
*choice
    #"We could head back to mine and read our purchases?"
        *set billie +5
        *goto apartment
    #"Sorry to cut this short, but I'm really tired."
        *set billie -10
        *set alix -5
        *goto fight
    *if not (pet_type = "")
        #"How would you like to meet ${petname}?"
            *set billie +10
            *set alix +5
            *if pet_type = "dog"
                *goto park
            *else
                *goto apartment

*label park
*set walk true
*set billie_present true
${petname} was in ${pet_pronoun_his_her} element at the park. They
skirted the edge of the duck pond, where mallards and moorhens left
criss-crossing wakes in the green algae. ${petname} frequently
disappeared into the knee-high yellow grass that had overpowered
the 'Keep off the Grass' signs. Some of the more affluent areas had
their own clean-up crews to take care of nearby public spaces. This
was not one of those neighbourhoods. In a few months, the tall
stalks would overwhelm the burnt-out lawnmower abandoned in the
middle of the playing field.

Alix and Billie amused themselves for a surprisingly long time
talking, throwing a ball for ${petname}, buying extremely dubious
meat on a stick from a street seller.

"You're not actually going to eat that, are you?" asked Alix, as
Billie sniffed the deep fried nugget.

Billie made a face. "Smells like butt." She wound back her arm and
whipped the stick forward, propelling the battered meat chunk into
the duck pond. A mallard attacked it hungrily.

"Are ducks carnivores, usually?" Alix asked.

```

"Ducks are psychopathic necrophiles, a bit of fried rat is probably small potatoes to those guys."

"We used to joke about the street sellers round here serving fried rat, but nowadays..."

A low rumble filled the sky overhead.

"Great," said Alix. There hadn't been a full-blown thunderstorm in ages. "We should probably..."

```
*choice
    # ... hurry back to mine."
        *set alix +5
        *set billie +5
        *goto apartment
    # ... find shelter."
        *set positivity +5
        *set dreams +5
        *goto shelter

*label apartment
*if petname = ""
    *goto apartmentcont
*else
    *goto pethomecheck

*label pethomecheck
*if pet_type = "fish"
    *set pethome "tank"
    *goto petmovecheck
*elseif pet_type = "bird"
    *set pethome "cage"
    *goto petmovecheck
*elseif pet_type = "lizard"
    *set pethome "vivarium"
    *goto petmovecheck
*else
    *goto apartmentcont

*label petmovecheck
*if pet_type = "fish"
    *set petmove "flopping"
    *goto petlocationcheck
*elseif pet_type = "bird"
    *set petmove "flying"
    *goto petlocationcheck
*elseif pet_type = "lizard"
    *set petmove "scrabbling"
    *goto petlocationcheck

*label petlocationcheck
*if pet_type = "fish"
    *set petlocation "floor"
```

```

    *goto petlinercheck
*elseif pet_type = "bird"
    *set petlocation "ceiling"
    *goto petlinercheck
*elseif pet_type = "lizard"
    *set petlocation "carpet"
    *goto petlinercheck

*label petlinercheck
*if pet_type = "fish"
    *set petliner "gravel"
    *goto petnoisecheck
*elseif pet_type = "bird"
    *set petliner "birdseed"
    *goto petnoisecheck
*elseif pet_type = "lizard"
    *set petliner "sand"
    *goto petnoisecheck

*label petnoisecheck
*if pet_type = "fish"
    *set petnoise "attacking ${pet_pronoun_his_her} filter"
    *goto apartmentcont
*elseif pet_type = "bird"
    *set petnoise "screeching"
    *goto apartmentcont
*elseif pet_type = "lizard"
    *set petnoise "thrashing ${pet_pronoun_his_her} tail around"
    *goto apartmentcont

*label apartmentcont
*set daytriploc "apartment"
*set billie_present true
Alix took extra time turning the key in the apartment door as she
struggled to remember whether she'd left any dirty underwear lying
around. She was drawing a blank, so opened the door equally slowly
to scan the room before allowing Billie inside.
*if not ((pet_type = "") or (walk = "true"))
    For reasons known only to ${pet_pronoun_his_her} tiny animal
    brain, ${petname}
        *if (((positivity <25) and (((pet_type = "cat") or (pet_type =
        "rabbit"))) or (pet_type = "dog"))))
            had deposited a shit right in the middle of the kitchen
            table.
                *goto cleanup
            *elseif (((positivity <25) and (((pet_type = "fish") or
            (pet_type = "bird"))) or (pet_type = "lizard"))))
                had escaped the confines of ${pet_pronoun_his_her}
                ${pethome} and was now ${petmove} around the ${petlocation}.
                Fortunately they were back before ${pet_pronoun_he_she} had come to
                any harm.
                    *goto cleanup
            *elseif ((positivity <25) and (walk = "true"))

```

```

        *goto pigeon
    *elseif (((pet_type = "fish") or (pet_type = "bird")) or
(pet_type = "lizard"))
        had made an enormous mess around ${pet_pronoun_his_her}
${pethome} by throwing ${petliner} everywhere and was now
${petnoise} triumphantly.
        *set mess true
        *goto intro
    *elseif (((pet_type = "cat") or (pet_type = "rabbit")) or
(walk = "false"))
        had fallen asleep spread-eagled on
${pet_pronoun_his_her} back. ${pet_pronoun_his_her} neck was
twisted at an uncomfortable-looking angle, legs splayed, feet and
mouth twitching as ${pet_pronoun_he_she} doubtless dreamed of
devouring an extra big ${pettreat}.
        *goto intro
    *else
        *goto pad
*elseif positivity <25
    *goto pigeon
*else
    *goto pad

*label pigeon
Alix had left the window open, allowing some mangy pigeon to enter,
wander around shedding feathers and shitting, and then apparently
exit, since it was now nowhere to be found.
*if walk = true
    ${petname} immediately ran inside and begin rolling in the
droppings, eyes shut blissfully.
*goto cleanup

*label cleanup
Alix sighed, took off her jacket and rolled up her sleeves.

"Let me just take care of this."
*goto billiegiggle

*label intro
*if walk = false

    "So, that's ${petname}," said Alix.
    *goto billiegiggle
*else
    *goto pad

*label pad

"So, this is the pad of dreams," said Alix, wincing as she said it.
Pad? She'd never called it a pad in her life. Where the hell did
that come from?
*if (walk)

```

She let go of  $\{\text{petname}\}$ 's lead and the eager pupper hurried over to  $\{\text{pet\_pronoun\_his\_her}\}$  water bowl, and immediately began lapping noisily, splashing water everywhere.

\*goto billiegiggle

\*label billiegiggle

Billie stifled a giggle.

\*if ((positivity <25) or (mess))

Once Alix had cleaned up and restored some semblance of order,

\*goto sofa

\*else

Once Alix had carefully put away her Magister Fortis comic, still in its cellophane wrapper,

\*goto sofa

\*label sofa

\*page\_break she joined Billie on the sofa.

Billie had made herself at home, kicking off her shoes to reveal brightly coloured socks, surrounding herself with her haul of brand new comics. Alix liked that about her, she always seemed so at ease, no matter where she was or what she was doing. And in her hands...

Alix's stomach lurched. Billie was holding the journal. Dad's journal.

\*if ((family >25) or (dreams >25))

"Don't touch that!" Alix yelled, far louder than she'd meant to.

\*goto billiereaction

\*else

"Please don't open it," Alix said quietly.

\*goto billiereaction

\*label billiereaction

"Sorry," said Billie, looking faintly shocked. She put it carefully down on the coffee table. "It's really beautiful."

"I know. It was my Dad's."

"Ah.

\*if billie >20

You've never read it?

\*goto headshake

\*else

\*goto headshake

```
*label headshake
"
```

Alix shook her head. "It's not- I just-"

The lights flickered and there was a sound like a freight train passing overhead. Alix barely noticed. Ugh. Why couldn't she just explain?

```
*choice
```

```
    #"Let's read it together."
        *set family +10
        *set dreams +5
        *set billie +10
        *goto open
    #"I don't think I'll ever read it."
        *set alix +5
        *set annie +10
        *goto closed
```

```
*label open
```

Alix pulled the familiar tome into her lap, and opened it carefully to the first page. There it was, Dad's neat handwriting, line after line of everything that had happened to him, from around five years ago right up until his death. But, before she could even take in the first

```
*page_break word-
*goto lightsout
```

```
*label closed
```

To emphasise her point, Alix pressed the diary closed with both hands, hugged it to her chest and drew up her knees to enclose it, to keep anyone from ever reading a single line. Billie shifted uncomfortably and Alix was just about to ask if she fancied some snacks in an effort to break the silence

```
*page_break when-
*goto lightsout
```

```
*label fight
```

Billie's face fell. Alix hunkered down in her jacket and looked away, trying to gather her thoughts. Billie spoke before she could.

```
*if ((billie <15) and (billie_mood = "angry"))
```

"I've tried, I really have. I'm not really sure why you even invited me over here if you were going to fob me off at every opportunity. I'm going to get the first flight I can back to Lifun. Don't bother trying to vidcall me again."

```
    *set billie_gone true
    *set billie_present false
    *set positivity -10
    *set dreams -5
    *goto distance
*elseif billie <15
```

"Maybe call me once you've had plenty of sleep and you're not slammed with work? Because until then, it seems like you're just wasting both of our time. I'm going to find someone to hang out with who actually wants me around."

```
*set positivity -5
*set billie_present false
*goto distance
```

```
*else
```

Billie gave her a hug.

"Alix, I know you've got a lot on your plate right now with Annie and... everything. But you don't have to push everyone who cares about you away." She took a knitted hat from her coat pocket and arranged it on her head. "I'm always around if you need me. I hope that'll be some time soon."

```
*set positivity +5
*set dreams +5
*set billie_present false
*goto distance
```

```
*label distance
```

```
*if (walk)
```

```
*set daytriploc "pavilion"
```

Billie shouldered her way back outside, heedless of the coming storm. Through a crack in the pavilion door,

Alix watched Billie go until she was a short, fast-moving speck in the distance.

```
*if positivity <15
```

She didn't have any tears left to shed.

```
*goto wonder
```

```
*else
```

```
*goto wonder
```

```
*label wonder
```

```
*if alix <15
```

She wondered if the mishandling of that situation was really her fault, or if there was someone else, somewhere out there, to blame.

```
*goto bark
```

```
*else
```

```
*goto bark
```

```
*label bark
```

```
*if walk = false
```

```
*set daytriploc "mall"
```

The fountain had come to a dead stop. Alix stared up at it for a fraction of a second before the lights failed. Shocked shoppers gasped as one, the susurrus of alarm punctuated by the sibilant thuds of plastic bags heavy with tinned goods dropping

from surprised fingers. The lights returned, but the clock remained stationary. When they were static, the squirrels lost some of their magic, somehow. The jewels embedded in their moving joints were clearly lumps of dull glass, their edges not just tarnished but furred with green mould. As around her everyone resumed their shopping, Alix wondered whether the motor had burned out.

```
*page_break Perhaps they'd never move-  
*goto lightsout
```

```
*else
```

```
*set daytriploc "pavilion"  
${petname} barked and strained at ${pet_pronoun_his_her}  
lead, clearly wanting to follow ${pet_pronoun_his_her} newfound  
friend. Alix knew exactly how ${pet_pronoun_he_she} felt. The sky  
darkened and thunder rumbled overhead.
```

```
"Pathetic," muttered Alix.  
*page_break The sky was unrepentant.  
*goto lightsout
```

```
*label shelter
```

```
*set daytriploc "pavilion"
```

The park's pavilion was, like most public or government-owned spaces these days, in a state of disrepair. It had been boarded up, but kids or drug addicts had broken in so many times the wooden cladding hung loose like an open door. Alix swung it aside and climbed cautiously in.

"Here's hoping there's no looters in here," said Billie, using her stylus as a torch as they moved through the dim interior.

"Nothing to loot," said Alix. The place had been picked clean months ago. Even an old filing cabinet in the former reception area had been stripped of its drawers. Presumably the metal was worth something to someone.

"So we're just hanging out here until the storm passes?" Billie asked.

Alix nodded.

```
*if billie >15
```

```
"Cool."  
*goto adjust
```

```
*else
```

```
"Awks."  
*goto adjust
```

```
*label adjust
```

```
*choice
```

```
#Break the silence
```

"This is fucking terrifying." A little heavy for small talk, but it was the first thing that came into Alix's head.

```

        *if billie >15

                "No way," said Billie, shaking her head. "Your
danger vision'll keep us safe."

                "My danger vision?"

                "Why else would you bring us into this crappy
pavilion?!"

                *goto darker
        *else

                "Uh huh," said Billie. She nudged a smaller
scorpiid with her toe and didn't offer anything further.
                *goto darker
        #Let it hang
        *if billie >15

                Billie's hand appeared in Alix's. They interlinked
fingers.

                "This is some near death shit," Billie said
eventually.

                Alix could only nod and squeeze Billie's hand.
                *set billie_mood "smitten"
                *goto darker
        *else

                "Do you even want me around?"

                Alix was so blindsided the question, she didn't
know how to respond. Could only stammer "I- I mean- that it-"
                *goto fight

*label darker

Alix couldn't tell if it was her eyes attempting to adjust, but it
seemed to be getting
*page_break ...darker.
*goto lightsout

*label leaveapartment
*if billie >25
        Alix found herself gripping Billie's hand, with
        *if (((pet_type = "cat") or (pet_type = "dog")) or (pet_type
= "rabbit"))
                ${petname} cuddled in between them.
                *goto rumbling
        *else
                a sick feeling growing in her stomach.
                *goto rumbling
*else

```

```

*goto rumbling

*label rumbling

The rumbling above intensified, the light fittings shook, the
curtain rail rattled. And then it was over. The lights didn't come
back on, but the noise and the shaking subsided and after a moment,
it became clear nothing further was going to happen.
*if ((positivity <25) and (billie >25))
    Alix let go of Billie's hand abruptly, feeling ridiculous.
    *goto stand
*elseif ((positivity >25) and (billie >25))
    Alix felt embarrassed. Billie was so great, and she probably
thought Alix was a complete sap now.
    *goto stand
*else
    *goto stand

*label stand

Alix stood up. "The power's tripped. I should probably go and reset
the circuit box."

"Aren't you curious to see what went on out there?" asked Billie.
"Those were some weird sounds. It didn't seem like a normal storm."
*choice
    #"I guess."
        *set storm true
        *set billie +5
        *set positivity +5
        *goto corridor
    #"I'd rather just get the lights back on."
        *set lights true
        *set billie -5
        *set career +5
        *goto corridor

*label leavepavilion
After the sounds had subsided and the ground had stopped shaking,
Alix
*if (billie_present)
    and Billie
emerged from the pavilion. The ground was wet. Alix looked up at
the sky. Still green and cloudless. As she stepped onto the path,
the origins of the water became clear. A large chunk of rock, still
steaming from its entry into the atmosphere, had smashed into the
centre of the pond, splashing most of its contents out onto the
surrounding ground.

The ducks and moorhens were nowhere to be seen. It was eerily quiet
all round.
*if (billie_gone)

```

Alix hoped Billie made it back safely.

```
Instinctively,  
*goto tracker  
*elseif (billie_present)
```

```
"Your tracker working?" Billie asked. "Mine seems to be  
dead."
```

```
*goto tracker  
*else  
*goto tracker
```

```
*label tracker
```

Alix took her tracker from her pocket. The screen was blank. She tried turning it off and on again, removing the battery and reinserting it. Nothing.

```
*if (billie_present)  
"Mine too."  
*goto antsypet  
*else  
*goto antsypet
```

```
*label antsypet
```

`{petname}` tugged on `{pet_pronoun_his_her}` lead jerking Alix into the edge of the long grass. Hundreds more fragments of rock were scattered between the clumps of weeds. Some had burned small patches to brown stubble.

```
*if billie_present  
Billie picked one up. "Ouch, hot!" she dropped it quickly,  
sucking her fingers.
```

Alix checked her tracker again. Still couldn't connect. The storm must have interfered with the relays. Feeling oddly cut off, Alix stuffed her hands in her pockets and hurried home

```
*if billie_present  
forcing Billie to jog to keep up with her.  
*finish Faster and faster, all the way home.
```

```
*else  
.  
*finish Disconnected.
```

```
*label leavemall
```

Someone knocked into Alix from behind, and she banged her knees against the solid marble base of the fountain. She reached down and clung to the edge until shopping centre staff approached, their torches providing little spots of light in the darkness like angler fish in murky deep sea trenches. Alix allowed herself to be ushered outside, and it was only then that what had just happened hit home. As she joined the throngs at the fire assembly point over the road, the police were already setting up a cordon around the smoking chunk of rock embedded in the shopping centre's window display. Not

the meteor itself, of course, something much smaller. A fragment, a taster, a warning of what was to come.

She hoped Billie was well away from here.  
\*finish Safe.

```
*label corridor
*if not ((pet_type = "") or (pet_type = "fish"))
    Once ${petname} had settled back down from the shock of the
sudden noise and blackout, they emerged into the corridor to
    find the emergency lights had failed.
    *goto brisk
*else
    They emerged into the corridor to find the emergency lights
had failed.
    *goto brisk
```

```
*label brisk
Alix moved briskly, using her stylus as a torch. At least that was
working.
```

"Aren't the emergency lights supposed to be foolproof?" asked Billie.

"Maybe it's not an emergency after all," said Alix wondering wildly if the power had been cut on purpose.

```
*if (lights)
    As she hurried down the steps to the basement, she half
expected some smallscale horror - a spiderweb full in the face, or
the inner door padlocked shut leaving her without light. There was
nothing out of the ordinary, apart from the power having tripped,
of course. Alix opened the fusebox and flipped the switch.
    *if positivity >25
        The overhead lights flickered and returned to life,
filling the room with harsh white light, banishing thoughts of the
apocalypse back to the shadows where they belonged.
        *goto snacks
    *else
        The overhead lighting stubbornly refused to come on, but
the emergency generator clicked and purred into life. The emergency
lights emitted a dim glow that left everything looking indistinct
and twilit, but it was better than nothing.
        *goto snacks
*elseif (storm)
    Alix hurried up the emergency fire escape taking the
steps two at a time. It wasn't too dark in the stairwell, because
someone had already opened the fire door, letting the green light
flood in. She slowed as she reached the rooftop.
```

Virtually everyone who lived in the building was up here, and they were all picking things up off the roof and chattering.

"You seen this crazy shit?" asked the old guy from the floor above. He held out a rock for Alix to look at.

She took it. It was grey, pitted, warm to the touch.

"What happened?" asked Billie.

\*if positivity >20

"Just a meteor shower," said a girl in a red plaid shirt. "They're more common than you think. Just don't usually happen in suburban areas."

\*goto rocks

\*else

"End of times," said a teenage boy with a topknot. "Just an early taster of how things are going to be forever in a couple of months."

\*goto rocks

\*label rocks

Alix glanced around at the rocks peppering the roof tops like half-melted snow. She was reminded of an old film she watched once, where little alien pods hitched a ride down to earth in a rain storm, and infected anyone who touched them with an extra-terrestrial disease.

\*if positivity <25

She dropped the rock back to the felt roof covering just in case.

\*goto billierockcheck

\*else

She rubbed the rock thoughtfully with her thumb. It seemed harmless enough.

\*goto billierockcheck

\*label billierockcheck

\*if (rock)

"It's like the one you got me," Alix observed.

Billie shook her head, and put on a voice like an old-timey radio announcer.

"It came from Outer Space!"

Alix smiled in spite of herself.

\*finish Billie rocks.

\*else

\*finish It always seems harmless at first.

\*label snacks

"Back to comics and snacks? You've got snacks, right?"

Alix nodded and led the way back to her apartment.  
\*finish "You like cereal?"

```
*label visit
*set visit true
*if relative = ""
    *set relative "Aunt Maude"
    *set relative_gender_him_her "her"
    *set relative_gender_he_she "she"
    *set relative_gender_his_hers "her"
    *goto visitcont
*else
    *goto visitcont
```

```
*label visitcont
${relative} lived further out of town than Aunt Serita, in a proper
house rather than a flat. That tiny, narrow townhouse was
practically a mansion in Alix's eyes. The area still had a
functioning neighbourhood watch keeping the gangs at bay and
tending to the streetlights and the weeds between the paving slabs.
All in all, it seemed largely untouched by everything that had
happened so far.
```

Alix still wasn't sure why she'd accepted \${relative}'s invitation.  
\${relative\_gender\_he\_she} had extended the offer countless times  
before and Alix always found some reason not to go. She could have  
said she was

```
*if family >25
    visiting Annie,
    *goto reason
*elseif career >25
    working on her latest video,
    *goto reason
*else
    cleaning her apartment,
    *goto reason
```

```
*label reason
or maybe
*if not (petname = "")
    taking ${petname} to the vet,
    *goto lie
*elseif billie_present
    videochatting with Billie,
    *goto lie
*else
    doing "important research",
    *goto lie
```

```
*label lie
and even if that wasn't strictly true,
*if positivity >25
```

she could've made it so by doing exactly that. Or thinking about it, at least. Thinking about was almost as good as doing.

```
*goto door
*else
    how would ${relative} ever know anyway?
    *goto door
```

```
*label door
*if not (party1)
    Still, Alix had given ${relative}'s last party a miss, so perhaps it was only right for Alix to actually spent some time with ${relative_gender_him_her} for once. And at least this way she wouldn't have to deal with 1970s party food and tuneless karaoke.
```

Alix reached the front door, decorated with a hanging basket of carefully tended pansies, purple and yellow. Alix spun it gently on its chains, stalling before

```
*choice
    #knocking on the glass panel of the front door.
        *goto inside
    *if auntmaudeadvice
        #letting herself in with the spare key Maude had given her.
            *set positivity +5
            *set family +5
            *goto hallway
```

```
*label inside
    "It's open!" Came ${relative}'s voice from inside. Of course it was.
    *if positivity <25
        To lock it would be an admission that the world was no longer a safe place.
        *goto hallway
    *else
        *goto hallway
```

```
*label hallway
```

The hallway was small, chintzy and smelled faintly of dog, although Alix couldn't remember \${relative} ever owning one. A small television hub was audible from the kitchen, playing away to itself, repeats of a gardening programme, years old. Alix wandered through to the lounge expecting \${relative} to be there, but finding only a mantelpiece filled with gold-embossed vases, their puny carat stickers still in place.

"I'm here!" Alix called out to the house, feeling strange.

```
*if billie_present
    She wished that she'd brought Billie along, hadn't been too embarrassed to open up this part of her life to her friend. But she'd left Billie to occupy herself for now, with the promise of another meet up later.
```

"I'm up here!" the house yelled back, but of course, it was  
\${relative}, voice muffled, the direction suggesting upstairs.

\*choice

#The bedroom, clearly.

\*set positivity +5

\*goto bedroom

#Most likely the loft.

\*set positivity +5

\*set family +5

\*goto loft

#Better wait until \${relative} was done with whatever  
\${relative\_gender\_he\_she} was doing.

\*set positivity -5

\*goto lounge

\*label bedroom

Alix peeped into \${relative}'s bedroom. It was less kitsch than  
expected, although obviously

\*if relative = "Uncle Simon"

gilt war memorabilia and protectorate photographs in ornate  
frames

\*goto pride

\*else

porcelain figurines of little girls in petticoats

\*goto pride

\*label pride

took pride of place. The shelf they were on was immaculate, and the  
smell of furniture polish still hung in the air.

\*if relative = "Uncle Simon"

Unable to help herself, Alix moved over to a huge photo of  
the entire protectorate, her eyes scanning the rows of green-eyed  
faces for

\*if family >25

Annie.

\*goto photo

\*else

Dad.

\*goto photo

\*else

\*goto landing

\*label photo

There. The three of them together. The photo was from the passing  
out parade, so Simon looked almost handsome, chest puffed out and  
beaming with pride. And on either side of him, Annie and Dad, young  
and unworried and unaware of all the missions that awaited them,  
all the times they'd sit in the kitchen when they thought Alix was  
sleeping, whispering about whether they should get this wound or  
that wound checked out, or whether it would heal on its own like  
the others.

There was another woman beside Simon, one Alix had never seen before in the photos or the news stories. She looked-

\*set simonsecret true

\*goto landing

\*label landing

\*page\_break A creak on the landing...

\*goto doorway

\*label loft

At the top of the stairs, a rickety wooden ladder led up into the loft. Alix climbed it warily, mindful of splinters, cobwebs, and spiders. The rungs hurt her feet through the soft soles of her plimsolls, but she managed not to slip to her death.

There was barely room to stand upright, but that didn't matter to `{relative}`, who was kneeling in front of a leather-bound trunk, loading packet upon packet of photos into a cardboard box.

`!{relative_gender_he_she}` smiled as Alix hunched closer.

"Oh good, you're here! You can help!"

It took less than one packet for Alix to become completely distracted by a photoset of a baby half-buried in an enormous frilly bonnet.

"Who's that?" asked Alix, but `{relative}` wasn't listening, staring instead at a packet of photos in the bottom of the trunk. It looked like several of the others that had already gone into the box, a blue cardboard envelope from the days you had to go to special shops to get photos developed, but when Alix reached for it, `{relative}` batted her hand away.

"We've got enough to be going on with here,"

`{relative_gender_he_she}` said softly, pushing the box towards the loft hatch.

\*if relative = "Uncle Simon"

    \*set simonsecret true

Reluctantly Alix helped manoeuvre the box back

\*page\_break downstairs.

\*goto downstairs

\*label lounge

Alix helped herself to a couple of caramel wafer biscuits from the cupboard, and then poured a glass of coke. It was flat, as it always was at `{relative}`'s house because `{relative_gender_he_she}` didn't drink it `{relative_gender_him_her}self`: it was there for Alix.

She kicked off her shoes, settled down on the sofa and turned on the large TV. `{relative}` had a really expensive cable package. Alix found flicking through the huge array of music and movie

channels more enjoyable than actually watching anything. She held the remote at arm's length, never allowing anything to stay on the screen too long, making a living collage of comedies, dramas, music videos and adverts, double-tapping on news channels to keep them from polluting the flow with their negativity.

She was so absorbed, she started when the door opened.

\*goto doorway

\*label doorway

`\${relative}` stood in the doorway looking a little confused.

"Didn't you hear me shout? I was in the loft."

"I was just... hanging out." Alix faltered, cheeks blazing. She felt caught in the act, though the act of what, she couldn't say. `\${relative\_gender\_he\_she}` wasn't fooled for one second, but instead of berating, `\${relative}` shifted `\${relative\_gender\_his\_hers}` attention to the cardboard box `\${relative\_gender\_he\_she}` gripped tightly with both hands. It was filled to the brim with those packets photos used to come in before everything went digital.

"Want to look?" `\${relative\_gender\_he\_she}` asked and Alix nodded.

\*page\_break "I'll make tea."

\*goto downstairs

\*label downstairs

They settled down together on the sofa with two mugs of tea and a tray of biscuits, heavily sugared and filled with crushed currants.

\*if family >25

Dad had called them squashed fly biscuits so consistently Alix couldn't remember the proper name.

`\${relative}` had pre-selected several packets of photos and laid them out on the coffee table.

"Which one first?"

`\${relative\_gender\_he\_she}` seemed to get some kind of pleasure from curating Alix's interaction with the photos, the same way Annie had always been with Christmas presents. It was weird, but Alix played along now just like she always had then.

\*choice

#The one labelled: 'Protectorate Days.'

\*set photopacket "protectorate"

\*set annie +5

\*set family +10

\*set career +5

\*goto viewphotos

#The plain yellow one.

\*set photopacket "yellow"

```

        *set billie +5
        *set positivity +5
        *goto viewphotos
#The one with 'Jim' written on it, obviously.
        *set photopacket "jim"
        *set alix +5
        *set family +5
        *set dreams +5
        *goto viewphotos

*label viewphotos
Alix chose a packet and carefully removed the more delicate paper
envelope of photos inside.
*if photopacket = "jim"

        ${relative} suddenly became very attentive to
        ${relative_gender_his_hers} tea, investing a great deal of effort
in blowing and sipping at it. Alix breathed in sharply. She wasn't
sure what she'd expected from the photos, but it wasn't this.
Herself and her dad at the beach, building a sand turtle. She
remembered collecting scallop shells to make the flippers, wading
out through foul-smelling black seaweed to find the best ones, yet
couldn't remember which beach it was, had forgotten the holiday
itself altogether until now.
        *if relative = "Aunt Maude"

                "It was when your mother was first taken ill," Aunt
Maude supplied. "I took care of all that, so your dad could...
                *if auntmaudeadvice
                        continue looking after you."
                        *goto where
                *else
                        " she trailed off, busying herself with dabbing
sugar dust from her saucer with an index finger.
                        *goto where
                *else
                        *goto where
*elseif photopacket = "yellow"

        All the pictures were of a large, incredibly smiley Alsatian
dog playing in a neatly kept garden. ${relative} lurked in the
background of some of the photos wearing outdated clothes, and in
one particularly entertaining sequence, an ill-advised wig.
        *if not (petname = "")

                "I never knew you had a dog!"

        ${relative} smiled. "That's going back some years now.
His name was Conan. He's long gone."
        *goto doggo
        *else
                *goto wig
*elseif photopacket = "protectorate"

```

There was Annie, hanging upside down in her bunk, with pants on her head for some reason. There was Annie with dad, squashed together in one lower bunk. Annie with wild messy hair she'd never have now, even if her hair wasn't thinning.

```
*if simonsecret
```

Another woman, in the mess hall, her face half-hidden behind an enormous burger.

```
"Who's that?"
```

"That's your Aunt Maggie." Simon's scalp glowed redder than ever, but his knuckles were white around his tea cup.

```
"I have an Aun-"
```

```
*goto lightsflicker
```

```
*else
```

```
*set anniejoker true
```

"Was Annie... fun?" Alix asked, worried it was a strange thing to ask, but `{relative}` seemed to understand. `{relative_gender_he_she}` put `{relative_gender_his_hers}` cup down on the coffee table, nodding.

"She was the joker of the protectorate. I heard none of the pilots wanted to fly with her, because she'd always find little ways to mess with them in transit."

```
"What kind of-"
```

```
*goto lightsflicker
```

```
*label doggo
```

```
*if pet_type = "dog"
```

```
"Don't you ever think of getting another?" Alix asked. "I'm not sure I could be without one after {petname}."
```

```
*goto shrug
```

```
*else
```

```
*goto hug
```

```
*label shrug
```

```
{relative} shrugged.
```

```
*if positivity >25
```

```
"Perhaps. Never say never, eh? Maybe {petname} will have puppies some day and I can have one of those?"
```

```
*goto hug
```

```
*else
```

```
"It just doesn't seem right now, you know, with the current climate."
```

```
*goto hug
```

\*label hug

For once in her life, Alix wanted to voluntarily hug `#{relative}`, and was on the verge of asking if she could...

\*goto lightsflicker

\*label wig

"That's some wig!" Alix giggled. "Did you-"

\*goto lightsflicker

\*label where

"Where...?" Alix began,

\*goto lightsflicker

\*label lightsflicker

but then the lights flickered, forcing a different question: "That happen a lot round here?"

"Never happened before." `#{relative}` said, frowning. "How about your neighbourhood?"

\*page\_break Prone to-"

\*goto lightsout

\*label bunker

Alix wasn't sure how she felt about the fact `#{relative}` had a meteor shelter. Relieved? Concerned? `#{relative}` `#{relative_gender_him_her}`self seemed a little embarrassed. When the lights went out, `#{relative_gender_he_she}` had taken control of the situation instantly, digging a torch out of a little drawer in the coffee table, grabbing Alix's hand, hurrying out the back door and across the lawn in a half crouch that Alix had automatically imitated. Now, in the artificial light of the bunker hidden beneath `#{relative_gender_his_hers}` garden shed, the `#{relative}` of old had returned, pre-occupied and hesitant.

"You take the armchair," `#{relative_gender_he_she}` said. "I was going to tune the radio anyway."

\*if family >25

"No way," said Alix, lowering herself to the rug. "Tune it from the comfort of the chair."

The 'radio' was a sleek, featureless silver box that `#{relative}` bought to life with a sweep of `#{relative_gender_his_hers}` hand. Noticing Alix's expression, `#{relative_gender_he_she}` shrugged. "Being part of the 'Protectorate Family' isn't [i]all[/i] bad."

The box emitted a crackle of static before stabilizing into a repeating message in an artificial voice, not a million miles away from Oju, the assistant on Alix's tracker, but a little deeper.

"... warnings in place for this region." Alix's heart hammered, but the message rolled on, indifferent. "Minor Scorpiid shower confirmed. Repeat: No meteor warnings in place for this region. Minor Scorpiid shower confirmed. Re-"

They both exhaled. `{relative}` made the hand motion again, and the radio fell silent.

"False alarm," `{relative_gender_he_she}` said. "Shall we go back to the house?"

They emerged from the shelter to find the lawn scattered with irregularly shaped pebbles, steaming in the dewy grass. The steam scared Alix more than she cared to admit.

```
*if positivity <25
```

```
    A rock was something with heft. A quick death. Steam? Didn't bear thinking about.
```

```
*if family >25
```

```
    "Another pot of tea?" asked Alix. Tea made everything better.
```

```
    *finish "I'll make this one."
```

```
*elseif not (petname = "") and (rock)
```

```
    *if not ((pet_type = "fish") or not (pet_type = "lizard"))
```

```
        {petname} will be frantic after that little outage."
```

```
said Alix.
```

```
        *goto home
```

```
    *else
```

```
        *goto home
```

```
*else
```

```
    *goto home
```

```
*label home
```

```
*finish "I should be going."
```

## rating\_outcome2

```
*temp petaction ""*temp missedcalls 0
```

```
*if (billie_gone)
```

Alix replayed their conversations in her head all the way home until it started to drive her crazy. As she climbed the stairs to her apartment, she tried again to log in to Wiff.net, desperate for the network to be back up, to give her the distraction she needed.

```
*goto billiecheck
```

```
*elseif (((daytrip) or (awards)) and (billie_present))
```

As they reached the apartment door, Alix tried to log into WIFF.net as discretely as possible. She didn't want Billie thinking she was so shallow she cared more about ratings than

```
*if (jodiealive)
```

the scorpiid shower, but right now, shallow didn't seem so bad.

```
*goto reason
```

```
*else
```

what had happened to Jodie, but she just needed one tiny thing that wasn't wildly outside her control.

```
*goto reason
```

```
*else
```

As Alix reached the door of her apartment a little later, she idly asked Oju to log in to WIFF.net, forgetting the problems she'd had with the network all the way home. It was so routine, checking her ratings. Almost obscenely routine after the shock of the scorpiid shower.

```
*goto reason
```

```
*label reason
```

That was part of the reason she did it. Good or bad, it was something normal. Something from her boring old life, the life before

```
*if not (jodiealive)
```

building collapses were milestones. The life when she and Jodie would send each other funny animal gifs and argue over how gif was pronounced.

```
*goto billiecheck
```

```
*else
```

meteor showers were added to the menu of extreme weather conditions.

```
*goto billiecheck
```

```
*label billiecheck
```

She removed her tracker from her wrist, intending to charge it when she got inside.

```
*if (billie_present)
```

```
*if not (visit)
```

"What are you doing?" asked Billie, poking her head over Alix's shoulder, cheeks red from the brisk walk. "You've got signal?"

"Oh, yeah, weird, must be back up."

"That site - is it ratemyfic.com?" asked Billie, already reaching for her own tracker, testing it yet again.

"Kinda," Alix admitted, shyly angling the screen away from her friend. "But it's original stories, not fanfictions."

"Of course," Billie nodded. "Silly me! You're way too creative to need to use someone else's ch- crap! Mine's still dead."

\*goto jodiecheck

\*else

A Stickapp came through from Billie,

\*if (coffee)

a hot chocolate with a smiling mug and animated steam. Alix was unsure whether it was in reference to their meeting, or an invitation for another. She'd have to reply later. A cookie with a question mark on it, maybe?

\*goto deluge

\*else

a piglet in a poncho. Alix smiled in spite of herself.

\*goto deluge

\*else

\*goto wiff

\*label jodiecheck

\*if not (jodiealive)

An uncomfortable pause.

"Look, Alix, I wasn't going to say anything about this, but it feels weird that we're both avoiding it, so... do you want to talk about Jodie?"

\*choice

#"Yes."

\*set dreams +5

As soon as she'd said it, Alix didn't know what to follow up with.

"It's okay," said Billie. "Take your time."

"I miss her already," said Alix. "We were nothing alike, I mean - you've seen her videos?"

"I'm not a regular viewer," Billie admitted, "but yes. I used her smokey eye tutorial for a work Christmas party."

"Well, exactly. We had virtually nothing in common, and yet...? I always felt like we were more on the same wavelength than Dietmar and Elizabeth, you know? Dookie's just so... much and Liz always tries to mother everyone. But Jodie and I? We had fun."

They sat in companionable silence for a moment. Alix wiped her eyes. "It sounds stupid," she said. "That that's all I can come up with to say about her."

"Hey," said Billie firmly. "From what little I know of her, Jodie would have loved that!"

\*page\_break Alix wasn't so sure.

\*goto deluge

#"No."

\*set career +5

Alix shook her head. What was there to say? My friend is dead and I could have stopped it? My friend would be alive if not for me. Alix swallowed, refusing to cry. She kept her focus fully on her tracker.

\*goto wiff

\*else

"Maybe because you're on the roving package?"

"I guess."

\*goto wiff

\*label deluge

A deluge of bleeps and notifications threatened to vibrate Alix's tracker straight off her wrist. The network was back.

\*if not (jodiealive)

Soon, Jodie's fans would know what had happened. Someone was sure to post about it. Should it be Alix? No. She was no good at that stuff. Better to leave that kind of thing to Elizabeth. Alix wiped her eyes again and sniffed.

\*page\_break She was holding it together.

Focussing on her tracker helped.

\*goto wiff

\*else

\*goto wiff

\*label wiff

\*if rating <6

After that  $\{rating\}$  out of 10, Alix couldn't help feeling a prickle of apprehension as she thumbed her login details into her tracker's screen.

```
*goto enterhome
*elseif rating >7
```

Even after everything that had happened in between, Alix still felt a tingle of pleasure at her previous  $\{rating\}$  out of 10. It was one small thing to keep her going when thoughts of her sick mother and the meteor's effects threatened to drag her down.

```
*if not (jodiealive)
    'Meteor's effects'. It sickened her that she couldn't
    even acknowledge Jodie's death properly in her thoughts. She kicked
    off her shoes angrily in the hallway, trying to keep her attention
    on the whirring buffer symbol instead.
```

```
*if (billie_gone)
    Could she pass the thing with Billie off as one of the
    meteor's effects? Like how people used to think the moon could send
    you crazy?
```

```
    *goto petcheck
*else
    *goto enterhome
```

```
*else
    *if jodiealive
```

```
        The login seemed to be taking forever.
        *goto enterhome
```

```
*else
    Alix finally took off her coat and shoes, checking the
    whirring buffer symbol every few seconds, desperate for a
    distraction from thinking about Jodie.
```

```
    *goto petcheck
```

```
*label enterhome
```

Waiting for the page to load, Alix swiped her fob over the access panel.

```
*if (billie_present)
    *if not (visit)
```

```
        Billie skipped inside offering to make a drink and
    proceeded to rattle around the small kitchen, asking for things
    like hazelnut syrup and coffee beans. Coffee beans! At this hour!
```

```
        Alix
        *goto sit
*else
```

```
        She
        *goto sit
```

```
*else
    She
```

```

        *goto sit

*label sit
had removed her coat, put away her shoes and curled up on the sofa
before the little whirring buffer symbol finally dissolved into her
stats page.
*if petname = ""
    *goto seerating
*else
    *goto petcheck

*label petcheck

*if pet_type = "cat"
    *set petaction "racing to hide under the kitchen table, tail
    lashing furiously."
    *goto squeal
*elseif pet_type = "dog"
    *set petaction "running a circuit round the furniture,
    barking ${pet_pronoun_his_her} head off."
    *goto squeal
*elseif pet_type = "rabbit"
    *set petaction "scurrying to hide under the kitchen table,
    ${pet_pronoun_his_her} hind feet skidding on the tiles."
    *goto squeal
*elseif pet_type = "fish"
    *set petaction "swimming furiously back and forth,
    ${pet_pronoun_his_her} tail churning the water into bubbles."
    *goto squeal
*elseif pet_type = "lizard"
    *set petaction "scurrying to hide in the faux rock cave in
    the corner of ${pet_pronoun_his_her} vivarium."
    *goto squeal
*else
    *set petaction "into a fury of squawking and trilling."
    *goto squeal

*label squeal
*if not (jodiealive)
    *goto seerating

*else
    Alix's involuntary squeal of excitement upset ${petname} and
    sent ${pet_pronoun_him_her} ${petaction}
    *goto seerating

*label seerating

A new rating. She touched the red notification dot and bit her lip
as the anonymous rating appeared on her screen.

${rating2}.

```

```

${rating2} out of 10.
*if (rating2 = rating)

    AGAIN.
*if ((rating2 <7) and (rating2 > rating))

    Well, it was an improvement on the last score, at least.
    *goto screenflash
*elseif ((rating >7) and (rating2 > rating))

    Wow. Now THAT was progress.
    *goto screenflash
*elseif ((rating <7) and (rating2 < rating))

    Ugh. She was going backwards.
    *goto screenflash
*elseif ((rating >7) and (rating2 < rating))

    Well, she couldn't expect to get ${rating} every time.
    *goto screenflash
*elseif ((rating >7) and (rating2 = rating))

    Why couldn't she be this consistent in every area of her
life?
    *goto screenflash
*elseif ((rating <7) and (rating2 = rating))

    Ugh, she was stagnating.
    *if positivity <25

        Not that she didn't know that already.
        *goto screenflash
    *else
        *goto screenflash
*else
    *goto screenflash

*label screenflash
*page_break "Message. Limit. Reached."
"What?"
*rand missedcalls 20 50

"You have ${missedcalls}. New. Messages." Oju informed her. Alix
tensed.

*if not (jodiealive)

    The guilt of checking her wiffnet score while Jodie lay dead
squeezed Alix's heart again. Dead and cold and undiscovered by the
emergency services. They'd been told to go home, that there was
nothing more to be done, but Dietmar and Elizabeth had stayed.
Perhaps this, and it was bound to be bad news, whatever it was,
${missedcalls} missed calls was never not bad news, perhaps this

```

was Alix's punishment for not being a better friend. Perhaps dad had been punishment for something else.

```
*goto messagecheck
*else
    *goto messagecheck
```

```
*label messagecheck
*if relative = ""
    *set relative "Aunt Maude"
    *set relative_gender_him_her "her"
    *set relative_gender_he_she "she"
    *set relative_gender_his_hers "hers"
    *goto message
*else
    *goto message
```

```
*label message
```

"Message. Left. Today. At. Eight PEE-em." Oju's voice gave way to  
\${relative}'s:

```
*if (visit)
```

"That damn scorpiid shower seems to have knocked out a relay somewhere. The hospital were trying to contact us for hours, Alix!

```
*if (auntmaudeadvice)
    I hope you remembered what I said at the party, Alix. I hope you were kind to her, because...
```

```
*goto plea
*else
    *goto plea
```

```
*else
```

"Where are you, Alix? The hospital have been trying to contact you for hours!

```
*goto plea
```

```
*label plea
```

You need to get to David Jones right away. Your mother's-

\${relative} continued, but Alix could no longer process the words. Her tracker slipped through her fingers.

```
*if (billie_present)
```

```
*if not (visit)
    She was vaguely aware of Billie lunging for it as it dropped,
```

```
*if positivity >25
    snatching it up before it hit the ground with reflexes that would have made dad proud. But she couldn't find any words to thank her friend because every atom of her being was focussed on keeping her upright, keeping her on her feet, propelling her in the direction of the hospital just as soon as she was able to start
```

```
                *page_break moving again.
                *finish
            *else
                but she wasn't quick enough.
                *goto smash
        *else
            She was vaguely aware of a vidcall coming through from
            Billie, made a vain attempt to catch the tracker and accidentally
            accepted the call instead.
                *goto smash
    *else
        *goto smash

*label smash
```

The face hit the ground first. The casing cracked, but fortunately the screen didn't shatter.

"Your warranty is now invalid." Oju intoned.

"My warranty is now invalid," Alix echoed, unaware of what she was saying, a ventriloquist's dummy spouting someone else's words, parroted phrases barely audible over the sound of her own hammering heart.

```
*if (billie_present)
```

```
        In the distance Billie was saying: "Alix? Alix?" until that
        too became a meaningless, repetitive noise.
*finish Meaningless, repetitive noise.
```

## ch4

```
*comment *image Ch4_Still_Sat.png*gosub_scene
csideimg_ch4_still_sat
*temp relative_present false
*temp billie_ward false
*temp relative_name ""
*temp relative_title ""
*temp whos_outside ""
DJ Memorial looked different by daylight. [i]This could really be
it.[/i] The multi-storey car park buzzed with life and movement.
[i]The end.[/i] If you could afford hospital, you could afford a
car, usually. Alix couldn't. She
*if (billie_present)
    and Billie
had arrived in a taxi. Its paintwork was peeling and there was a
rust hole in the boot. Water dripped from the exhaust - its
converter was clearly failing.
*if (billie_present)
    Billie had to install a new app just to call it.
```

The driver had seemed bemused to be called out, but eager for the work. The car didn't have a payer installed, so Alix had to connect direct to his tracker. She had turned on every available piece of protective software first.

Now in the car park, Alix watched sons in suits push mothers in wheelchairs up the spiralling ramps to waiting saloons and people carriers. Kids on crutches manoeuvred nimbly over the speed bumps and into minis and hatchbacks and escorts driven by grandparents and aunts and uncles. She felt a little dazed. Shaking her head to clear it, she

```
*choice
    #jogged down the spiral ramp.
    *goto ward
    #pressed the call button for the lift.
    *if not (visit)
        *goto ward
    *else
        *set relative_present true
        *if relative = "Aunt Maude"
            *set relative_name "Maude"
            *set relative_title "Aunt"
            *goto ward
        *elseif relative = "Uncle Simon"
            *set relative_name "Simon"
            *set relative_title "Uncle"
            *goto ward
```

```
*label ward
```

Past the purple gravel and the dusty leaves, past the nurse on reception and her dirty books, down the pungent buffed corridors and into the Protectorate Pledge Wing with its gouged sign and paintings of muted coloured nothings in plain pine frames. Had she

become an orphan during that brief taxi ride? During that walk from reception to ward?

Above the fob panel was a key pad, for emergencies. The most used buttons on the keypad had lost their numbers. The one, the six, the two, eroded away to plain silver from all those tapping fingers. But that was for staff to worry about. Alix swiped her fob, just like home and the door light blinked green, just like home. This was her second home, in a way.

```
*if (billie_present)
```

```
    Billie hovered in the doorway, clearly uncertain about whether to proceed.
```

```
        *if billie_mood = "angry"
```

```
            Who could blame her? They weren't exactly getting along great right now.
```

```
        *if billie >30
```

```
            "I... I could really use you coming in here with me," Alix said, barely recognising her own voice. "That is, if you don't mind." Billie smiled and gave Alix's forearm a squeeze.
```

```
            "Right with you, chief," she said, and her voice sounded different too.
```

```
                *set billie_ward true
```

```
                *goto steel_door
```

```
        *else
```

```
            She rubbed the back of her neck awkwardly and looked away. "I think this is a moment for you and your mum, don't you?" Oh well. It wasn't as if Alix wasn't used to going alone.
```

```
                *goto steel_door
```

```
*label steel_door
```

```
Alix steeled herself for whatever was on the other side of the door.
```

```
*page_break THUNK!
```

```
While she dithered, the door lock had engaged and she hurt her elbow shoving against the unresisting metal.
```

```
*if (billie_present)
```

```
    She gave Billie an embarrassed smile.
```

```
She swiped her fob again, pushing the door immediately this time...
```

```
*page_break ...electronic hinges whirred softly...
```

```
...to reveal Annie
```

```
*if (relative_present)
```

```
    and ${relative} standing by the window together.
```

```
    *goto doctor
```

```
*else
```

```
    standing in front of the window.
```

"You just missed your `{relative}`," said Annie. Then, muttering: "`!{relative_gender_he_she}` actually made an effort to get here, even if `{relative_gender_he_she}` didn't stick around."  
\*goto doctor

\*label doctor

A doctor, previously lounging in the visitors' chair making airnotes leapt to her feet as Alix  
\*if (billie\_ward)  
    and Billie  
entered.

"I thought you were dying," Alix said softly, joining her. She couldn't help staring - how could this bundle of sticks in a hospital gown be her mother? The doctor exchanged a glance with  
\*if ((relative\_present) and (billie\_ward))  
    `{relative}` and Billie.  
    \*goto pretence  
\*elseif (relative\_present)  
    `{relative}`.  
    \*goto pretence  
\*elseif (billie\_ward)  
    Billie.  
    \*goto pretence  
\*else  
    Annie.  
    \*goto pretence

\*label pretence  
Alix pretended not to notice.

"Seems you were misinformed, no doubt by this idiot." Annie inclined her head towards  
\*if (relative\_present)  
    `{relative}`.

`{relative}` continued to gaze out of the window, `{relative_gender_his_hers}` mouth a tight line. "Your heartbeat was erratic. You were struggling for breath. Your eyes... your eyes..."  
    \*goto doctor2  
\*else  
    the doctor.  
    \*goto doctor2

\*label doctor2

"Let's not overexert ourselves now, shall we?" asked the doctor, a tall woman, her hair up in two neatly pinned buns like mouse ears.

"On the contrary," said Annie, turning towards them, "I feel better than I have in ages."

Alix took a step back.

```
*if (billie_ward)
```

```
    If Billie hadn't been there to catch her, she probably would
    have gone sprawling to the floor.
```

Annie's eyes blazed. Not in their usual smug know-it-all way, but with a bright green fire like copper sulphate on a naked flame. With her yellowing emaciated body and those beautiful, terrible other-worldly eyes, she looked increasingly like an alien imitation of Annie Akerman, a frightening replica of the real thing.

It took all Alix's strength not to back all the way up to the door. Her mother

```
*if annie >30
```

```
    seemed hurt by
```

```
    *goto fear
```

```
*else
```

```
    seemed to be revelling in
```

```
    *goto fear
```

```
*label fear
```

her daughter's barely concealed fear and revulsion. Alix addressed the doctor, but did her best to hold her mother's gaze out of principle.

```
*choice
```

```
    #"So, she's okay? It was a false alarm?"
```

```
        *set family +10
```

```
        *set billie +5
```

```
        *set annie +5
```

```
        *goto doctor3
```

```
    #"What's wrong with her eyes? Why are they like that?"
```

```
        *set family -5
```

```
        *set annie -5
```

```
        *goto doctor3
```

```
    #"Thank you doctor, you can leave us now."
```

```
        *set annie +10
```

```
        *set dreams +5
```

```
        *set family +5
```

```
        *goto doctor4
```

```
*label doctor3
```

```
"Well,
```

```
*if (relative_present)
```

```
    your ${relative_title} is correct.
```

```
    *goto arrhythmia
```

```
*else
```

```
    *goto arrhythmia
```

```
*label arrhythmia
```

Annie suffered a bout of arrhythmia and some shortness of breath. We've fitted her with a portable ECG, so we'll be immediately aware

of any sudden changes, but it seems she's stabilised now." The doctor held up her tracker as proof. Little peaks and troughs blipped across its screen. "We're still in somewhat uncharted territory as far as Annie's genetic modifications go. My best guess is the implanted genetic material has been displaced from its activity sites and is accreting around the organs, the eyes being the most visible. When we have the scans and bloodworks back, we'll have a better idea."

"No you won't," said Annie. She sounded pleased, like she got a kick out of being a medical mystery.

```
*if (billie_ward)
```

```
    "Anyway, who's this? Don't I get an introduction? Ashamed of your mutant mother?"
```

```
*if (anniescarf)
```

```
    "I got you a scarf!" Alix blurted.
```

```
*if (relative_present)
```

```
    "Isn't it time we... made arrangements?" said ${relative}.
```

```
    *goto doctor4
```

```
*else
```

```
    *goto doctor4
```

```
*label doctor4
```

At that, the doctor quietly slipped outside, her tracker still blipping softly along with Annie's heart.

Annie tilted her head, clearly waiting for more from her daughter.

```
*if (anniescarf)
```

```
    Alix looked down at her empty hands, her cheeks colouring. "I really did buy you a present this time, I did. It arrived, but I left it at the apartment. It's purple, with silver and..." she trailed off, too uncomfortable to continue.
```

```
*if (billie_ward)
```

```
    It was then that Billie did the unthinkable. She stepped forward, folded Annie into a hug and said: "Hi Mrs Akerman, I'm Billie. It's an honour to meet you!"
```

```
    *if annie >25
```

```
        Annie did the unthinkable right back. She not only accepted Billie's hug, but squeezed her tight and said: "The famous Billie! Finally she brings you to visit." Alix was gobsmacked. She'd never mentioned Billie to Annie, she was sure of it. She was always so careful where Billie was concerned.
```

```
        *goto relativecheck2
```

```
    *else
```

Over Billie's shoulder, those green eyes flashed. Alix swallowed. Was she going to pay for this later? As soon as Billie let go, Annie was behaving as if the exchange had never happened.

```
*goto relativecheck2
*else
    *goto relativecheck2

*label relativecheck2
*if (relative_present)
    "Arrangements?" Alix finally caught on to what her
    ${relative_title} had said. Annie seemed to have missed the entire
    exchange, distracted by her own reflection.
```

She had picked up a bedside mirror and was squinting into it. Alix couldn't tell whether Annie was examining those eyes or her altogether changed complexion.

```
*if (relative_present)

    "Can't wait until I'm dead before picking over my corpse,
    ${relative_name}?" She hadn't missed a thing.
```

```
    "Annie..." ${relative} sounded tired. Exhausted. "I'm just
    thinking of Alix. She'll have a lot to deal with and-"
*if annie <20
```

```
    "When it's all said and done, put me in the bin, set me on
    fire, throw me out to sea or something, save yourself the bother!"
    *if (billie_ward)
        *goto stop
    *else
        *goto listening
*else
```

```
    "I'm thinking make an event of it, you know - everyone has to
    wear purple, have a ceilidh, eat little sausages on sticks, it'll
    be fun!"
```

```
    *if (billie_ward)
        *goto stop
    *else
        *goto listening
```

```
*label listening
She had been paying attention after all.
*goto stop
```

```
*label stop
```

```
"STOP IT!" said Alix, clenching her fists.
```

```
*if ((billie_ward) or (relative_present))
    They were
    *goto strange
*else
    Annie was
```

\*goto strange

\*label strange

looking at her strangely. Taken aback, but with a touch of admiration. Suddenly Alix was ten years old again, her parents stitching one another's wounds over the kitchen table and joking about having matching coffins. She'd hated it then and she hated it now - premature funeral planning.

Slowly Alix exhaled. She glanced out at the patio where a kid in an oxygen mask limped in a halting circuit, watched over by a nurse.

"I need some air.

\*choice

  #Alone."

    \*set career +5

    \*set family -5

    \*set annie -5

    \*goto outside

  #Join me, Annie?"

    \*set family +5

    \*set Annie +10

    \*set whos\_outside "Annie"

    \*goto outside

  \*if (billie\_ward)

    #Come with, Billie?"

      \*set dreams +5

      \*set billie +5

      \*set whos\_outside "Billie"

      \*goto outside

  \*if (relative\_present)

    #How about you, \${relative}?"

      \*set family +10

      \*if relative = "Aunt Maude"

        \*set whos\_outside "Aunt Maude"

        \*goto outside

      \*elseif relative = "Uncle Simon"

        \*set whos\_outside "Uncle Simon"

        \*goto outside

\*label outside

Alix slid the patio door aside and stepped out into the courtyard. The perks of being ex-Protectorate: a pretty hole to go and die in.

\*if not (whos\_outside = "")

  As if reading her mind, \${whos\_outside} said: "It could be worse, I suppose."

  "Really? How?"

On the other side of the courtyard, the kid had come to a stop and was staring up into the sky, arm outstretched. Alix's first

thought was 'meteorite!' but the kid didn't look afraid. Balding and pinched and unafraid, somewhat like Annie.

```

*if whos_outside = "Billie"
    *if ((petname = "") or (pet_type = "fish"))

        "You could have a hairy back and smell like a burst
        sewage pipe."
        *goto jesus
    *else

        "${petname} could have been run over by a lorry right in
        front of you and popped like a water balloon."
        *goto jesus
*elseif ((whos_outside = "Aunt Maude") or (whos_outside = "Uncle
Simon"))

    ${relative} made a face. "Oh, I don't know. It's just what
    people say, isn't it?" ${relative_gender_he_she} picked at a
    loose thread on ${relative_gender_his_hers} sleeve.
    *if ((whos_outside = "Uncle Simon") and (simonsecret))

        "Is that what people said to you... about Aunt Maggie?"

        Simon yanked the thread, popping several stitches.
        "Goddamit!"

        "I'm sorry," Alix said immediately. "I'm sorry, I
        shouldn't have brought it up, it's none of my business."

        "It's ok," he said, but he looked sick. "How do you
        think an oddball like me had any connection whatsoever with the
        protectorate?"

        "You're military."

        "So are a lot of people, doesn't mean they brushed
        shoulders with the special forces on a daily basis. And I was a
        cook. Did your parents never tell you that?"

        Alix shifted her weight uncomfortably. Truth be told,
        the only thing her parents had told her about Simon was to be nice
        to him, no matter how oddly he might behave at times.

        "Well," Simon said, clearly reading her thoughts in her
        features. "I'm not surprised, because it was Maggie they were
        friends with really, not me." Alix made small noises of
        protestation, but he snorted and said: "It hardly matters now.
        They've more than paid their dues, whatever. Maggie was the first
        one to show signs of-" He gestured over his shoulder towards Annie,
        who had taken to her bed
        *if (billie_ward)
            and was now chatting to Billie
            *goto hell

```

```

        *else
            *goto hell
    *else

        "D'you ever feel like it's all a waste of time?" Alix
        blurted.

        ${relative} gave her a long, appraising look. "All
        what?"

        "The parties, the media, trying to go on as normal,
        everything."
        *if positivity >45
            ${relative} shook ${relative_gender_his_hers} head
            vehemently.

            "No. Never. No time spent trying to make things
            better is ever wasted. Whether it's for five minutes or fifty
            years. And what else are we going to? Descend into orgies and
            pitchfork mobs?"

            *goto nose
        *else

            ${relative} gave up on the thread, let
            ${relative_gender_his_hers} fingers drop to
            ${relative_gender_his_hers} side. "Maybe. But I suppose it's better
            than a return to what happened when the news broke. All that
            rioting, the fires, the... other stuff."

            *goto nose
        *elseif whos_outside = "Annie"

            "Why aren't you afraid?" asked Alix, before Annie could even
            attempt to answer the first question.
            *if annie >20

                "Seems I've already faced the worst there is."
                *goto meaning
            *else
                Annie shrugged and rubbed her stick arms. It was mild
                outside, airless if anything, yet she shivered.
                *goto meaning
        *else
            Alix glanced back through the patio door.
            *if ((billie_ward) and (relative_present))
                They were all chatting like they'd known each other
                years.
                *goto feeling
            *elseif (billie_ward)
                Billie
                *goto book
            *elseif (relative_present)
                ${relative}
                *goto book

```

```

    *else
        Annie
        *goto book

*label nose

Alix wrinkled her nose.
*goto butterfly

*label hell
.

"Whatever the hell happens to them when the gene splicing starts to
fail." He pinched the bridge of his nose.
*goto butterfly

*label book
had picked up a book and was nonchalantly flipping through it.
*goto feeling

*label feeling
Alix had that feeling again, the one she'd had all her life, like
she was outside looking in. Maybe that's why she'd got so hooked on
making MyBoxx videos - it gave her the chance to be inside looking
out for once. She took a deep breath,
*if positivity <40
    but it just made her eyes sting all the more, heavy with
suppressed tears. She blinked hard and turned back to the
courtyard.
    *goto butterfly
*else
    it helped a little. She took a couple more and turned back to
the courtyard.
    *goto butterfly

*label jesus

"Jesus! Billie!" But Alix was laughing. Some of the tension eased.
She only realised her shoulders had been hunched when they dropped
back to their normal position.

"Hey, wouldya look at that!" Billie elbowed Alix and pointed across
the courtyard.
*goto butterfly

*label meaning

"Which means?" Alix prompted.
*if Annie >30
    Annie held Alix's gaze. "My husband's dead and my daughter
hates me." Her mouth twitched like she had a living creature
clamped tight in there and it was fighting to get out, but Alix
barely noticed, transfixed by those eyes.

```

```

        *goto butterfly
*else
    A shake of the head, hands clasped over her stomach, possibly
    in pain. Alix sighed. Always the same. Pain and silence.
        *goto outdoorchecks

*label butterfly

A purple butterfly alighted on the kid's outstretched fingers.
Nurse and kid alike oohed and aahed over it.
*if positivity >35
    Alix had thought all the butterflies had died, was sure she'd
    seen a news report to that effect, and yet here was this little
    guy, proving everyone wrong.
        *goto outdoorchecks
*else
    Probably wouldn't last the day.
        *goto outdoorchecks

*label outdoorchecks
*if ((whos_outside = "Uncle Simon") and (simonsecret))

    "Alix, she went so fast." Simon's voice cracked. He hadn't
    even noticed the butterfly. "Just be grateful for this time with
    your mother, that's all I can say. Treasure every last second."
        *goto relativechoice
*elseif ((whos_outside = "Uncle Simon") or (whos_outside = "Aunt
Maude"))

    "Look, the thing is, Alix, you don't have to do this on your
    own," said ${relative} after the butterfly had fluttered away once
    more. "I'll always be here for you, even after- Even after.
    Especially after. Remember that."
        *goto relativechoice
*elseif whos_outside = "Billie"

    Before they went back inside, Alix just had to say it.
    *choice
        #"Thanks Billie, for everything."
            *set alix +10
            *set billie +5
            *goto backinside
        #"All of this has been a huge mistake. I'm sorry."
            *set billie -10
            *set alix -10
            *set billie_mood "angry"
            *goto backinside
        #"I don't know what I'd do without you Billie,
seriously."
            *set alix +10
            *set billie +10
            *set billie_mood "smitten"
            *goto backinside

```

```
*elseif whos_outside = "Annie"
```

Every time Alix thought Annie had done the most frustrating thing she could possibly do, she found some new way to be infuriating. Alix's voice shook as she said the words:

```
*choice
```

```
    #"Have it your way."
```

```
        *set family -5
```

```
        *set annie -10
```

```
        *set alix -5
```

Alix turned on her heel and went back inside. She hardened her heart as Annie struggled to close to the patio door, burying her nose in her tracker so she couldn't be drawn into any further loaded conversations.

```
        *if (billie_ward)
```

Billie was watching them with a confused frown, but Alix matched it with one of her own, as if whatever she was reading on her tracker was important and perplexing.

```
            *gosub attributecheck
```

```
            *goto voicemails
```

```
        #"I [i]love[/i] you, you insufferable woman."
```

```
            *set family +10
```

```
            *set annie +10
```

```
            *set positivity +5
```

```
            *goto anniereact
```

```
*else
```

```
    *goto backinside
```

```
*label relativechoice
```

```
*choice
```

```
    #She nodded.
```

```
        *set family +5
```

```
        *set alix +10
```

```
        *goto backinside
```

```
    #What was there to say to that? Nothing.
```

```
        *set family -5
```

```
        *set alix -5
```

```
        *goto backinside
```

#Alix wasn't much of a hugger, but if ever there was a time, this was it.

```
        *set family +10
```

```
        *set alix +5
```

```
        *set annie +5
```

```
        *goto backinside
```

```
*label backinside
```

```
*if whos_outside = "Billie"
```

Billie stayed outside a moment. She said it was to watch the butterfly some more, but she wiped her eyes when she thought she was no longer in Alix's periphery.

```
    *goto backinside2
```

```
*elseif whos_outside = "Annie"
```

```
    Annie struggled a little with the step, grimacing.
```

```

        *goto backinside2
*elseif ((whos_outside = "Aunt Maude") or (whos_outside = "Uncle
Simon"))
    Alix stood to one side and let ${relative} go back in first.
    *goto backinside2
*else
    *goto backinside2

*label backinside2

Alix returned to the hospital room, leaving behind thoughts of
*if positivity >35
    against the odds
    *goto backinside3
*else
    doomed
    *goto backinside3

*label backinside3
butterflies.
*page_break She slid the patio door shut.
*if ((whos_outside = "Annie") and ((relative_present) and
(billie_ward)))

    ${relative} and Billie were
    *goto backinside4
*elseif ((whos_outside = "Annie") and (relative_present))

    ${relative} was
    *goto backinside4
*elseif ((whos_outside = "Annie") and (billie_ward))

    Billie was
    *goto backinside4
*else

    Annie had clambered back into her bed and was
    *set whos_outside ""
    *goto backinside4

*label backinside4
looking at Alix expectantly, so she buried her nose in her tracker
to get out of any awkward conversations.
*gosub attributecheck
*goto voicemails

*label attributecheck
*temp mainstat
*set mainstat "dreams"
*temp mainstatval
*set mainstatval dreams
*if family > mainstatval
    *set mainstat "family"

```

```

        *set mainstatval family
*if career > mainstatval
        *set mainstat "career"
        *set mainstatval career
*return

*label voicemails
*page_break Textbook avoidance tactic.
There was a notification.
*if mainstat = "career"
        A videomail from a code Alix didn't recognise. She slipped in
her earbud and pressed play:
        *if career >45
                A woman in a navy blue suit, sitting at a desk somewhere
with a cityscape view. "Alix, this is Melanie," she said, smiling a
toothpaste advert smile. "I'm head of Talent Acquisition at MyBoxx
Gold, and after your
                *if (awardwin)
                        recent award success,
                *goto premium
        *else
                your most recent upload,
                *goto premium
        *else
                It was Chad Chen, of all people. He looked a little
slimmer than he had at the MyBoxx Awards, younger too, like this
might be an old vid- Oh no.

                "Dear... LIXXIL..." said Chad, although the 'Lixxil' had
a strange emphasis, clearly dubbed - a syllable by syllable
reconstruction using snippets of Chad's voice that didn't fit
together quite right. "As you know, MyBoxx values all its content
creators. However, in light of the recent economic downturn, we can
only offer financial recompense to those Boxxers who score in the
absolute top rating figures across a variety of metrics, and we're
sorry to say that you fell short of our new algorithmic
requirements. We hope you'll continue to contribute to MyBoxx even
without the added bonus of a consistent revenue stream. Chen out."

                Alix remembered when rumours of that video first
surfaced. She'd dismissed it as a hoax, thinking MyBoxx would never
be so crass as to dismiss its contributors in such a faceless,
corporate manner.
                *set positivity -5
                *set job_lost true
                *goto unbelievable
*elseif mainstat = "dreams"
        Oju was clever enough to automatically mute alerts when
entering a hospital, so Alix had missed this one. An email. A
little old school, but for small companies they were a helluva lot
cheaper than vids.
        *if dreams >50

```

It was from Zest, a publisher of short story anthologies Alix had submitted to a little while ago. Alix swallowed and opened the message.

```
*if ((rating) + (rating2)) >15
    [b]... we're pleased to inform you that your short
story "The Superpower of Being Ordinary" has been accepted for
publication and will appear in Zest Zine volume ten. Please
complete the attached...[/b]
    *set positivity +5
    *goto alixreact
*else
    [b]... we regret to inform you...[/b]
    *goto alixreact
*else
```

It was from WIFF.net. More ratings had come in. A suspicious amount. Alix swallowed and opened the message.

Someone had linked to her WIFF.net profile under one of her videos. More than a thousand ratings had come in all at once. In some ways, it was better than reading each individual rating. One short, sharp shock, and there they all were, aggregated and averaged.

```
*if ((rating) + (rating2)) >15
    9.7 overall. Wow.
    *set positivity +5
    *goto alixreact
*else
    1.3 overall. Yikes.
    *set positivity -5
    *goto alixreact
*elseif mainstat = "family"
```

Spam. The ruse of message-checking wouldn't last long if all she had to read was a mail from a lost astronaut needing her to note him money so he could get-

```
*if family >50
    Annie was calling out softly. "Alix. Alix."
```

Alix looked up from her tracker.

```
*if whos_outside = "Annie"
```

Annie had given up trying to tuck herself back into bed and instead lay awkwardly on top of the covers.

```
*set whos_outside ""
*goto glazed
*else
    *goto glazed
*else
    *goto interruption2
```

```
*label glazed
```

Her mother's eyes had a slightly glazed look, but she was apparently aware of Alix's gaze, because she patted the bed beside her, inviting Alix to sit.

```
Alix complied
*if annie >25
    willingly.
    *goto annieslastwords
*else
    warily.
    *goto annieslastwords
```

```
*label annieslastwords
*if annie >30
```

"I know I haven't been the most understanding mother, or the nicest mother, or the most... motherly, even, but," Annie swallowed and her throat made a clicking sound like beetle wings. "You know I love you, right?" For the first time since her mother took ill, Alix was terrified. Following Annie's first collapse, Alix had developed a dull awareness that her mother was dying, an unpleasant background buzz like a fly slowly expiring in the windowsill. On the way to the hospital, that had reached a crescendo, roaring in her ears until she thought her head would explode. But what was happening now was worse. There was nothing. No buzz, no awareness, just numbness and silence, on and on, rolling over her like waves, drowning her. She couldn't catch her breath to speak, to say the words back. She was almost scared to, because of the added weight they carried, the undertones of goodbye.

```
    *goto goodbye
*else
```

"I know everything's going to shit, but at least you'll have some spare funds when I cark it. Just take the cash and leave. The public bunkers, even the well-managed ones, they're bullshit. Trust me on this - there's not going to be enough room, or food, it'll be a horror show. But there's this captain, his number's in one of `#{relative_name}`'s boxes in the attic, you know the ones. We had a thing, when I was at military school. Before your father. Anyway, he has some program, some high level bunker filled with rich arseholes and indispensable geniuses. Codename is Ark, they just love their Biblical references, but it could be your best chance." She went on and on, babbling, delirious.

```
    *goto goodbye
```

```
*label goodbye
```

Annie gripped Alix's wrist and that bony hand was hot, terrifyingly hot, Alix could feel her skin reddening under the touch. This was it.

```
"NURSE!" Alix yelled. "DOCTOR! NURSE! SOMEONE!"
*goto interruption
```

\*label alixreact

Alix clutched her tracker to her chest and looked up at the-  
\*goto interruption

\*label premium

we would love to have you on board making some premium content for us.

\*if not (video1)

    \*goto callback

\*else

    \*if videotype = "pet"

        Your little \${pet\_type} is just adorable, by the way. No wonder it raked in all those hits!

        \*goto callback

    \*elseif videotype = "hosp"

        Those hospital workers are [i]so[/i] brave, I have to say. Content with heart is exactly what we're looking at.

        \*goto callback

    \*elseif videotype = "boxx"

        You've really hit on something with the whole 'A day in the life of a Boxxer' thing, I think. Our research shows users will pay more for that kind of content.

        \*goto callback

    \*elseif videotype = "party"

        You definitely opened my eyes to a new cultural phenomenon with your Aunt's end of the world parties. I thought they'd be more... raucous, somehow. But your video had real pathos.

        \*goto callback

\*label callback

Anyway, when you get a minute, call me back." She pressed a button on her desk, and her contact code filled the screen in large white numerals. Alix hurriedly saved it and closed the call.

\*set positivity +5

\*goto unbelievable

\*label unbelievable

Unbelievable. Alix had always struggled with the idea that she might be wasting her time making videos what with the meteor and her mother and everything, but now?

\*page\_break She couldn't think straight.

\*goto interruption

\*label anniereact

"Oh. Really? Well." Annie hugged herself tighter.

\*if annie >20

    "I've already made the will you know. You don't have to suck up."

    \*goto alixresponse

\*else

"Amazing what people talk themselves into believing with a massive space rock looming over their heads."

\*goto alixresponse

\*label alixresponse

\*if ((positivity >30) or (annie >45))

Alix surprised herself by laughing. "You are such a cow."

Annie let out a snort that sent the butterfly fluttering back into the sky. The kid looked crestfallen, but Annie was laughing too hard to care. "Then we make a good pair 'cause you're a moose," she coughed. Alix patted her back and helped her back inside as she wheezed and choked, both of them smiling around pain.

\*goto backinside2

\*else

Well, she had really tried, and still, Annie was terrible. She was already shuffling back inside without so much as a second glance for Alix.

\*goto backinside2

\*label interruption

\*if whos\_outside = "Annie"

Annie trudged back across the room, and clambered onto the bed like it was a mountain peak.

\*goto interruption2

\*else

\*goto interruption2

\*label interruption2

\*page\_break An alarm.

The alarm connected to Annie's heart, or her lungs, or both. It was sounding. Annie went stiff, eyes wide, bulging, the green in them glowing brighter, it seemed, although that could have just been because she was staring unblinking at the lights overhead.

\*if (billie\_ward)

Billie knocked over the leather visitor's armchair in her haste to make room for the crash team that rushed in.

\*if (relative\_present)

`\${relative}` looped `\${relative\_gender\_his\_hers}` arm across Alix's chest and half carried her to the doorway as the team of doctors and nurses surrounded Annie's bed, calling medical jargon to one another and making quick checks on Annie's eyes, her pulse, her airways. Alix fought and struggled, because someone had to. Annie certainly wasn't.

A tired-looking surgeon burst into the room and barked: "Outside, please," before pulling up his mask. "Why's this AI off?" he grumbled, flicking a switch on the overhead unit. As the AI found its voice, Alix finally found hers too, and said: "Please!" She didn't know what she was pleading for. She was led outside as the

AI reeled off Annie's vitals, a sequence of ever-decreasing numbers.

One nurse took up position outside the door, hand poised over the hazard foam control, while another ushered

```
*if ((relative_present) or (billie_ward))
```

```
    them
```

```
        *goto vendingmachines
```

```
*else
```

```
    Alix
```

```
        *goto vendingmachines
```

```
*label vendingmachines
```

to the waiting area and swiped a hospital-issue fob against the vending machines for snacks no-one would eat.

```
*if ((billie_present) and not (billie_ward))
```

Billie joined them, returning from wherever she'd been waiting. She didn't ask what they were doing or what was happening. It was written all over their faces.

```
*finish Hours passed
```

### rating3

[i>Welcome to wiff.net, the Writers' Independent Fiction Forum.[/i]\*line\_break

[i>The following extract was submitted by [/i>[b]Lixxil[/b][/i]. We thank you for taking the time to read it.[/i]

Writing and reading are a strange partnership. I sit here and write this now, and you sit there and read it now, but for both of us, 'now' means something different. By the time you read this, my world could have ended. You could be reading it as your world is ending, without even knowing it. And this looking glass through which you view me, you think it's one way, but it isn't. It's taken me a while to piece it all together, but I think I always knew about you. I sensed you were there.

That first  $\{rating\}$  out of 10 that made me so

```
*if rating >6
    happy.
    *goto then
*elseif rating <5
    sad.
    *goto then
*else
    unsure of myself.
    *goto then
```

```
*label then
```

That was you. And then you followed it up with that  $\{rating2\}$  and

```
*if rating2 >6
    I felt only relief.
    *goto box
*elseif rating2 <5
    that really took the wind out of my sails.
    *goto box
*else
    I didn't know what to think.
    *goto box
```

```
*label box
```

That box left on my doorstep to see how I'd react, that was down to you too, indirectly.

```
*if not (rock)
    *if not (pet_type = "")
        So I suppose I have you to thank for  $\{petname\}$ .
        *goto mother
    *else
        *goto mother
*else
    *goto mother
```

```
*label mother
```

My

```

*if (((annie >15) and (positivity >30)) or ((annie >45) and
(positivity >15)))
    improved
    *goto relationship
*elseif annie <5
    terrible
    *goto relationship
*else
    mediocre
    *goto relationship

*label relationship
relationship with my mother, my
*if billie >15
    wonderful
    *goto friendship
*elseif (((billie <5) or (billie = "angry")) or (billie_gone))
    doomed
    *goto friendship
*else
    non-existent
    *goto friendship

*label friendship
friendship with Billie, you played your part in those too.

So thank you.

*if (rating + rating2) > 15

    Thank you for believing in me even when I didn't.
    *goto mother2
*elseif (rating + rating2) >10

    Thank you for bothering to leave a score, even if sometimes
you were left cold by my words.
    *goto mother2
*else

    Thank you for reminding me that I don't do this for anyone's
approval but my own.
    *goto mother2

*label mother2
*if annie>15
    Thank you for giving me those helpful nudges towards a woman
who at times I was convinced hated me and didn't want me.
    *goto friendship2
*elseif annie <5
    Thank you for making me feel like I was justified in
distancing myself from someone who distanced themselves from me my
entire life.
    *goto friendship2

```

```

*else
    *goto friendship2

*label friendship2
*if billie >15
    Thank you for encouraging me to embrace a friend who I needed
more than I ever could have imagined, and who has enriched my
    life beyond all reckoning.
    *goto focus
*elseif billie <5
    Thank you for teaching me I need to stand on my own two feet
and can't use others as an emotional crutch.
    *goto focus
*else
    *goto focus

*label focus
*temp mainstat
*set mainstat "family"
*temp mainstatval
*set mainstatval family
*if career > mainstatval
    *set mainstat "career"
    *set mainstatval career
*if dreams > mainstatval
    *set mainstat "dreams"
    *set mainstatval dreams
*goto statoutcome

*label statoutcome
*if mainstat = dreams
    Thank you for encouraging me to follow my dreams.
    *goto thanks
*elseif mainstat = career
    Thank you for encouraging me to knuckle down and work hard to
achieve the things that are important to me.
    *if (awardwin)
        Although that MyBoxx award was all me.
        *goto thanks
    *else
        *goto thanks
*else
    Thank you for helping me see the value of those around me,
even if their endless parties seem stupid.
    *if (simonsecret)
        And for my opening my eyes to the additional traumas
some of them have been through.
        *goto thanks
    *elseif (anniejoker)
        And for making me realise that my mother wasn't always
the bitter husk she is now.
        *goto thanks
    *else

```

```
*goto thanks

*label thanks
Thank you for being there, for seeing this through, whatever this
is.
*if ((positivity >20) and (alix >15))
    Perhaps someday we'll meet.
    *goto whatever
*elseif (positivity >20)
    Perhaps you'll read my next story too.
    *goto whatever
*else
    Perhaps this is goodbye.
    *goto whatever

*label whatever
Whatever happens

[i]Thank you for reading. Please now rate the piece on a scale of
1-10. (With 1 representing 'What the hell is this crap?!' [/i]
[i]up to 10[/i] [i]'The finest creative work since time
immemorial.'[/i])

*input_number rating3 1 10

*finish Thank you.
```

## ch5

```
*comment *image Ch5_Sun.png*gosub_scene csideimg_ch5_sun
*temp petretrieval false
*comment Records whether or not anyone has gone to fetch Alix's
pet.
*temp retriever ""
*comment Records *who* has gone to fetch Alix's pet.
*temp petcarrier ""
*temp pethome ""
*temp petcatcher ""
*temp scarfretrieval false
*temp scarfretriever ""
*temp petreact ""
*temp hug ""
*temp driven false
*temp shelter ""
*comment Records where Alix ends up taking shelter. Possible
variables are "bus", "hospital" "dietmars" and "apartment"
depending on the choices Alix makes.
*temp code 1000
*temp relativename ""
*temp relativetitle ""
*temp otherrelative ""
*temp bunkerbuddy ""
*temp alix_ward false
*temp pet_ward false
*temp visited_scarfpickup false
*temp crack false
*comment records if Alix has anyone with her when heading to the
hospital bunker. Could be "Billie", "Aunt Maude", "Uncle Simon",
"Billie and Maude" or "Billie and Simon".
```

Doctors and nurses fluttered around her like moths, their words drifting against her ears. "Stabilised... life-signs... poor prognosis..." Alix waved them away and sat with her hands on her knees.

```
*if (billie_present)
```

Billie had found a vending machine that dispensed sudokus on reels of receipt paper. She'd completed dozens and was now turning them into little origami cranes and frogs and penguins.

```
*if billie_waiting
```

Billie was so good at entertaining herself in hospital waiting rooms, it made Alix wonder again about the Lifun disaster with a twinge of guilt that she'd never really asked her friend about it.

```
*if relative = "Aunt Maude"
    *set relativename "Maude"
    *set relativetitle "aunt"
    *set otherrelative "Uncle Simon"
    *goto comeandgo
*elseif relative = "Uncle Simon"
    *set relativename "Simon"
```

```

        *set relativetitle "uncle"
        *set otherrelative "Aunt Maude"
        *goto comeandgo

*label comeandgo
${relative} came and went, returned again with a holdall of
clothes, some for Annie, some for ${relative_gender_him_her}self.

"Is there anything you'd like from home Alix? The doctors have said
she doesn't- There isn't much-" Her ${relativetitle} crouched in
front of her like when she was little and asking about dad. "I
should have enough time to go back again and get an overnight bag
for you. I should have picked things up on the way, but my head
wasn't- I wasn't thinking-" Tears welled in
${relative_gender_his_hers} eyes, but Alix just didn't have it in
her to be comforting.
*if (billie_present)

        Billie did though. She had hugs for days and she shared them
        easily, even with a virtual stranger like ${relative}. Alix watched
        them enviously.

Who would comfort Alix? Where were the hugs and words of
encouragement she needed?
*choice
        #She stood up.
                *set dreams +10
                *set career +10
                *set alix +10
                *goto homeward
        #She remained seated.
                *set family +10
                *set billie +10
                *set annie +10
                *goto wardward

*label homeward
"You stay here," said Alix. "I'm going to go home. Just for a
moment. There's something really important I need to do."
*page_break Important to whom?
*goto jogging

*label wardward
Where else was there to be but here?
*if (auntmaudeadvice)
        It was like Maude herself had said at the party, in not so
        many words - Annie needed someone to be there for her now.

Alix shook her head.
*if positivity <50

        What else was there to do but wait for death. Her own. Her
        mother's. Everyone's. "Don't. Just stay here. Wait with me."

```

```

*if petname = ""
    *goto scarfcheck
*else

    "But what about ${petname}?" asked ${relative}. Alix was
    touched that ${relative_gender_he_she}'d even remembered. "I could
    go get ${pet_pronoun_him_her}?" ${relativename} continued. "Bring
    ${pet_pronoun_him_her} here? If we say ${pet_pronoun_he_she}'s
    Annie's they might even let me bring ${pet_pronoun_him_her} on the
    ward."

    "I doubt it," said Alix. Annie didn't exactly keep her
    distaste for all living things to herself.
    *if billie_present

        "Or I could get ${pet_pronoun_him_her}?" Billie piped
        up. "I'd only need your fob. That way you can be right here if
        anything... happens..."
    *choice
        #"Yeah, I should probably go and get ${pet_pronoun_him_her}."
            *set petretrieval true
            *set retriever "alix"
            *goto jogging
        #"${relative} are you sure? I'd really appreciate it."
            *set petretrieval true
            *set retriever "relative"
            *if relative = "Aunt Maude"
                *set hug "her"
                *if billie_present
                    *set bunkerbuddy "Billie"
                    *goto retrievalcheck
                *else
                    *goto retrievalcheck
            *else
                *set hug "his"
                *if billie_present
                    *set bunkerbuddy "Billie"
                    *goto retrievalcheck
                *else
                    *goto retrievalcheck
        #"I'll just call Elizabeth and ask her to drop in and feed
        ${pet_pronoun_him_her}."
            *set alix -5
            *goto scarfcheck
    *if (billie_present)
        #"Thanks Billie. That would be incredible.""
            *set petretrieval true
            *set retriever "billie"
            *set hug "her"
            *goto retrievalcheck

*label scarfcheck
*if (anniescarf)

```

"You're absolutely sure?" `{relative}` pressed. "Nothing you need?"

The scarf. She'd left the scarf as it had arrived, folded in green tissue paper inside a cardboard carton.

"The scarf," said Alix, getting that strange feeling again that she was a puppet and someone else was wiggling the lever that moved her mouth.

```
*choice
    #"I have to go and get it."
        *set scarfretrieval true
        *set scarfretriever "alix"
        *goto homeward
    #"It's ok. There are more important things to be
worrying about."
        *goto retrievalcheck
    #" {relative} if you could pick that up for me, I'd be
eternally grateful."
        *set scarfretrieval true
        *set scarfretriever "relative"
        *goto retrievalcheck
    *if (billie_present)
        #"Billie, would you mind fetching it for me?"
            *set scarfretrieval true
            *set scarfretriever "billie"
            *goto retrievalcheck
*else
    *goto retrievalcheck

*label jogging
Alix jogged from the hospital to her apartment. {relative} had
offered to drive her,
*if billie_present
    and Billie had offered to call another taxi,
    *goto run
*else
    *goto run
```

```
*label run
but Alix needed the run. She ran in the bus lane, because it wasn't
as if any buses would be using it and other traffic was few and far
between. When she reached her building, she stopped and did
something she almost never did. She looked up at all those windows
and thought about all the lives going on behind them.
```

The girl who mostly wore plaid shirts, apart from when she was having fancy dress parties, which was often, these days. The young lad with the topknot and the serious expression, who had dropped out of university when the meteor was announced. The old guy from the floor above who still had an allotment and grew potatoes and made more potato salad than he knew what to do with.

```
*if positivity <50
```

```
    Soon they would all be gone. Maybe the building too.
```

Alix turned on her tracker's news ticker long enough to see the latest. Sixteen days. Sixteen days? Could that be right? That was the lowest it had been in a while.

But now wasn't the time to worry about that. Alix had come here for a reason, and it was time to

```
*page_break get to it.
```

```
*if (petretrieval)
```

```
    *gosub petdeets
```

```
        *label vip
```

```
        ${petname} was important, of course ${pet_pronoun_he_she} was, but ${pet_pronoun_he_she} wasn't the only reason Alix had come here. Once ${petname} was safely in ${pet_pronoun_his_her} ${petcarrier}, there was another thing Alix needed to do before she could go and witness her mother's final hours.
```

```
        *page_break Another important thing.
```

```
        *gosub statcheck
```

```
        *goto statresult
```

```
*elseif (scarfretrieval)
```

```
    *if petname = ""
```

```
        *goto scarfpickup
```

```
    *else
```

```
        *gosub petdeets
```

Alix was glad she hadn't just left it to Elizabeth to feed \${petname}. As she entered the apartment her beloved \${pet\_type} \${petreact} at her. Once it became apparent \${pet\_pronoun\_he\_she}'d have to go in a \${petcarrier}, \${pet\_pronoun\_his\_her} enthusiasm dwindled. Alix chased \${pet\_pronoun\_him\_her} around \${pethome} for ten minutes with \${petcatcher} before \${pet\_pronoun\_he\_she} finally succumbed to the lure of \${pettreat}s and co-operated. Now Alix was able to get on with the task at hand.

```
        *goto scarfpickup
```

```
*elseif petname = ""
```

```
    *gosub statcheck
```

```
    *goto statresult
```

```
*else
```

```
    *gosub petdeets
```

```
    *goto vip
```

```
*label petdeets
```

```
*set petretrieval true
```

```
*if pet_type = "cat"
```

```
    *set petcarrier "pet carrier"
```

```
    *set pethome "the apartment"
```

```
    *set petcatcher "the open pet carrier"
```

```
    *set petreact "yowled"
```

```
    *return
```

```

*elseif pet_type = "dog"
    *set petcarrier "pet carrier"
    *set pethome "the apartment"
    *set petcatcher "the open pet carrier"
    *set petreact "barked"
    *return
*elseif pet_type = "bird"
    *set petcarrier "carry cage"
    *set pethome "the apartment"
    *set petcatcher "a net"
    *set petreact "wolf whistled"
    *return
*elseif pet_type = "fish"
    *set petcarrier "travel tank"
    *set pethome "${pet_pronoun_his_her} tank"
    *set petcatcher "a net"
    *set petreact "shimmied"
    *return
*elseif pet_type = "lizard"
    *set petcarrier "travel tank"
    *set pethome "${pet_pronoun_his_her} vivarium"
    *set petcatcher "a net"
    *set petreact "blinked slowly"
    *return
*else
    *set petcarrier "pet carrier"
    *set pethome "the apartment"
    *set petcatcher "the open pet carrier"
    *set petreact "twitched ${pet_pronoun_his_her} nose"
    *return

```

```

*label scarfpickup
*set visited_scarfpickup true

```

The scarf was right where she had left it, in its cardboard box from the mail order company. She picked it up and turned it in her hands. It was deep purple with a lilac trim, finished with silver embroidery and fringing. It couldn't be more perfect, and yet, typically, Alix had left it too late and now it was unlikely Annie would ever-

The tears came as a shock, seemingly out of nowhere.

```

*goto oju

```

```

*label retrievalcheck
*if ((scarfretreival) or (petretrieval))
    *if ((retriever = "billie") or (scarfretreiver = "billie"))
        Billie
        *if (relative = "Aunt Maude")
            *set bunkerbuddy "Aunt Maude"
            *goto smile
        *else
            *set bunkerbuddy "Uncle Simon"

```

```

                *goto smile
    *else
        ${relative}
        *goto smile
    *else
        Alix felt like ${relative} expected something more from her,
        but she was too busy running potential scenarios of what was
        happening to Annie to oblige.
        *if ((billie_present) and (relative = "Aunt Maude"))
            *set bunkerbuddy "Billie and Maude"
            *goto scenarios
        *elseif ((billie_present) and (relative = "Uncle Simon"))
            *set bunkerbuddy "Billie and Simon"
            *goto scenarios
        *elseif (relative = "Aunt Maude")
            *set bunkerbuddy "Aunt Maude"
            *goto scenarios
        *else
            *set bunkerbuddy "Uncle Simon"
            *goto scenarios

    *label smile
    smiled, apparently grateful of being given something to do. Alix
    accepted ${hug} hug as best she could, but she was too busy running
    potential scenarios of what was happening to her mother in there.
    *goto scenarios

    *label scenarios
    She went from simple heartbreaking scenes where her mother just
    quietly slipped away, to outlandish horror movie vignettes where
    Annie mutated into a green and gold beast, ripped all the doctors'
    throats out and bounded off into the night.
    *if billie_present
        *if not ((retriever = "billie") or (scarfretriever =
        "billie"))

            Billie completed her latest origami piece, an owl, and
            held it out to Alix. "Sorry, I know they're useless."

                "They're-"
                *goto mints
        *else
            *goto mints
    *else
        *goto mints

    *label mints
    *if not ((retriever = "relative") or (scarfretriever = "relative"))

        ${relative} waved a tin of mints under Alix's nose.
        "Mint?"

```

With the threat of apocalypse right on the horizon, people were buying tinned everything. Except mints. Alix had yet to meet anyone under the age of fifty who bought mints in tins.

```
"I-"  
*goto breathe  
*else  
*goto breathe
```

```
*label breathe
```

Alix took a deep breath. She felt like someone had wrapped layer upon layer of duct tape around her chest, like in one of Dietmar's videos. Every inhale was a battle. Everything about this would be laughable if it wasn't so-

```
*page_break Another alarm  
*goto alarm
```

```
*label statcheck
```

```
*temp mainstat  
*set mainstat "family"  
*temp mainstatval  
*set mainstatval family  
*if career > mainstatval  
*set mainstat "career"  
*set mainstatval career  
*if dreams > mainstatval  
*set mainstat "dreams"  
*set mainstatval dreams  
*return
```

```
*label statresult  
*if mainstatval = career
```

This could be her last chance to

```
*page_break see her friends.
```

```
*goto dietmars
```

```
*elseif mainstatval = dreams
```

```
*goto desk
```

```
*else
```

```
*goto coffeetable
```

```
*label dietmars
```

"You absolutely sure about this?" Dietmar asked, although with Alix already boosted up on his shoulders and holding his vape pen, she'd have thought he had his answer already. "You sure this thing gets hot enough?" he continued.

"If they can explode and knock people's teeth out, they can get hot enough to set off a foam dispenser."

Alix hadn't been sure Dietmar would come through, much less get Elizabeth

```
*if (jodiealive)
    and Jodie
    *goto onboard
*else
    *goto onboard
```

```
*label onboard
```

on board. Not because of the logistics - it wasn't such a big deal for a millionaire to send a limo across town to pick up some friends.

```
*if not (pet_type = "")
    (And their ${pet_type}).
    *goto randomness
*else
    *goto randomness
```

```
*label randomness
```

More because of the sheer randomness of it - calling him up to make that video at that moment. But then again, that was the kind of thing Dietmar thrived on. It was why his videos were watched by millions, Alix included.

```
*if not ((myboxx1) and (awards))
```

It seemed like forever since she'd seen them, her fellow myboxxers, outside of watching their video antics. They didn't meet physically too often, but their joint streams and other collabs were amongst their most popular uploads. The scorpiid showers made vid connections patchy, and for some reason, they rarely contacted one another just to chat, so their friendship had lapsed a little. Alix was glad she'd had the chance to rekindle things.

Elizabeth was wearing a shower cap and had the waterproof cover on her tablet too. "Check out Dookie being a big ol' wussy!" she chuckled, pinching the screen to zoom in on his face. The fire alarm clanged, and the foam canisters hidden in the ceiling released, coating Alix and Dietmar in a thick layer of foam.

```
*if not (petname = "")
    *gosub pet_at_dietmars
*if (jodiealive)
```

Further down the corridor, Jodie in short shorts and a bralet, twirled under the cascading foam, streaming herself on her tracker, filming Elizabeth filming them, laughing and screeching.

A woman wearing an actual velvet stole came out to see what the noise was all about and

```
*if positivity >25
    ask if she could join in. Seemed they weren't the only ones
    who needed to let their hair down.
    *goto paid
*else
```

tell Dietmar he was trash and she hoped he got evicted. They livestreamed the whole rant, of course.

\*goto paid

\*label paid

It couldn't have come out better if they'd paid her to do it.

After a few minutes the canisters stopped squirting, and Dietmar dumped Alix onto the floor and then threw himself down alongside her and made foam angels on the hallway carpet.

\*if not (jodiealive)

Alix played along and joined him, but it wasn't the same without Jodie. She hated that none of them had even said her name since it happened.

\*goto secondalarm

\*else

\*goto secondalarm

\*label secondalarm

When the second alarm sounded, they barely even noticed.

\*page\_break Familiarity breeds contempt and all that...

\*goto stayorgo

\*label desk

She unlocked the bottom desk drawer and retrieved her laptop from its hiding place. There was her memory stick, right where she'd left it a life time ago. She usually synced her short stories to her tracker so she could work on them anywhere, but with everything that had been going on lately, this one had slipped through the cracks. It was an odd one, even by her standards, but it felt important.

\*if alix >20

"No matter how it seemed, the last one was for me. But this one? This one is for you," she said aloud.

\*if petname = ""

\*goto unfinished

\*else

`\${petname} assumed she was talking to  
`\${pet\_pronoun\_him\_her} and circled excitedly inside  
`\${pet\_pronoun\_his\_her} `\${petcarrier}.

\*goto unfinished

\*else

\*goto unfinished

\*label unfinished

She wasn't sure she'd even finish it now. She'd thought a suitable ending would come to her, but so far, it was proving elusive.

She didn't bother trying to sync it - the network was up for now, but connection was still patchy. Instead she tucked the memory stick into the lining of her rucksack and returned the laptop to its drawer.

```
*goto oju
```

```
*label coffetable
```

It was there in the middle of the coffee table where she had left it. Dad's book. She picked it up and flicked first to the back, where her own notes were about

```
*if (writing1)
    that latest piece of writing.
    *if shortstorytype = "gamey"
        *comment *image Alix_Note_storygame.png
        *gosub_scene csideimg_alix_note_storygame
        *goto book
    *else
        *comment *image Alix_Note_storynew.png
        *gosub_scene csideimg_alix_note_storynew
        *goto book
*elseif (videol)
    that last video she made.
    *if videotype = "pet"
        *comment *image Alix_Note_videopet.png
        *gosub_scene csideimg_alix_note_videopet
        *goto book
    *elseif videotype = "hosp"
        *comment *image Alix_Note_videohosp.png
        *gosub_scene csideimg_alix_note_videohosp
        *goto book
    *elseif videotype = "boxx"
        *comment *image Alix_Note_videoboxx.png
        *gosub_scene csideimg_alix_note_videoboxx
        *goto book
    *else
        *comment *image Alix_Note_videoparty.png
        *gosub_scene csideimg_alix_note_videoparty
        *goto book
*else
    choosing a gift for Annie.
    *comment *image Alix_Note_giftscarf.png
    *gosub_scene csideimg_alix_note_giftscarf
    *goto book
```

```
*label book
```

```
*if petname = ""
    *goto bookmain
*else
    *set retriever "alix"
    *gosub petdeets
    *goto bookmain
```

```

*label bookmain
The book weighed heavy in her hands. Could she do it? Could she
really read his words, his private thoughts? It seemed like a
betrayal, somehow.
*if alix > 20
    No. She couldn't betray him. She'd made herself a promise.
    She would look after it, and maybe, someday, after all this she'd
    read it. But not today. She put the book carefully into her bag,
    picked up
        *if (petretrieval)
            ${petname}
            *goto leave
        *else
            the scarf
            *goto leave
    *else
        Well, perhaps if he hadn't betrayed her by dying, he'd be
        here to stop her reading his diary. It was a stupid thought,
        petulant, but she couldn't help it. If she didn't read it now, then
        when? When she was cowering in some meteor shelter right before it
        hit? Fuck that. She
            *if (petretrieval)
                peered into ${petname}'s ${petcarrier} for a moment to
                check her ${pet_type} was comfortable, then nodded to herself
                *goto sofa
            *else
                tucked Annie's scarf into the top of her bag
                *goto sofa

*label leave
*page_break and turned to go.
*goto oju

*label sofa
and sat down on the sofa to read.
*page_break Hours passed.
She closed the book and wiped her eyes. Well.
*if positivity >50

    He loved them both very much, that much was clear. Everything
    else could be forgiven.
        *goto petorscarf
    *else

        Her worst fears were confirmed. She was no longer sure why
        she'd done this to herself.
            *goto petorscarf

*label petorscarf
*if petname = ""
    *goto nothingleft
*elseif (scarfretrieval)

```

Alix's fingers crept into the top of her bag, catching the edge of the scarf, rubbing the soft silk between finger and thumb.

```
*goto nothingleft
```

```
*else
```

```
*if pet_type = "fish"
```

    \${petname} bumped \${pet\_pronoun\_his\_her} head against the side of the travel tank.

    "Stop it," said Alix absently. "You're only hurting yourself."

```
*goto nothingleft
```

```
*elseif pet_type = "bird"
```

    \${petname} hooked \${pet\_pronoun\_his\_her} beak through the bars of \${pet\_pronoun\_his\_her} travel cage, screeching furiously at their refusal to break or bend.

    "Ssssh, ssshhh," said Alix. "Not much longer, I promise."

```
*goto nothingleft
```

```
*else
```

    \${petname} scratched at the front of the \${petcarrier} and looked up at Alix with large, pleading eyes.

    "You're better off in there for now," said Alix. "Trust me."

```
*goto nothingleft
```

```
*label nothingleft
```

There was nothing left to do but return to the hospital. She gave her apartment a final look over and closed the door.

```
*page_break What? Thought you'd get to read the journal?
```

```
*goto oju
```

```
*label oju
```

In Alix's pocket, Oju began emitting a loud noise, a very specific noise Alix had previously only heard on news reports and public safety adverts. Alix reached for her tracker, strapped it to her wrist, and sure enough, the display was flashing red. The evacuation countdown had begun. Twelve minutes. So much for sixteen days. If she ran, really pushed herself, she could probably just about make it back to the hospital.

```
*if petname = ""
```

```
*goto consider
```

```
*else
```

    \${petname} wouldn't like being bashed around in the \${petcarrier} as Alix ran, but \${pet\_pronoun\_he\_she}'d like being hit by an asteroid even less.

```
*if positivity <50
    Although even that might be preferable to spending the
next who knows how many hours in a bunker with a bunch of
strangers.
```

```
*goto consider
```

```
*else
```

```
*goto consider
```

```
*label consider
```

```
*choice
```

```
#Make a run for the hospital
```

```
*goto running
```

```
#Stick with the building's evacuation procedure
```

```
*set shelter "apartment"
```

```
*goto evacuate
```

```
*label running
```

```
*if (driven)
```

Dietmar's driver made nervous small talk for the entirety of their drive. Alix watched a bead of sweat make its way down the nape of his neck to the collar of his shirt as he prattled about his children and his wife. They lived in another country and he hoped the money he sent them was enough to get them into a good shelter, but since the impact alarm, he hadn't been able to get through to them.

"It couldn't have hit somewhere else without us knowing, could it?" he asked her, on the wrong side of the road with his indicator still flashing from the turn half a mile back. Alix made placatory noises to the contrary.

Overhead, the sky boomed and grew darker and the driver slammed on his breaks.

"Get out, get out, I'm going back, I'm sorry," he babbled. When she didn't move he opened the car door for her and she had no choice but to hop out onto the roadside. He turned an abrupt circle with a screech of tyres and sped off back towards Dietmar's place, door still flapping open.

Well, at least she was a little nearer to the hospital than she had been. Perhaps if she hurried she could get there before her mother's ward was totally locked down. That was a necessary peculiarity of the Protectorate Pledge wing. It acted as a kind of secure facility as well as a hospice. They tried to keep it quiet, but she'd heard, no, knew, about what happened to some of the Protectorate in their final hours.

Nothing else for it. Taking a deep breath, she set off at a run.

```
*page_break Run Alix, RUN!
```

```
*goto vomit
```

```
*else
```

Alix had to at least try. Even if Annie never woke up again, Alix couldn't let her be alone in her final hours. As she left her apartment, the other tenants were already filing downstairs to the underground car park. It wasn't a bunker, but it was the best they had. The old man from upstairs called out to her as she turned off the staircase for the lobby.

"Missy, aren't you coming with us?"

She shook her head and clutched

```
*if ((petretrieval) and (retriever = "alix"))
    ${petname}'s ${petcarrier}
```

```
*goto chest
```

```
*elseif ((scarfretrieval) and (scarfretriever = "alix"))
```

```
    Annie's scarf
```

```
*goto chest
```

```
*else
```

```
    her rucksack
```

```
*goto chest
```

```
*label chest
```

to her chest, shouldering the door open. Outside the sky was darker than it had been in a long time, but still tinged with green. Alix made for the bus lane again, and sprinted.

```
*page_break Run Alix, RUN!
```

```
*if alix >20
```

```
    *goto vomit
```

```
*else
```

Alix's legs pumped, her heart throwing itself against her ribcage as violently as

```
*if ((petretrieval) and (retriever = "alix"))
```

```
    ${petname} was against the front of the ${petcarrier}.
```

```
*goto darker
```

```
*else
```

```
    a captive animal against the bars of its cage.
```

```
*goto darker
```

```
*label vomit
```

Vomit scorched the back of her throat, dark spots threatened the edges of her vision, and a burly security guard sucking a lollipop barred her way, but she'd made it. The alarm was still sounding, but otherwise, the hospital was quiet. She supposed those who could move easily had already been evacuated. Porters with patients in wheelchairs and on gurneys moved briskly down the corridors. Alix wondered what happened to those hooked up to machines like her mother. Perhaps she'd find out.

She hoped

```
*if (billie_present)
```

```
    Billie and ${relative}
```

```
*goto relative_situation
```

```
*else
```

```
    ${relative}
```

```

*goto relative_situation

*label relative_situation
had made it to the hospital shelter, at least. Finding out would be
difficult, what with all the network problems, but she couldn't
afford to think about that right now.

"Mother... intensive care..." she managed to pant, and the guard looked
sympathetic, but didn't move.
*if petname = ""
    *goto duncan
*else
    His eyes travelled to ${petname}.

    "You can't bring a ${pet_type} in here without special
dispensation. It has to have had all the proper checks."
    *set pet_ward true
    *goto duncan

*label duncan

"Oh, let her be, Duncan," said a nurse, appearing at his side.
Might've been the one with the dirty books from Annie's ward, Alix
couldn't be sure. "It's not like we'll be liable if anything
happens. There'll be no-one left to sue."

He nodded and joined the tail-end of the evacuees making their way
to the priority care bunker. Alix was free to
*page_break run again.
*goto ward

*label darker

The sky grew darker and she felt as if she was trying to outrun the
meteor.
*if positivity >50
    And succeeding.
    *goto streaming
*else
    And failing.
    *goto streaming

*label streaming
*if ((scarfretrieval) and (scarfretriever = "alix"))

    The lilac scarf, now clutched in her fist,
    *goto breeze
*else

    Her hair
    *goto breeze

*label breeze

```

streamed out behind her, caught by the breeze of her own speed.

It was like being a child again, running downhill, almost too fast for her own legs, laughing wildly at the sheer recklessness of it all, her laughter almost as high as it had been then, but with an edge to it, cackling at the simple enjoyment of going fast, of being young and fleet-footed and full of promise and then it went black and she stumbled, she was falling, she couldn't be falling, but she was, and she couldn't even see the ground in front of her as she

\*page\_break SLAMMED into it.

\*goto blackness

\*label evacuate

Alix joined the tail end of the orderly queue that was making its way down to the underground car park. Although the apartment block was built a little after cars had ceased to be commonplace, architects and town planners were initially isolated from the effects of the downturn and so it never occurred to them that the people likely to live in these cramped, one bedroom apartments would also be unlikely to afford a car of their own. Throughout Alix's tenancy, it had been used primarily for barbecues and games of table tennis.

There were some old school lockers at the back of the car park, each containing the residents' survival kits.

\*if (survivalkit)

Alix was glad she'd added to hers - a few packs of noodles and a box of chocotreats would have looked pretty pathetic right now.

\*if petname = ""  
\*goto residents  
\*else

"Don't worry," Alix told \${petname}, circling in  
\${pet\_pronoun\_his\_her} \${petcarrier}. "I even remembered  
\${pettreat}s for you."

\*goto residents

\*else

\*set positivity -5

Shit! Alix never got round to finishing hers. She supposed she'd have to rely on the kindness of strangers now, or enter into a barter system, trading packets of noodles for powdered milk to go in her chocotreats.

\*if petname = ""  
\*goto residents  
\*else

"Sorry buddy," Alix told \${petname}, "You might have to go without \${pettreat}s for a while." She'd just have to hope she could scrounge up [i]something[/i] for the poor \${pet\_type} to eat.

\*goto residents

\*label residents

The other residents dragged out camp beds and blankets and camping chairs, from their stashes.

\*if (survivalkit)

    Alix realised she wasn't as prepared as she'd thought.

Perhaps she should try to

\*choice

    #Check in with \${relative}

        \*goto callrelative

    #Get some sleep

        \*goto sleep

    \*if (billie\_present)

        #Check in with Billie

            \*goto callbillie

\*label sleep

Alix spread out a moth-eaten old blanket from the back of her locker. It smelled awful and she could feel the cold concrete through it, but what choice did she have? She hadn't been savvy enough to bring an inflatable mattress like her uber-prepared neighbours.

An old man had a coughing fit, a pair of small siblings fought and had to be carried to separate ends of the car park, screaming.

Alix stared up at the ceiling and watched spiders crawl around the rafters.

\*goto check

\*label alarm

\*comment \*image alarm.png

\*gosub\_scene csideimg\_alarm

\*page\_break Everyone must go.

But go where? Nurses and orderlies were operating with fittingly surgical precision, some taking up key positions along corridors, others ensuring the sickest and most immobile patients were moved to the evacuation points. Annie's ward was different, Alix knew. A fortress in and of itself, instead of evacuating, it would go into lockdown, blast doors going up, originally intended for containing the Protectorate, now being used to protect them from the impact.

If Alix hurried, she could make it to Annie's ward, could ride it out locked in there with Annie and the automated medcare system. But did she want to? She knew how some of the Protectorate had gone out. Being locked in a metal box with... that... well, it was almost as dangerous as going head to head with the meteorite. The hospital's meteorite shelter wasn't likely to be much better. It would be overcrowded and underfunded. She'd be with

\*if (billie\_present)

    \*if ((scarf retriever = "billie") or (retriever = "billie"))

        \*goto auntoruncle

```

        *else
            Billie and
            *goto auntoruncle
*else
    *goto auntoruncle

*label auntoruncle
*if ((scarfretriever = "relative") or (retriever = "relative"))
    *goto strangers
*else
    ${relative} and
    *goto strangers

*label strangers
a bunch of strangers. Supplies would be scarce. If they had to stay
down there any length of time, it could get real unpleasant, real
fast. She should probably
*choice
    #Hurry to Annie's ward
        *set alix_ward true
        *if (billie_present)
            *if ((retriever = "billie") or (scarfretriever =
"billie"))
                *goto ward
            *else
                "Billie, I'm sorry, I have to-"
                "Don't even," said Billie firmly. "See you on the
other side."

                Alix hated how she always seemed to end up running
away from Billie. But right now, running was necessary.
                *page_break Run, Alix, RUN!
                *goto ward
            *elseif ((retriever = "relative") or (scarfretriever =
"relative"))
                *goto ward
            *else
                ${relative} had already committed to joining the
throng heading towards the hospital bunker, and Alix struggled to
even see her ${relativetitle} over the crowds as she slipped away.
Between the crowds and ${relative_gender_his_hers} unwavering
commitment to following rules, it was unlikely ${relative} would
follow.

                "Alix, are you sure?" ${relative_gender_he_she}
yelled after her, already knowing exactly where she was going. Alix
raised her right hand in a thumbs up as she ran, and hoped her
${relativetitle} saw it.
                *page_break Now sprint!
                *goto ward
    #Take her chances in the hospital shelter

```

```
*set shelter "hospital"  
*goto hospitalshelter
```

```
*label stayorgo
```

Eventually the press of evacuating rich people became too much to ignore. The woman in the velvet stole stepped delicately over them and made her way to the back stairway, their brief time together forgotten in an instant. Alix sat up. Dietmar was still lying on his back, clothes darkened with gradually dissolving foam.

"We should go," said Elizabeth.

Alix was filled with sudden remorse. Her mother was dying, actually dying, and she'd left

```
*if (billie_present)  
    Billie and  
    *goto relatives  
*else  
    *goto relatives
```

```
*label relatives
```

#{relative} to deal with the reality of it.

"I guess." Dietmar stood slowly, pulled Alix to her feet too. "The bunker here is really sweet," he added, but his voice was devoid of all emotion. "There's a pool table and a bar. We'll have a meteor party or something."

```
*if (jodiealive)
```

"An end of the world party," Jodie corrected, her voice equally flat.

```
    *goto bellhop  
*else  
    *goto bellhop
```

```
*label bellhop
```

Alix watched as a guy in an old-timey bellhop uniform went from door to door, knocking and scanning to make sure no-one got left behind. No-one should die alone, after all. Dietmar caught her expression. For all his frivolity, he was an astute judge of emotions in others.

"I can pay my driver a shit ton of money to take you to the hospital, if you want," he said. "It's probably illegal or something, but," he shrugged.

"Immoral is the word you're looking for," said Elizabeth sharply. "You can't exploit the guy just because he's poorer than you."

"Look, if Alix wants to go, she can, that's all I'm saying."

```
*choice
```

```
    # "I don't want to, but I have to. Thanks Dietmar."
```

```

*set driven true
*if petname = ""
    *goto running
*else
    *if petcarrier = ""
        *gosub petdeets
        *goto running
    *else
        *goto running
#"I can't ask you to do that, Dietmar. Or your driver."
*set shelter "dietmars"
*goto dietmarbunker

```

```
*label ward
```

```
*set alix_ward true
```

Alix came to a skidding halt. The door to her mother's ward was closed and locked. The blast door had lowered to cover it. She swiped her fob on the access panel, but it just flashed red and beeped. Swipe. Beep. Swipe. Beep. She was too late. After everything she'd been through, she'd missed this, the most important moment for her, for her mother. Their last chance and she'd missed it.

She glanced to the keypad at the side of the door. It accepted a four digit numerical code. An override, for emergencies just like this. She banged on the metal surface, knowing it to be fruitless, whose attention was she hoping to attract? There was no one. Her gaze returned again to the keypad. She didn't know the number. She didn't know who programmed it, so it wasn't even as if she could make an educated guess. The chances of her happening across the correct number by accident was ten thousand to one.

But what about that other person? The one who made her decisions for her sometimes, it seemed. Someone who both was and wasn't Alix, who watched her antics with a degree of detachment, like an out of body experience. Maybe they had heard it somewhere. Maybe they could guess. It was a wild theory, but it was all she had right now.

She hovered her finger over the keypad and let 'them' punch in the number.

```
*input_number code 0001 9999
```

It worked! Alix could barely believe it. The keypad flashed in acceptance of the override, the blast shield rose, Alix pushed the heavy metal door behind it aside and raced through. On the other side, she punched the manual lockdown button and sealed herself in. This was it.

```
*page_break No going back.
```

```
*if annie >25
```

```
    *goto annieok
```

```
*else
```

\*goto anniedying

\*label blackness

For a moment, there was only blackness, and Alix wondered if it was all over. Slowly, she opened her eyes. The road was rough against her cheek, and as she pushed up off it, her head swam and she felt sick. Gingerly her fingers floated to her forehead. A large bump was growing, but she hadn't broken the skin. Still sore to the touch though, and she winced as she clambered to her knees, which were bruised and battered too. The sky was black with a jade tinge, like a magpie's wing.

Alix knew she should find shelter, but close by there was nothing but several lanes of a disused dual carriageway, and a short way off, a bus shelter. As soon as she stood, all she could think about was sitting down, so the bus shelter seemed as good a place as any. No protection against a meteor, of course, but then what was, really? Bunkers were like aeroplane oxygen masks. If you needed them, your chances weren't good anyway.

She limped towards the bus stop,

\*if petname = ""

    \*goto sit

\*else

    only then remembering poor \${petname}.

    \${!{pet\_pronoun\_his\_her}} \${petcarrier} was a little way off, upside down, but when Alix picked it up, \${pet\_pronoun\_he\_she} \${petreact}.

    \*if pet\_type = "fish"

        Some of the water had leaked out, but there seemed to be enough that \${pet\_pronoun\_he\_she} could at least move and breathe, which would have to do for now. Alix carried the travel tank as carefully as she could to avoid sloshing any more water out

        \*goto sit

    \*else

        Alix took \${pet\_pronoun\_him\_her} out, hugged \${pet\_pronoun\_him\_her} tight and apologised over and over for getting \${pet\_pronoun\_him\_her} into this mess. Satisfied that \${pet\_pronoun\_he\_she} was none the worse for \${pet\_pronoun\_his\_her} ordeal, she tucked \${pet\_pronoun\_him\_her} into the front of her jacket, leaving the carrier in the middle of the road,

        \*goto sit

\*label sit

\*set shelter "bus"

and sat down on the one remaining plastic seat in the bus shelter.

As she checked her tracker, she almost cried to find she had signal. She really needed to speak to someone, anyone, really, although her priority should probably be

\*choice

    #\${relative}

    \*goto callrelative

```
#Annie
    Unfortunately, before Alix could call anyone, a forced
news notification came through, preventing her from dialling
anything other than emergency services.
```

```
    *if annie >45
        *goto breakingnews
    *else
        *goto newsreader
*if (billie_present)
    #Billie
        *goto callbillie
```

```
*label callbillie
```

Alix sat back against the wall, her gaze fixed on her tracker's signal meter, almost daring it to drop. She selected the frequent callers from her app list and touched Billie's picture. Well, it was a photo of a pug in a bobble hat, but that was Billie's go to avatar. The dialling screen had barely initialised before Billie answered, her face filling most of the tracker's screen.

"Alix? Oh, Alix, thank god! When the alarms all went off, I was so scared!

```
*if retriever = "billie"
```

But at least I have some company!" She held `{petname}` up to her tracker's camera

```
    *if pet_type = "fish"
        in {pet_pronoun_his_her} tank.
    *goto billieevacuate
```

```
    *else
```

pressing `{pet_pronoun_him_her}` close to her face. `!{pet_pronoun_he_she}` wriggled and squirmed, so she nuzzled `{pet_pronoun_him_her}` briefly then loosened her grip a little, lowering `{petname}` into her lap off-screen.

```
        *goto billieevacuate
```

```
*elseif scarfretriever = "billie"
```

But I got it." She held the scarf up for Alix to see.

```
    *if petname = ""
        *goto billieevacuate
```

```
    *else
```

"Naturally, I picked `{petname}` up too." She turned her tracker's camera on `{pet_pronoun_him_her}` briefly as proof.

```
        *goto billieevacuate
```

```
*else
```

```
    *if ((retriever = "relative") or (scarfretriever =
"relative"))
```

```
        {relativename} isn't back yet. Have you heard from
{relative_gender_him_her}?"
```

"No." Alix swallowed. Oh god, what had she sent her `{relativetitle}` into? She had turned the news ticker off, what if something had happened at the apartment block that she didn't know about?

"I'm sure \${relative\_gender\_he\_she}'s fine," said Billie, clearly sensing Alix's unease. "It's all just gone kind of crazy here at the moment."

\*goto billienods

\*else

\${relativename} just went to try to find out what's happening with Annie's ward. Apparently it has some kind of automated care system or something? Anyway, \${relativename}'s not too happy about an AI being the only one keeping an eye on your mom."

"It's good that \${relative\_gender\_he\_she}'s looking out for Annie like that."

\*goto billienods

\*label billieevacuate

"I guess I have to join your building's evacuation procedure, now?" Billie continued.

The building's alarm wailed on in the background. Billie looked away from her tracker's camera. She was on the move. Billie's face darkened and lightened as her tracker struggled to accommodate the changing light levels.

"Yes," said Alix. "Yes, please do."

Moments later she heard her landlord's voice off-screen, saying he wasn't about to start letting in any old waifs and strays off the street. Billie looked ready to cry.

"Show him my fob," said Alix, then, louder, to the landlord: "Let her in, please, Gordon! She's my guest!" She was shaking, unable to believe he could be like this, that anyone could be like this.

"Alix?" asked the landlord, looming into view as Billie turned the tracker camera on him. "Why aren't you here? Who's thi- You know what? I don't care. Fine." He moved aside and waved Billie through.

"Oh, thank you thank you thank you!" Billie gushed, openly crying now.

"Don't get too excited yet," said Alix, trying to take on Billie's role since she didn't seem to be playing it any more. "Who knows how long you'll spend in that disused car park with all my awful neighbours?"

"Are they really awful?" asked Billie, crying harder.

"Oh, god, Billie, no! They're fine. It was just a joke, a terrible, terrible joke."

Billie wiped her eyes and sniffed. "Good. I think I'm okay now."  
\*goto billienods

\*label billienods

Billie nodded to herself, then squinted intently into her tracker, peering around as if that could help her see behind Alix. "Where are you?"

\*if shelter = "bus"

    \*if billie >25

        "I'm in my apartment's shelter," Alix lied. "It's kind of basic, but we're all ok."

        "You're with people? It sounds kind of quiet there. Not like here."

        "Yeah, yeah, they're just sleeping. I should probably go, actually. Don't want to wake them."

            \*goto billiesudden

    \*else

        Alix shrugged. "A bus stop just outside town, I guess?"

        "Alix! God!" Billie covered her mouth, but it didn't stop the sob escaping. "How-why- can't you come back here? Please, Alix, come back here!"

        Alix shook her head. "I don't think there's time. And my knee's kinda scuffed up, and... I'll be okay, Billie, I promise."

        Billie kept her hand clamped over her mouth and her shoulders shuddered, but there was no further noise. Alix cast around for some kind of assurance, but she wasn't sure there were any, so she just said:

            \*if positivity >30

        "I've got Protectorate blood, remember? That's virtually like being made from girders."

            \*goto billietremble

    \*else

        "I'll be fine."

            \*goto billietremble

\*elseif shelter = "apartment"

        "In my apartment's shelter. Although calling it a shelter is giving it too much credit." She swooped the tracker in a wide arc so Billie could see.

        "The one here's cramped, but it's not so bad," said Billie. She followed suit, and for a moment, Alix was able to see knots of people, some sitting on the floor, some standing, a couple making use of the machine-dispensed sudokus, a group of children playing with brightly coloured bricks on the floor, unaware anything was amiss. "How it'll be in a couple of days is anyone's guess, but let's hope it doesn't come to that."

"You're in the best possible place, really," said Alix.  
"Virtually everyone there has had state disaster training."  
\*goto billietremble  
\*elseif shelter = "dietmars"

"I'm in Dietmar's shelter with him and Elizabeth  
\*if (jodiealive)  
    and Jodie  
    \*goto wild  
\*else  
    \*goto wild  
\*elseif shelter = "hospital"

"It's ok, I'm in the shelter," said Alix, turning the tracker away from herself for a moment to offer Billie a view of DJ Memorial's utilitarian shelter. It was, like all public services, overcrowded and underfunded, yet somehow meeting a myriad of regulations and guidelines thanks to dedicated workers breaking their backs. In the corner, a group of children were transfixed by a large plastic doll's house, moving the animal figurines around inside as everything was normal.  
\*goto billietremble

\*label wild  
- It's pretty wild." She panned the tracker round so Billie could get a load of everything. The pool table, the bar with its uniformed bartender, the goddamn crystal chandeliers.

"Whoah," said Billie, finally cracking a smile. "How the other half live, eh?"

"They'll be shitting on the dancefloor at the first sign of trouble," said Dietmar, overhearing. "I guarantee it."

"There's a dancefloor?!" Billie's eyes widened. Alix smiled. It was nice to see a little of her friend's usual self coming through. "I thought this was a classy bunker because it has a drinking fountain and building blocks for the kids."

"I wish I was there," said Alix suddenly.

"Can I hear a string quartet?"

"It's a recording."

"Yeah, one of the violinists didn't bring his bow, so they had to go with the back up option."

"Elizabeth, you're not helping."  
\*goto billiesudden

\*label billietremble

"Oh, good," said Billie, her lip trembling. "I wish I was there. Or you were here, whichever."

"Me too. I'm so, so sorry you ended up there without me. I don't know what I was thinking."

\*if retriever = "billie"

Billie held \${petname} up again. "You were thinking of this one. And I don't blame you. It was an impossible decision, your \${pet\_type} or your mother."

\*goto journal

\*elseif scarfretriever = "billie"

Billie held the scarf up again. "You were thinking of Annie and how happy this would make her."

Showed how little Billie knew Annie, but Alix didn't have the heart to disagree.

\*goto journal

\*else

\*goto billiesudden

\*label journal

\*if (daytrip)

Billie held something else up in front of her tracker's camera. "I picked up something else while I was at it," she explained.

"Dad's journal!"

"I haven't read it," said Billie quickly. "I haven't and I won't. I just thought you might want it."

"Thanks Billie. I do. Thank you so much." It was Alix's turn to become tearful. She zoomed her tracker out a little, hoping it was too low def to pick up her tears.

\*goto billiesudden

\*else

\*goto billiesudden

\*label billiesudden

"Hey," said Billie suddenly. "Remember

\*if ((daytrip) and (pet\_type = "dog"))

that park we took \${petname} to?"

\*goto alixnod

\*elseif (daytrip)

that comic shop we went to?"

\*goto alixnod

\*elseif (billie\_drinks)

that weird nightclub we went to - Puzzles?"

```

        *goto alixnod
*elseif (coffee)
    that coffee shop we met up in?"
    *goto alixnod
*else
    that volcano that erupted in my home town? The one where your
    dad saved all those people?" Some of those people, Alix thought.
    Billie was waiting for a response, so
        *goto alixnod

*label alixnod
Alix nodded.

```

"Let's meet up there when this is all over," said Billie, and her eyes were so full of hope and fear and desperation, Alix paused for a long time thinking about how to respond.

```

*choice
    #"Of course."
        *goto anniestate
    #"I love you."
        *if billie >35
            *set billie_mood "love"
            *goto anniestate
        *else
            *set billie_mood "not_love"
            *goto anniestate
    #"You're my best friend."
        *if billie >30
            *set billie_mood "bestie"
            *goto anniestate
        *else
            *goto anniestate

```

```

*label anniestate
Alix took a breath to say the words just as the screen of her
tracker flickered and cut out, replaced with
*if annie >45
    *page_break BREAKING NEWS
    *goto breakingnews
*else
    *page_break something else.
    *goto newsreader

```

```

*label callrelative
Alix had to scroll way down her list of recently called numbers to
find ${relative}. ${relative_gender_his_hers} avatar was
*if (visit)
    that
    *goto picture
*else
    a
    *goto picture

```

```

*label picture
picture from about twenty years ago of ${relative_gender_him_her}
wearing a noticeably wiggly auburn wig.
*if (visit)
    Alix still wasn't sure if the wig was a joke or not.
    *goto callrelative2
*else
    *goto callrelative2

*label callrelative2
The call rang out for a good long while. Just as Alix was about to
give up and try ${otherrelative} instead, ${relative} picked up. At
first Alix thought ${relative_gender_he_she} had selected audio
only, because the screen was black, but when
${relative_gender_he_she} said: "Hello, Alix? Is that you?" She
realised ${relative} just had ${relative_gender_his_hers} mobile
phone pressed to ${relative_gender_his_hers} ear.

Old people. Why couldn't they get on board with trackers like
everyone else?

"Yes, ${relative}, it's me."

*if retriever = "relative"
    "What is wrong with this damn ${pet_type} of yours, Alix? Is
it feral?"

    "${pet_pronoun_he_she}'s a sweetheart when you get to know
${pet_pronoun_him_her}."

    "I'll bet."

    "Is everything ok?"

    ${relativename} sighed. "Yes, yes, ${pet_pronoun_he_she} just
    *if pet_type = "fish"
        kept avoiding the net and then trying to jump out of the
damn tank. I only just got ${pet_pronoun_him_her} in the portable
tank.
        *goto ready
    *elseif pet_type = "bird"
        attempted to peck my face off, then flew around
screeching ${pet_pronoun_his_her} head off and pooping all over the
place. I had to throw a blanket over ${pet_pronoun_him_her} to get
${pet_pronoun_him_her} in the carry cage.
        *goto ready
    *else
        tried to bite my fingers off when I picked
${pet_pronoun_him_her} up and then hid behind the furniture for
twenty minutes. I only just got ${pet_pronoun_him_her} in the pet
carrier.
        *goto ready
    *elseif scarfretriever = "relative"

```

"I think I have the scarf you wanted. It was in a package, right, not in any of your drawers or closets?"

Good grief, who knew what the old snoop had been poking around in?

\*if (simonsecret)

Although Alix supposed she was a fine one to talk about that.

\*goto correct

\*else

\*goto correct

\*else

\*if (billie\_present)

"Billie's just gone to get a final few snacks from the vending machine for us. She's a sweet girl. As soon as she's back, we'll evacuate."

"Good," said Alix. "I'm glad you're both safe."

\*goto safe

\*else

"I'm just waiting on that ridiculous doctor to give me a satisfactory answer on who's going to be looking after Annie during all this. As soon as she's consulted her superiors and reported back, I'll be heading to the shelter myself."

"Annie's ward is probably the safest place in the city."

Alix said.

\*goto safe

\*label correct

"Yes," Alix said. "That's the one. Purple and silver."

"Oh, I didn't open it. But I have it."

\*if (rock)

Alix hoped  $\{\text{relative\_gender\_he\_she}\}$  didn't turn up with Billie's volcano rock.

\*goto thanks

\*else

\*goto thanks

\*label thanks

"Right. Thanks."

"Okay then,

\*goto seeyou

\*label ready

Still, we're ready to go now,

\*goto seeyou

\*label seeyou

so I guess I'll see you in a little while."

"Wait, what?"

"I'm heading out."

"\${relative} you can't do that! Didn't you hear? There's an evacuation in progress. You have to go to the apartment's bunker. You can't come back here."

"Or what? It's not like I'm going to get arrested, is it? And anyway, DJs has a public shelter. They can't turn me away no matter how late I get there."

"That's assuming you make it back! \${relative}, please, this is madness, please stay there. You can use my fob if you have any trouble getting in. The landlord's a dick, but if you show him that, he has to let you in."

"Language, Alix. Even if I'm not registered to the property? Sounds risky."

"Not as risky as driving during a meteor strike!"

\*goto safe

\*label safe

"Speaking of," \${relative} added seamlessly, "where are you right now? Somewhere safe, I hope?"

\*if shelter = "bus"

    \*if positivity >40

        "Don't freak out, because I promise I'm going to be absolutely fine."

        "I'm already hating the sound of this."

        "I'm in a bus shelter just outside town."

        \*goto goodness

    \*else

        "I fell and bumped my head and scratched up my knee and now I'm stuck in some tumbledown bus shelter on the main road towards DJs."

        \*goto goodness

    \*elseif shelter = "apartment"

        "In my apartment's shelter. All the mod cons." Alix glanced over at the dripping drinking fountain. Someone had put a saucepan underneath to collect the drops.

"Oh good," said `{relative}`, missing Alix's sarcasm completely. "The one here is full of screaming children. Driving me absolutely up the wall. Sorry, Alix."

"No worries," said Alix, confused as to whether the apology was because `{relative}` regarded her as a child, or because `{relative_gender_he_she}` assumed Alix liked children, or for something else entirely.

```
*if (simonsecret)
```

"I wish Margaret was here." It was so sudden and he sounded so sad, Alix was caught off guard.

"Oh. Gosh. I-"

"I know, I know, it's weird of me to bring it up. It's just she really hated children. She would have had a field day with these little shits." He was laughing, but there were tears too.

"Don't!" said Alix. "You'll set me off too!"

```
*goto done
```

```
*else
```

```
*goto done
```

```
*elseif shelter = "dietmars"
```

"I'm in Dietmar's shelter with him and Elizabeth

```
*if (jodiealive)
```

```
and Jodie
```

```
*goto fullstop
```

```
*else
```

```
*goto fullstop
```

```
*elseif shelter = "hospital"
```

"It's fine, I'm in the shelter here," said Alix, glancing around DJ Memorial's utilitarian shelter. It was, like all public services, overcrowded and underfunded, yet somehow meeting a myriad of regulations and guidelines thanks to dedicated workers breaking their backs over it all.

In the corner, a group of children were transfixed by a large plastic doll's house, moving the animal figurines around inside as if everything was normal.

"Glad to hear it," said `{relative}`. "Wish I was there."

"Yeah, sorry about that. I should have gone myself."

"Not at all. I had the car, after all. And you can't drive, so-"

```
*if retriever = "relative"
```

```
Presumably talking about {petname}, {relative} added:  
"Anyway, I've got this one, and now I suppose I'm heading down to your shelter..."
```

```
*goto done
*elseif scarfretriever = "relative"
    There was an intense rustling noise at the other end of
the line and then ${relative} said: "I've squished your gift into
my pocket, but I'm sure it'll be fine. Heading down to your
building's shelter now."
    *if not (petname = "")

        "Wait, while you're there can you get ${petname}
before-" Alix said suddenly, but ${relative} had already moved on
and was saying something about: "... better than any of the previous
ones.

        *goto music
    *else
        *goto done
```

```
*label fullstop
so..."
```

"Oh, that's nice," said \${relative}. "So you're with friends?"

Alix wanted to say "I'm with [i]rich[/i] friends" so her  
\${relativetitle} could appreciate the opulence of the shelter she  
was in, but it seemed too crass. Particularly since while Alix had  
a pool table, a well-stocked bar and crystal chandeliers to admire,  
\${relative} was in an overcrowded public shelter where even toilet  
paper would be rationed.

Instead, she said: "Yes. All his neighbours are here too."

"That's good," said \${relative}. "Community is important."

Alix watched Dietmar flicking through the musical options on the  
surround sound system, pointedly ignoring the lady in the stole  
saying she wanted dubstep.

"Uh-huh."

```
*goto done
```

```
*label goodness
```

"Oh my goodness! Which one?"

Alix snorted: "Why?"

"Because I'm coming to get you." Alix could hear fabric swishing,  
probably \${relative} putting on a coat.

"You can't do that \${relative}. If you're between the hospital and  
here when it hits, what good does that do either of us?"

"So I'm supposed to sit here doing nothing?"

"You're supposed to be a comfort to Annie."

`{relative}` sighed heavily. Alix could feel the droop of her `{relativetitle}`'s shoulders in `{relative_gender_his_hers}` voice. "Okay. Fine."

\*goto done

\*label done

Alix felt like the call was over, and was about to say her goodbyes when `{relative}` said suddenly: "When all this is done with and the government have got everything back up and running, we'll have a party like you've never seen.

\*if (party1)

No hummus and cheese on sticks. We'll have fondue - the cheese kind and the chocolate kind! And instead of karaoke, we'll play that game you like, with the electronic guitars and things?

\*goto visitcheck

\*else

\*goto visitcheck

\*label visitcheck

\*if (visit)

And I'll get all the photos digitised so everyone can see them all - we'll have them projected onto the wall, five feet tall!

\*goto visitcheck2

\*else

\*goto music

\*label visitcheck2

\*if ((visit) and (pet\_type = "dog"))

And you know what? I bet the animal rescue centres will be overflowing after the impact, so I'll get a new dog, no, two new dogs and they can play with `{petname}`.

\*goto music

\*label music

You can pick the music, and we'll have cocktails instead of that horrific wine. How does that sound?"

\*choice

#"That sounds wonderful."

\*goto anniestate

#"I love you."

\*goto anniestate

#"I'll look forward to it."

\*goto anniestate

\*label hospitalshelter

The hospital bunker was already uncomfortably hot due to the sheer number of people packed in. As one of the main public evacuation shelters in the area, it was both incredibly well run and extremely ill thought out. Hospital staff slid easily from directing families around the building to directing them around the shelter, but

nothing could help with the fact that the air conditioning units were so sporadically positioned there were hot spots and cold spots, that the drinking fountains, although fresh and cool, were too few for a shelter of that size. The same too for the chemical toilets and washing facilities.

```
*if (((bunkerbuddy = "Billie") or (bunkerbuddy = "Billie and Maude")) or (bunkerbuddy = "Billie and Simon"))
```

```
    "Ooh look - goodie bags!" said Billie, pointing.
```

```
    *if (bunkerbuddy = "Billie")
```

```
        "Billie, those are our survival kits."
```

```
        *goto survival
```

```
    *else
```

```
        "I think those are wash kits, dear," said ${relative} absently, joining the queue to take one despite having a holdall with a nightmask peeping out the top.
```

```
        Billie made eye contact with Alix and gave a playful little shrug.
```

```
        *goto survival
```

```
    *elseif (bunkerbuddy = "")
```

```
        *goto welcomepack
```

```
    *else
```

```
        "Oh thank goodness," said ${relative}, pointing. "I was worrying that I hadn't packed a wash bag for you, but they have little emergency ones."
```

```
        Thank goodness, thought Alix, as she took the small tote bag from the shelter volunteer. Inside there was a bottle of water, a packet of dehydrated fruit, a small square of flannel for washing, a tiny plastic toothbrush and a comb. God forbid anyone should have a hair out of place during the apocalypse.
```

```
        *goto bunkbeds
```

```
*label survival
```

```
Each in turn received an identical beige tote bag which contained a bottle of water, a packet of dehydrated fruit, a small square of flannel for washing, a tiny plastic toothbrush and a comb.
```

```
Billie rooted in the bottom of hers until she came up with a DJ memorial notebook and pen. She held them up triumphantly.
```

```
"See! Goodie bags!"
```

```
Alix smiled as best she could. Making jokes in the face of potential annihilation was her brand. She wasn't used to being on the receiving end. Maybe those commenters who said she was wrong in the head were right after all.
```

```
*goto bunkbeds
```

```
*label bunkbeds
*if ((bunkerbuddy = "Billie and Maude") or (bunkerbuddy = "Billie
and Simon"))
```

The dormitory area was filled with triple decker bunkbeds. Since they were in a party of three, they had one to themselves.

"Shotgun top bunk!" yelled Billie, tossing the notebook up there to secure her place.

Alix sighed. She could hardly expect `{relative}` to go on the middle bunk. Manoeuvring into it was awkward enough for a young person, never mind a stiff oldster.

"Guess I'm in here then," she said, hauling herself onto the thin mattress. Creaking bedsprings overhead and beneath her spine. Worst of both worlds.

It was still a little early to attempt to sleep just yet. She could

```
*choice
    #make the most of having Billie and {relative} with
her.
        *goto chat
    #check for news updates.
        *if annie >45
            *goto breakingnews
        *else
            *goto newsreader
*else
```

A shelter volunteer in a hi-vis vest led them to the dormitory area. Because there were two of them, and the beds were all triple decker bunks, they were going to have to share with a stranger. In this case, a pregnant woman with her hair tied back in a brightly coloured head scarf. Obviously, she had to have the bottom bunk, which left middle and top for Alix and `{bunkerbuddy}`. Alix wasn't sure which was worse. Three inches from a cobwebbed concrete ceiling, or between two sets of creaking bedsprings?

```
*if (bunkerbuddy = "Billie")
```

"Shotgun top bunk!" Billie yelled, struggled up the ladder and belly flopped onto the bed. The whole frame creaked and rocked. Fortunately the pregnant woman was laughing.

"Billie!" But Alix was laughing too. Billie had that effect.

```
*choice
    #At least in here, they could catch up.
        *goto chat
    #At least in here, Alix could catch up with the
latest on the meteor.
        *if annie >45
```

```

                *goto breakingnews
            *else
                *goto newsreader
        *else

            "I'm not quite the old relic you think I am!" said
            ${relative} following Alix's gaze to the top bunk. With a twinkle
            in ${relative_gender_his_hers} eye, ${relative_gender_he_she}
            sprang up the ladder and onto the mattress. "I probably won't want
            to move again for the next couple of hours though,"
            ${relative_gender_he_she} admitted, folding
            ${relative_gender_his_hers} arms behind ${relative_gender_his_hers}
            head.

            "That's okay," Alix smiled, crawling into her own bunk.
            *choice
                #"We can just talk."
                *goto chat
                #"I was going to check the news anyway."
                *if annie >45
                    *goto breakingnews
                *else
                    *goto newsreader

*label chat
*if ((bunkerbuddy = "Billie and Maude") or (bunkerbuddy = "Billie
and Simon"))

    "We should find some way to pass the time," said Alix,
    mindful of ${relative}'s tired, red-rimmed eyes.

    Billie produced a deck of cards from her back pocket. "Do you
    have the game No Soup over here?"

    ${relative} and Alix shook their heads.

    "Okay, I'll teach you."

    They all squeezed into ${relative}'s bunk and played a
    practice round. The game seemed to consist primarily of shouting
    "SOUP" or "NO SOUP" in response to questions about your hand of
    cards. Alix was just starting to get the hang of things when both
    her own and Billie's trackers went off simultaneously.
        *if annie >45
            *goto breakingnews
        *else
            *goto newsreader
*elseif (bunkerbuddy = "Billie")

    "Cools," said Billie, letting one leg dangle over the edge of
    her bunk, so it was like the split down the toe of her Converse was
    speaking to Alix. "What d'ya wanna talk about?"
        *choice

```

#"Our impending deaths."  
\*if positivity >45  
Fortunately Billie saw it for the joke it was. There was the inevitable creak of bedsprings and then her face appeared over the edge.

"Well, obviously," she said. "We should be making our wills right now." She disappeared for a moment and Alix heard furious scribbling. Then a note was handed down to her.

"'I hearby'- that's not how you spell that, Billie, 'I hearby leave all my worldly possessions to' ALL your worldly possessions?"

"Well, currently that's this pen."

"That's not what worldly possessions are. That's just what you currently have on you."

"Okay, give it back a minute," her hand appeared, open waiting.

"No. Your stuff is mine now."

Billie's head appeared next, her face a mock scowl.

\*goto billiesudden  
\*else  
Alix heard the pregnant woman tut beneath her.

Billie's head appeared over the edge of the bunk.

"Hey," she said. "Less of that kind of thing, ok? People are trying to hold it together."

\*goto billiesudden  
#"You and me."  
As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Alix wondered what the hell she meant by them.

Billie exhaled slowly.  
\*if billie\_mood = "angry"  
"We're ok, I guess."

Alix nodded to herself. That was a start.

On her wrist, her tracker had been flashing news updates for a while now, and she finally allowed herself to look at one.

\*if annie >45  
\*goto breakingnews  
\*else

```

        *goto newsreader
*elseif billie >20
    *if billie_mood = "smitten"
        *set billie_mood "love"

        "...I think I know where you're going
with this," said Billie slowly, her smile lighting up her whole
face.

        *goto anniestate
    *else
        *set billie_mood "smitten"
        *goto why
    *label why

    "Why do you bring it up?" asked Billie,
dangling her face over the edge of the bunk, close to Alix's own.

    Maybe it was just being upside down that did
it, but she was bright, bright red.
    *choice
        #Tell her, you fool.
            *goto anniestate
        #Back out of this somehow.
            *goto anniestate
    *else
        "You and me are besties for LYFE!" said
Billie, extending her pinkie over to Alix for a pinkie shake.

        Alix pinkie shook, of course.

        As she did, her wrist came into her eye-
line, and the newsfeed she'd been avoiding for the last half hour
or so loomed into view from her tracker.
        *if annie >45
            *goto breakingnews
        *else
            *goto newsreader
        # "Anything. Literally anything."
        "What's your favourite bird?"

        "Favourite bird?" Alix was confused. If this was a
joke, it didn't have a punchline she knew.
        *if pet_type = "bird"
            "${petname} of course!"

            "Not your favourite individual bird!" Billie
snorted as if Alix was the crazy one. "Favourite kind. Mine's a
peacock. What about cheese?"
            *goto favouriteeverything

        *else
            "I don't know. African Grey parrots are
cool, I guess?"

```

"Neato, mine's a peacock. What about cheeses? I'm very partial to a nice bit of Edam."

\*goto favouriteeverything

\*else

"You and me are the only ones who could've ended up stuck in here, Alix," said  $\{\text{relative}\}$ ,  $\{\text{relative\_gender\_his\_hers}\}$  voice flat and emotionless. "None of the rest of our shitty family could get over themselves long enough to come."

\*choice

\*if (simonsecret)

#"Aunt Maggie would be here if she could though, wouldn't she?"

Simon didn't answer for a long time, and Alix was worried she'd upset him, but then he said softly: "No, she would have insisted on going to Annie's ward."

"Really? They were that close?"

"Oh no. But they understood one another. And Maggie thought she was indestructible, of course, like they all did. So she wouldn't have even considered the dangers."

Alix hadn't considered the dangers, not really. As if reading her mind, Uncle Simon said forcefully: "We did the right thing being here, Alix. We don't have superpowers. We're no use to anyone up there."

Alix wondered if they were any use down here.

\*goto anniestate

\*if (anniejoker)

#"You never got round to telling me about Annie's practical jokes."

"Oh,"  $\{\text{relative}\}$  shuffled a little, like  $\{\text{relative\_gender\_he\_she}\}$  was settling in for a good story. "Well. How about this one? You know they travelled in those dropships, the protectorate?"

"Uh-huh."

"They had a footwell, like in a car? And there was this ongoing joke where everytime there was a new pilot, someone would put a rubber rat in there. Big black Halloween thing, red eyes, furry body, squeaked when you squeezed it, you know the kind."

"I do."

"Well, there's this old hand flying, Morrison, I think his name is, and he reaches down in the footwell,

and there's the rat. And he's not some rookie, so he doesn't freak out, he reaches down and picks it up, gives it a damn hard squeeze.

Only it's not the fake rat. It's a real rat, two weeks dead, and when he squeezes it, his fingers mush through its ribcage and its eyes pop out onto the ground in front of him. [i]Then[/i] he freaks out."

"And Annie did that? Our Annie?"

"Our Annie."

Alix is speechless. As usual, it's her tracker that breaks the silence.

```
*page_break BREAKING NEWS
```

```
*if annie >45
```

```
    *goto breakingnews
```

```
*else
```

```
    *goto newsreader
```

```
#"That's because we're the best ones."
```

\${relative} chuckled. "Damn right! When all this is over, [i]we'll[/i] throw a party. Show them how it's done."

"We should have hot dogs, and mini pizzas," said Alix, warming to the idea. "No cheese skewers."

"Some things are, sacred, Alix."

"[i]In addition[/i] to cheese skewers?"

"Now you're getting it."

If that was a contentious issue, Alix wondered how a karaoke ban would be received.

```
*goto anniestate
```

```
#"They're not so bad."
```

```
"They're shitheads."
```

```
"Then why go to their parties?"
```

\${relative} sighed. "What else am I going to do? Host more of my own?"

"Why not?" asked Alix. Thinking: surely you have to get better at it eventually?

```
*goto anniestate
```

```
*label favouriteeverything
```

And they worked their way through favourite everything (with occasional suggestions from the pregnant lady, whose name was Toni, and whose favourite condiment was brown sauce) until they were able to almost forget where they were and what they were doing.

```
*page_break Almost.  
*if annie >45  
    *goto breakingnews  
*else  
    *goto newsreader
```

```
*label welcomepack
```

Alix got her welcome pack which contained rather wonderfully (no doubt from some enormous historic stockpile) a DJ memorial pen and notepad, a bottle of water, a packet of dehydrated fruit, a small square of flannel for washing, a tiny plastic toothbrush and a comb. Personal grooming was important, evidently. She was shown to her dorm, which was an area with twenty or so triple decker bunk beds, each with a thin mattress and a scratchy wool blanket. Alix was on the middle bed, the worst of both worlds. She slid in and stared up at the bowing springs of the mattress above her.

```
*goto check
```

```
*label check
```

She should probably use her tracker to check in on

```
*choice  
    #${relative}  
        *goto callrelative  
    # a local news bulletin  
        *if annie >45  
            *goto breakingnews  
        *else  
            *goto newsreader  
    *if (billie_present)  
        #Billie  
            *goto callbillie
```

```
*label annieok
```

There she was, sitting on the edge of her hospital bed as she had done a thousand times before. But this time something was different. The monitors around her were all flashing red and the automated voice of the medical computer was strongly insisting that she return to her bed for a full body scan. Her hair was all but completely gone and she was thinner and yellower than ever, yet her back was ramrod straight. She turned as Alix approached and Alix gasped.

She looked well. She looked happy and strong and powerful, in spite of everything. "It's almost over," she said.

"TEMPERATURE CRITICAL," intoned the medical AI. "RETURN TO YOUR BED FOR THE COOLING PROCEDURE. TEMPERATURE CRIT-"

"That's why I always preferred the damn thing with its voice turned off," said Annie, ignoring its requests and getting to her feet.

Alix rushed forward, ready to steady Annie against the collapse she knew must come.

"No," said Annie and she held out her hand to motion 'stop' and Alix did, even though she didn't want to. Annie's stance was rock solid. No hint of a stagger or a sway as she strode towards the patio doors.

"The blast shield is down," said Alix, still straining to move towards her mother, every muscle taut.

Annie laughed. "It won't matter," she said, staring straight into Alix's soul with those green, green eyes. Alix realised that rather than being alien, those eyes were Annie's essence. The core of Annie distilled into vibrant jade. "I wish I could hold you, one last time, my girl." Annie looked down at her hands, and when she blew a kiss, Alix fancied she heard her mother's damp lips sizzle as they touched the skin of her fingertips. Annie grasped the edge of the patio door and squeezed it hard and her fingers sank in like it was butter. The blast door too, glowed orange at her touch. It took a little longer, and Alix could see it took effort as Annie furrowed her brow and her hands reddened. But eventually she was through and out into the courtyard and, instead of offering any goodbyes, she just grinned and leapt and was away like a shooting star in reverse, streaking upwards into the sky.

```
*if (pet_ward)
```

```
    Whatever Annie had done seemed to have affected ${petname}
    too. Alix had never seen ${pet_pronoun_him_her} so utterly
    motionless.
```

Eventually Annie's power waned, and the sudden regaining of her faculties made Alix pitch forward, grabbing at the edge of the bed to right herself, just like Annie used to when she stumbled. She hurried to the gap in the blast shield to stare up at the sky, but her mother was gone.

```
*set annieblazeofglory true
```

```
*page_break Nothing but green sky.
```

```
*if positivity >50
```

```
    *goto meteoraverted
```

```
*else
```

```
    *goto meteorstrikes
```

```
*label anniedying
```

```
"Hello, Alix."
```

Alix flinched. It wasn't her mother's voice. Annie remained inert and yellowing beneath her bed covers. "Doctor Carson activated my vocal settings when the lock-down was initiated," the AI explained in its soothing, modulated tones. "Your mother does not have much time," it continued, its blue scanner lights roving endlessly over Annie's sleeping frame.

"However, her coma is medically induced. I could wake her if you'd like to say goodbye."

Alix sat down heavily in the leather armchair. Her hands went to the arm rests and she realised there were grooves where she had dug in her nails all those times Annie had said something snide and cruel. "Will it hurt?"

"I can minimise her pain."

That seemed like a machine's way of saying yes. Which was more selfish? To demand a goodbye from Annie, or let her go without getting the last word? Alix sighed. She knew exactly how Annie would see it.

\*choice

#"Wake her up, please."

Slowly Annie's eyes opened. She blinked, then said: "Maude? You came back."

Alix swallowed. "Of course I did."

"But you were so upset about Jim. I thought-" Annie looked down at her hands, tried to lift them, but the effort was too much. "I thought I cut my hands. There was blood."

Alix moved to the edge of the bed, ignoring the AI's rote proximity warnings. She clasped Annie's hand and it was so hot it almost hurt.

"No," Alix told her. "No blood and no upset. Everything is fine."

"Then why am I in the hospital?" asked Annie drily, and with a twinkle in her eye.

"No getting anything past you, is there?"

"Alix?"

"Yes?" Alix's breath caught in her throat. She didn't know what she expected, but her mother only looked at her like she was seeing her for the first time, not in this particular meeting, but ever, at all. A weak smile tugged at the corners of Annie's mouth and then she closed her eyes.

"Is she...?"

"No," said the AI. "But it is unlikely she will wake again. You should now retreat to a safe distance."

\*goto safedistance

#"Leave her in peace."

Alix leaned forward in her seat and took her mother's hand. It was hot to the touch, almost painfully so. The skin had a yellow sheen and was pulled tight over jutting bones. Alix squeezed it and it was like squeezing the handles of barbecue tongs left too long on the grill.

```
*if dreams >35
```

Unsure precisely why she was doing it, Alix began to recite one of her short stories. She hadn't committed it to memory on purpose, and yet there it was, unexpectedly on the tip of her tongue.

"Writing and reading are a strange partnership. I sit here and write this now, and you sit there and read it now, but for both of us, 'now' means something different.

```
*page_break By the time you read this..."
```

"Whatever happens, thank you for reading." Alix adjusted her position in the seat a little, but didn't let go of her mother's hand. She felt like there'd never been a silence like this before. It made her feel stupid for having spoken. Was the ward thoroughly soundproofed, or had everything just ceased?

"Internal temperature is rising," the AI warned, disproving the latter part of that theory. "You should now retreat to a safe distance."

```
*goto safedistance
```

```
*else
```

"Internal temperature rising," the AI warned. "Please retreat to a safe distance."

```
*goto safedistance
```

```
*label safedistance
```

"You retreat to a safe distance," said Alix, and continued to hold her mother's hand

```
*page_break until the last traces of heat had ebbed away.
```

```
*if positivity <50
```

```
    *goto meteorstrikes
```

```
*else
```

```
    *goto smallimpact
```

```
*label dietmarbunker
```

"Okay," Dietmar nodded and wandered off to give his driver the good news.

```
*if not (pet_type = "")
```

As Dietmar was leaving, the bellhop entered, carrying `{petname}`. Alix waved him over and took her `{pet_type}` gratefully, trying to push down the guilt of forgetting all about `{pet_pronoun_him_her}`. She was dropping the ball on a lot of things lately.

"Can't have been an easy decision," said Elizabeth, giving Alix's arm a squeeze.

"Half the time they don't feel like decisions," Alix confessed.  
"Not really. I mean, what else could I do?"

"I guess," Elizabeth nodded, furrowing her brow and Alix felt bad. Elizabeth was estranged from her family, had moved out when she was seventeen and never looked back. Family vs friends wasn't something she'd ever have to consider. Not that that was really the choice Alix had been faced with. More condemn someone else to certain death or give them a chance of survival.

"Hey, that looks like serious face," said  
\*if (jodiealive)  
    Jodie. "I don't like serious face. Why don't we go and watch those guys play foosball? A couple of them are hot..."  
    \*goto foosball  
\*else  
    Elizabeth. "Why not put it to good use? We could go and show those losers how to play foosball?"  
    \*goto foosball

\*label foosball

Alix followed her gaze to where several guys in polo shirts were circling, none wanting to be the first to undertake such a frivolous act as to play table football during a planetary crisis.

"Sure, in a sec."

First, Alix wanted to use her tracker to

```
*choice
  #call ${relative}
  *goto callrelative
  #check the latest news report
  *if annie >45
    *goto breakingnews
  *else
    *goto newsreader
  *if (billie_present)
    #call Billie
    *goto callbillie
```

\*label breakingnews

[b]BREAKING[/b] said the news ticker over and over again. No further elaboration, just that. The image was poor quality, clearly being streamed from a tracker zooming beyond its capabilities and wobbling thanks to an inexperienced streamer.

A lone figure, pale green and blurry, stalking across an empty car park. Sound quality was poor too. A hubbub of voices welled up, all

asking who it was, and what they were doing, distorting and crackling with a static edge.

Alix's heart clenched like a fist. She was fairly certain that particular shade of pale green was exclusive to hospital gowns. The figure stopped for a moment. Crouched as if gathering strength. They began to glow, brighter and warmer, until the glow was too bright to make out the figure within, and then they streaked upward, into the sky like a reverse shooting star. For a moment, there was a hushed silence, as all the watchers held their breath. Then a sonic boom which shook the ground so violently the concrete cracked beneath Alix's feet. She clutched her chest, struggling to breathe, strangled with fear.

```
*set annieblazeofglory true
```

```
*set crack true
```

```
*if shelter = "bus"
```

```
    *goto ended
```

```
*else
```

The lights went out, dropping to the emergency back-up and there was a flash so bright Alix had to look away and put her hand over the tracker for a moment. When she looked back, the streamer was filming nothing, just an empty car park, with a soft rain falling.

```
    *goto ended
```

```
*label ended
```

The stream ended and nothing took its place. The silence became oppressive.

```
*page_break Not. One. Sound.
```

```
*if positivity >50
```

```
    *goto meteoraverted
```

```
*else
```

```
    *goto meteorstrikes
```

```
*label newsreader
```

A poised newsreader, the strong lighting and hive of movement in the newsroom behind her suggesting this was pre-recorded.

"Scorpio XXIX, the meteor that has been approaching for some time now, will make impact shortly." That vagueness, another clue that this was filmed and kept aside, ready to be deployed at the appropriate moment. Cut to a simulation of the meteor and its path. A huge, pitted rock, blazing with green fire, moving ever closer.

Cut to the latest predicted impact zones. They were

```
*if positivity >50
```

```
    smaller than before.
```

```
    *page_break Unexpected.
```

```
    *goto smallimpact
```

```
*else
```

```

        larger than ever. Almost half the world was an angry red
blotch, like a
        *page_break spreading bloodstain.
        *goto meteorstrikes

*label meteoraverted
*set meteor_impact "none"
*if (alix_ward)
        Alix sat down on the bed, unsure how to proceed. Should she
go outside, try to follow Annie somehow? Should she call someone?
What had just happened?
        *if (pet_ward)
                ${petname} still seemed mesmerised by Annie's actions -
${pet_pronoun_his_her} eyes were glued to the gaping hole in the
side of the room.
                *goto onceagainuju
        *else
                *goto onceagainuju
        *else
                *goto onceagainuju
*else
        Alix's fingers tightened around
        *if shelter = ""
                her knees.
                *goto imagechanged
        *if (((retriever = "relative") or (scarfretriever =
"relative"))) and (billie_present))
                Billie's.
                *goto imagechanged
        *elseif (scarfretriever = "alix")
                the scarf.
                *goto imagechanged
        *elseif (retriever = "alix")
                *if ((pet_type = "fish") or (pet_type = "lizard"))
                        ${petname}'s travel tank.
                        *goto imagechanged
                *else
                        ${petname}'s shoulders.
                        *goto imagechanged
        *else
                her knee caps.
                *goto imagechanged

*label onceagainuju
Once again, Oju provided the answer, her clear voice suggesting:
"This breaking news matched your recent interests."

Alix quickly accepted the bulletin. A busy news room, but
apparently no audio. "Sound up, Oju," she said, to no avail. She
tapped hurriedly through the tracker's manual menus, pressed the
volume button to the max. Nothing. Unless...
*goto imagechanged

```

\*label imagechanged

The image on the tracker screen had changed. It was a live feed, there was no audio, no voiceover from a kindly news anchor in a safe studio bunker. Just the meteor, the real meteor, not a simulation. A live satellite feed, brought to you somehow by the marvel of technology. It looked so tiny. Alix knew that was down to the distance and capabilities of the satellite's camera, but still.

That was what all the fuss was about? That little cold rock. It wasn't even all that green, far more muted than the recreations and even the sky itself, implied. Greenish white.

\*if (annie >45)

And then, something else. An orange shooting star coming the opposite way. Blazing towards it at incredible speed. Alix made a small, involuntary noise and squeezed

\*if shelter = ""

her knees

\*goto evenharder

\*elseif (((retriever = "relative") or (scarfretriever = "relative"))) and (billie\_present))

Billie's fingers even harder.

Billie said "Oww" softly under her breath, but she was too transfixed by the unfolding images to even attempt to retract her hand.

\*goto anniestrike

\*elseif (scarfretriever = "alix")

the scarf even harder.

The tightness of the fabric twisting through her fingers was turning her fingertips deep purple, but she couldn't let it go any more than she could look away.

\*goto anniestrike

\*elseif (retriever = "alix")

\*if pet\_type = "fish"

`\${petname}`'s travel tank even harder.

\*goto anniestrike

\*else

`\${petname}`'s shoulders even harder.

`\${petname}` gave her a warning nip and Alix adjusted her grip and patted the poor `\${pet\_type}`'s head by way of apology.

\*goto anniestrike

\*else

her knee caps

\*goto evenharder

\*elseif (annieblazeofglory)

Then, a tiny speck, streaking towards the meteor, fast and hot, burning orange. It- Annie? Was it really Annie?- made impact with the surface of the meteor and-

Nothing. Alix had expected... something! For the meteor to explode, or at least for a cloud to go up as the burning particle hit.

```
*goto meteorspun
*else
    *goto meteorspun
```

```
*label meteorspun
```

The meteor spun on through space, slowly it seemed. Alix held her breath watching it. When it disappeared out of the satellite's view, her tracker's screen went black and she was left gasping for breath.

```
*if (pet_ward)
    ${petname} seemed similarly stunned. Alix wondered whether
    ${pet_type}s could sense something in the air, static electricity
    maybe? ${pet_pronoun_he_she} had been utterly silent and
    motionless for what seemed like a long time now.
*if shelter = "bus"
```

Above, the sky was growing darker and darker, losing its green. The air grew cold and Alix shivered

```
*page_break Time passed.
*goto timepassed
*elseif shelter = ""
    *goto timepassed
```

```
*else
```

Around her, everyone had fallen silent. Some shook with noiseless tears. Others locked eyes, sharing in one another's fear and misery. Still others looked at the ground,

```
*if shelter = "dietmars"
```

There was loud pop and a smash as the champagne cork hit the chandelier. Dookie stood watching the champagne foaming out of the bottle and onto his hand. "Seemed like as good a time as any," he shrugged.

```
*page_break The bottle changed hands for a while.
*goto timepassed
*elseif shelter = "hospital"
```

A toddler picked up the tiny ceramic bath from the doll's house and began smashing it against the roof, yelling: "BASH BASH BASH!" He looked shocked when his mother burst into tears.

```
*page_break No-one else did or said anything.
*goto timepassed
*elseif shelter = "apartment"
```

The old guy from upstairs went from person to person offering them home made potato salad. Alix thought it a sweet gesture. She watched him persist, holding out the tupperware container to each person in turn. No -one took any.

```
*page_break His pilgrimage seemed to take forever.
*goto timepassed
```

```
*label evenharder
even harder.
```

Her nails were digging in even through her jeans, but she couldn't feel it, was barely even aware she was doing it.

```
*goto anniestrike
```

```
*label anniestrike
```

Annie. Annie was there. In her supernova blaze, it wasn't possible to make her out as a human being, but Alix knew that was who it was. She flashed across the sky towards the meteor, gaining speed and brightness until eventually she met with its cold pale surface. Alix expected a huge sonic boom, or a cataclysmic earthquake, but there was no sound. Just a bright flash and then the meteor fell apart, chunks

```
*finish spinning off into space.
```

```
*label timepassed
```

Alix wasn't sure precisely much time had passed. Just long enough for her to unclench her aching muscles, to doubt, one more time, the accuracy of the news footage. It was then that there was a deep rumble. The ground shook, slightly at first, then more and more until it became too much for Alix to retain her balance, and she dropped to her knees as the sky roared

```
*if meteor_impact = "none"
    *finish and total darkness fell.
```

```
*else
    and the ground cracked and
    *finish total darkness fell.
```

```
*label meteorstrikes
```

```
*set meteor_impact "big"
```

```
*if shelter = "apartment"
```

```
    *set alix_supernova true
```

```
    *goto meteorstrike_main
```

```
*elseif ((retriever = "relative") or (scarfretriever = "relative"))
```

```
    *set pet_dead true
```

```
    *set relative_dead true
```

```
    *goto meteorstrike_main
```

```
*elseif ((retriever = "billie") or (scarfretriever = "billie"))
```

```
    *set pet_dead true
```

```
    *set billie_dead true
```

```
    *goto meteorstrike_main
```

```
*elseif not (retriever = "alix") or not (scarfretriever = "alix")
```

```
    *if (shelter = "dietmars")
```

```
        *goto meteorstrike_main
```

```
    *elseif (petretrieval)
```

```
        *goto meteorstrike_main
```

```
    *else
```

```
        *set pet_dead true
```

```
        *goto meteorstrike_main
```

```

*label meteorstrike_main
*if shelter = "bus"
    The sky flashed bright white green, like a chemistry
    experiment Alix had done in school with some boron. Or maybe
    barium. She couldn't remember, could only remember that the flash
    made her take a step a back and cover her eyes, just like she was
    doing now. Some of her classmates had laughed.
    *goto firstsound
*else
    *goto firstsound

*label firstsound
*if shelter = ""
    *goto surprisetears
*else
    Then, a sound like rain. Fine droplets falling hard and fast
    against the roof of the shelter. Next, a roaring, building and
    growing louder and closer, until the shelter shook and the
    *if (crack)
        crack in the concrete widened.
        *goto surprisetears
    *else
        concrete beneath it cracked.
        *goto surprisetears

*label surprisetears
Alix surprised herself by bursting into tears. She'd never
considered herself the kind of person who might do that.
*if (visited_scarfpickup)
    Now it seemed it was becoming something of a regular
    occurrence.

When her dad died, she'd cried of course, but when Annie was first
hospitalised, Alix had felt only numb. A spreading coldness in her
belly that turned to guilt when her mother's condition worsened.
She had expected more of that. Not this. Had there been something
wrong with her then? Or now? Which was the right way to be?
*if (((retriever = "relative") or (scarfretriever = "relative"))
and (billie_present)) and not (alix_ward))

    Billie looked surprised too, but was soon hugging her,
    forehead pressed against Alix's so firmly it almost hurt. Alix was
    so grateful for the companionship. Without Billie she would likely
    be falling apart altogether.
    *goto sheltercheck
*elseif (retriever = "alix")
    *if ((pet_type = "fish") or (pet_type = "lizard"))

        She tried to focus on ${petname} instead, but that just
        set off a new line of worries about whether the travel tank would
        be sturdy enough to withstand whatever the meteor might throw at
        them.

```

```

        *goto sheltercheck
    *else

        As if sensing her discomfort, ${petname} ${petreact} and
        snuggled more closely against Alix's chest. Alix was so grateful.
        Without ${petname}, she would likely be falling apart altogether.
        *goto sheltercheck
    *else
        *goto sheltercheck

*label sheltercheck
*if shelter = "bus"

    Alix felt she should run, but where to? The shelter creaked
    and groaned, but it seemed to be holding, whereas when she looked
    towards the city, she could see buildings falling, masonry tumbling
    into the rumbling streets. Nowhere was safe. In fact, she seemed
    some distance from the epicentre here.
    *if meteor_impact = "none"
        *finish For now.
    *else

        No sooner had that thought crossed her mind than the
        ground shuddered with such force the bus shelter was dislodged from
        its foundations and came
        *set alix_supernova true
        *finish CRASHING down on top of her.

*elseif shelter = "apartment"
    *if positivity <15
        None of Alix's neighbours came to comfort her. She
        wondered if she'd done something to offend them.
        *goto lightfittings
    *else
        The potato salad guy came and tentatively put his arm
        around Alix. She felt bad for knowing him only as potato salad guy.
        *goto lightfittings
*elseif shelter = "dietmars"

    Alix watched the chandelier shedding crystals like
    snowflakes,
    *if (jodiealive)
        falling, glittering, into Jodie's hair, and had a sudden
        vision of the meteor strike passing uneventfully only for the light
        fitting to come loose and crush her friend to death. She took
        Jodie's elbow and led her hurriedly back over to the bar.
        *goto worry
    *else
        and for some reason it reminded her of Jodie. What if
        Jodie was up there, judging them because they hadn't even had a
        funeral for her yet? What if she was the one shaking the
        chandelier, specifically to make Alix feel bad?
        *goto worry

```

```
*elseif shelter = "hospital"  
    *goto lightfittings  
*else  
    *goto worry
```

```
*label lightfittings
```

The light fittings shook. All the children in the shelter began crying pretty much simultaneously. Maybe it was some kind of resonance thing, Alix thought, wiping her nose. Although why had it affected only the children and her? Was she defective in some way? Developmentally stunted?

```
*goto worry
```

```
*label worry
```

```
*if ((alix_ward) and (annieblazeofglory))
```

Would Annie be able to breathe up there, in the atmosphere? How would she know where she was going? Was she going anywhere at all, or just away?

Strange, the things you worry about when the world is ending.

```
*goto trinity
```

```
*label trinity
```

They say bad things come in threes. The roof, which moments ago had seemed so sturdy, so reliable, shuddered and caved in, and Alix was able to test the trinity of badness as she breathed brick dust, tasted blood and

```
*finish blacked out.
```

```
*label smallimpact
```

```
*set meteor_impact "small"
```

```
*if (alix_ward)
```

The AI fell silent for a moment, making the distant rumbling seem like it was right there in the room.

"Impact imminent," intoned the AI. "Please adopt the brace position. Impact im-" and on it went with its new refrain.

```
*goto rumbling
```

```
*elseif ((shelter = "") or (shelter = "bus"))
```

Overhead, the sky rumbled.

Alix had expected it to go dark, but instead, the sky flared brighter, like an early electronic screen with a faulty backlight.

```
*goto rumbling
```

```
*else
```

Outside, the sky rumbled.

The emergency lighting flared bright for a moment, then went out.

Not this again.

The shelter warden went to flip the breaker switch, but it did nothing.

```
*goto rumbling
```

```
*label rumbling
```

The rumbling intensified, louder and with a screaming edge to it, until Alix was no longer sure whether it was still happening, or whether the sound was in her own ears. Her ears kept popping, which made it worse. Her skin prickled, and she worried that she was about to discharge like a weathervane in a lightning storm.

```
*if (((retriever = "relative") or (scarfretriever = "relative"))
and (billie_present))
```

"My ears keep popping," said Billie in a whisper. "Are you getting that too?" Alix could only nod, swallowing frantically in an effort to dislodge the swollen feeling around her eardrums.

```
*goto boom
```

```
*else
```

```
*goto boom
```

```
*label boom
```

One long, loud boom. Everything shook, once, briefly, like a dog trying to twitch a flea off its back.

```
*finish Then silence.
```

```
*label pet_at_dietmars
```

```
*if pet_type = "dog"
```

```
    ${petname} was having the time of ${pet_pronoun_his_her}
life, running up and down the corridor between them, barking like a
mad thing. ${pet_pronoun_his_her} coat became heavy with foam and
${pet_pronoun_he_she} shook, spattering Dietmar and causing him to
yell at the top of his voice.
```

```
    *return
```

```
*elseif pet_type = "cat"
```

```
    ${petname} was hating it. ${pet_pronoun_he_she} had insisted
on coming with them, then spent most of the time wandering the
hallway meowing plaintively. Now, as it became harder and harder
for ${pet_pronoun_him_her} to avoid the falling foam,
${pet_pronoun_he_she} escalated to yowling and hissing.
```

```
    *return
```

```
*elseif pet_type = "rabbit"
```

```
    ${petname} seemed surprisingly unperturbed by all the foam,
hopping through it without a care in the world.
```

```
    *return
```

```
*elseif (pet_type = "bird")
```

```
    ${petname}, furious at being left shut up in Dietmar's
apartment, was screaming a string of expletives at the top of
${pet_pronoun_him_her} voice.
```

```
    *return
```

```
*else  
  *return
```

## rating4

```
*temp friend ""[i>Welcome to wiff.net, the Writers' Independent  
Fiction Forum.[/i]
```

```
*line_break
```

```
[i]The following extract was submitted by [/i][b>Lixxil[/b][i]. We  
thank you for taking the time to read it.[/i]
```

```
*if meteor_impact = "none"
```

Everything had been leading up to this moment. At least, that is what we'd all been led to believe. In the end, there was no end. We didn't go out with a bang, because she did. She got to shine one last time, which was all she wanted, really. She got not one, but two commemorative statues. One outside the hospital, in place of that ugly old shape that made no sense, and one on the hill overlooking the city. Everyone said it was only fitting that she had two statues - one that everyone could see for miles around, and one linking her to the hospital that had nursed her through her final days. Some people chose to forget that they had protested the naming of the hospital wing only six short months ago. Group amnesia. Selective remembering.

But we're all guilty of that. At the funeral, I told everyone how wonderful she had been, how brave, how strong. And the mourners nodded and smiled their agreement into their handkerchiefs. But the truth of it was in how she dealt with that meteorite. A fire that brought tears to your eyes, furious and terrible and beautiful and unstoppable. A thing to be admired from a safe distance, not cuddled, or rebuked.

My mother killed a meteorite, not the other way around.

```
*goto rating
```

```
*elseif meteor_impact = "small"
```

Once upon a time, there was a girl called Alice. Not that one. This Alice's land was far from wondrous. The sky had been wrong for a long time. Now it was wronger still. And not just the sky, but the land too. There were craters where buildings had been, piles of rubble blocking roads and pavements, lakes displaced so that wet places were dry and dry places were wet. It seemed like an ending. And yet, it wasn't.

Because there were people amongst the rubble, and most still had hands and minds and memories and they used those to rebuild. They could no longer look to their wrists for guidance, so instead they looked to each other. And when their devices were eventually restored to them many months later, they appreciated them and each other, all the more.

Alice appreciated her

```
*if pet_type = ""
```

```
    *goto BillieBobbie
```

```
*else
```

```
    ${pet_type} most of all.  
    *goto mostofall  
*elseif meteor_impact = "big"
```

Becoming aware of the smell of your own body is a strange way to realise you're not dead. The panicked sweat, the last vestiges of hastily applied body spray, they mingle in the nostrils with the brick dust and the blood. Each breath is a reminder that you're alive, not because of the act itself, but the scent it carries. My ghost would probably still breathe, I think, as futile as the gesture might be. But it wouldn't smell. Somehow, I know this.

When a hand reaches through the rubble, that has its own smell too. Disinfectant and the cold tang of outside air. There is still air outside. Insides are still inside. The rescuer clears away the worst of the rubble and suddenly I feel like a charlatan, like I was playing at being buried. And in a way, I am. I'm not buried for real, forever. Not like her.

I'm sorry.

I miss you.

I wish we could do back and start this all over again with what I know now.

Maybe you will.  
\*goto rating

```
*label BillieBobbie  
*if (billie_present)  
    *set friend "Bobbie"  
    friend Bobbie most of all.  
    *goto mostofall2  
*else  
    *set friend "Ermintrude"  
    friend Ermintrude most of all.  
    *goto mostofall2
```

```
*label mostofall  
She had come so close to losing that precious ${pet_type}, now she knew how much ${pet_pronoun_he_she} meant, and that she would never let ${pet_pronoun_him_her} go again, even if another meteor came. They would always live happily ever after.  
*goto rating
```

```
*label mostofall2  
She had come so close to losing ${friend}, now she knew how much she meant, and that she would never let her go again, even if another meteor came. They would always live happily ever after.  
*goto rating
```

```
*label rating
```

```
[i]Thank you for reading. Please now rate the piece on a scale of
1-10. (With 1 representing 'What the hell is this crap?!' [/i]
[i]up to 10[/i] [i]'The finest creative work since time
immemorial.')[/i]
```

```
*input_number rating4 1 10
*if alix >50
    I've come to value your opinion, you know.
    *finish Really
*elseif alix <20
    What makes you think I care about your opinion?
    *finish Jerk
*else
    Like water off a duck's back.
    *finish Am I the water or the duck?
```

## epilogue

```
*temp dead_relative ""*temp living_relative ""
*temp living_relative_gender_he_she ""
*temp living_relative_gender_his_her ""
*temp living_relative_title ""
*temp pet_move ""
*temp petmovement ""
*temp epilogue ""
*comment Was getting a weird error where the final part of the
epilogue defaulted to family no matter what so have added this in
an effort to fix it. May be "career" or "dreams".
*temp deadfriend false
*temp friend ""

*comment *image epilogue_day.png
*gosub_scene csideimg_epilogue_day
*temp mainstat
*set mainstat "career"
*temp mainstatval
*set mainstatval career
*if dreams > mainstatval
    *set mainstat "dreams"
    *set mainstatval dreams
*if family > mainstatval
    *set mainstat "family"
    *set mainstatval family

*if mainstat = "career"
    *goto career_epilogue
*elseif mainstat = "dreams"
    *goto dreams_epilogue
*elseif mainstat = "family"
    *goto family_epilogue

*label pet_setup
*if pet_type = "cat"
    *set pet_move "stalking"
    *set petmovement "ran"
    *return
*elseif ((pet_type = "dog") or (pet_type = "lizard"))
    *set pet_move "clambering"
    *set petmovement "ran"
    *return
*elseif (pet_type = "rabbit")
    *set pet_move "hopping"
    *set petmovement "hopped"
    *return
*elseif (pet_type = "bird")
    *set pet_move "fluttering"
    *set petmovement "flew"
    *return
*else
    *set pet_move "swimming"
```

```

        *set petmovement "swam"
        *return

*label career_epilogue
*set epilogue "career"
"Hey, get a shot of this," says Dietmar, skipping up the kerb.

"Can we stick to the shooting schedule, please?" Elizabeth asks,
referring to her clipboard. Paper notes, because the network is
still too jittery to rely on. Their new office is a converted
carpet shop on a former retail park,
*if ((meteor_impact = "big") or (meteor_impact = "small"))
    outside the worst of the blast radius. The car park's a
    little cracked, but no-one has a car, so it doesn't really matter.
Elizabeth painted their company logo in the window to deter
looters, she says, but Alix worries it'll have the opposite effect.
    *if not (jodiealive)
        One wall is dominated by a large framed photo of Jodie,
        doing that pose she loved with one shoulder to the camera and her
        chin tilted downwards to make her eyes look bigger. They still
        don't talk about her much. It's too painful.
    *if (awardwin)

        Alix's award is in the toilet, hidden behind all of
        Dietmar's. It's a cliché, but it really does seem like the best
        place for them.
        *if not (petname = "")
            *if not (pet_dead)
                *if pet_type = "fish"

                    ${petname} comes to the office in
                    ${pet_pronoun_his_her} carry tank when Alix is there. Elizabeth
                    stencilled the logo onto that too. ${pet_pronoun_he_she}'s on a
                    warning at the moment though, because ${pet_pronoun_he_she}'d been
                    doing ${pet_pronoun_his_her} old tidal wave trick and soaked a
                    stack of brand new notepads.
                    *goto paper
                *else

                    ${petname} has the run of the office when
                    Alix is there, and ${pet_pronoun_his_her} own special workplace
                    food and water bowls complete with company logo too.
                    ${pet_pronoun_he_she}'s in Elizabeth's bad books right now though,
                    because ${pet_pronoun_he_she} got up on Alix's desk and chewed on
                    some of the brand new notepads before Alix could stop
                    ${pet_pronoun_him_her}.
                    *goto paper
            *else
                *goto paper
        *else
            *goto paper
*else
    cheap and cheerful.

```

\*if not (jodiealive)

One wall is dominated by a large framed photo of Jodie, doing that pose she loved with one shoulder to the camera and her chin tilted downwards to make her eyes look bigger. They still don't talk about her much. It's too painful.

\*if (awardwin)

Alix's award is in the toilet, hidden behind all of Dietmar's. It's a cliché, but it really does seem like the best place for them.

\*goto paper

\*label paper

\*if (rock)

At least all that paper gives Alix an excuse to use Billie's rock as a paperweight. A bittersweet reminder of those loved and lost.

The paper bears their company logo as well, because Elizabeth insists on the importance of good branding. "We went over this at the office," she says, growing more exasperated. "We need to get this thing finished!"

\*choice

#What thing?

The thing in question is their first project together as a studio.

\*if (videol)

They were using some of the footage Alix had shot for her video,

\*if videotype = "pet"

    \${petname} \${pet\_move} around,

    \*goto reedit

\*elseif videotype = "hosp"

    a series of interviews with the doctors, nurses and porters at DJ memorial,

    \*goto reedit

\*elseif videotype = "boxx"

    screengrabs and video capture of actual MyBoxx fan comments,

    \*goto reedit

\*else

    some talking heads from \${relative}'s last party, including Alix's many aunts, uncles and other extended Protectorate family.

    \*goto reedit

\*else

    They had already done some pieces to camera back at the office,

    \*goto reedit

#Never mind, carry on

\*goto time

```

*label reedit
but are now filming additional segments to turn it into
*if meteor_impact = "none"
    a full-blown comedy sketch.
    *goto elizabethreiterating
*else
    a serious news piece.
    *goto elizabethreiterating

*label elizabethreiterating
*if (job_lost)
    So much for Chad Chen trying to torpedo her career with his
demonetisation.

Dietmar keeps running off ahead and coming back with footage of
locations they haven't discussed. Elizabeth is trying her hardest
to keep them to the shooting schedule.

"As I've said before," Elizabeth barks, "we're running out of time
to get this done!"
*goto time

*label time
*if (jodiealive)
    *if meteor_impact = "none"

        "We have literally all the time in the world!" says
Jodie. Her wrist is bare where her tracker used to live.
        *goto wrist
    *else
        *goto wrist
*else
    *goto wrist

*label wrist

Alix glances down at her
*if (jodiealive)
    *if ((mainstat = "career") and (meteor_impact = "none"))
        own
        *goto wristcont
    *else
        *goto wristcont
*else
    *goto wristcont

*label wristcont
wrist. The basic functions of her tracker have been restored,
although Oju is still mostly silent. She never realised how much
she would miss that tinny robot voice.

Almost as much as she misses

```

```

*if (billie_dead)
    Billie.
    *goto 2nd_dead
*elseif (relative_dead)
    ${relative}.
    *goto 2nd_dead
*elseif (pet_dead)
    ${petname}.
    *goto 2nd_dead
*elseif not (jodiealive)
    *set deadfriend true
    Jodie.
    *goto 2nd_dead
*else
    Annie.
    *goto thought

*label 2nd_dead
*if not (deadfriend)
    *if not (jodiealive)
        And Jodie.
        *goto 3rd_dead
    *else
        And Annie.
        *goto thought
*elseif (relative_dead)
    And ${relative}
    *goto 3rd_dead
*elseif (pet_dead)
    And ${petname}.
    *goto 3rd_dead
*else
    And Annie.
    *goto thought

*label 3rd_dead
And Annie.
*goto thought

*label thought
*page_break Ouch.
The thought is still like being hit by falling masonry. Alix
flinches.
*if epilogue = "career"
    *goto career_epilogue_cont
*elseif epilogue = "dreams"
    *goto dreams_epilogue_cont
*else
    *if (relative_dead)
        *set dead_relative "${relative}"
        *if dead_relative = "Aunt Maude"
            *set living_relative "Uncle Simon"
            *set living_relative_gender_he_she "he"

```

```

        *set living_relative_gender_his_her "his"
        *set living_relative_title "uncle"
        *goto family_epilogue_cont
    *else
        *set living_relative "Aunt Maude"
        *set living_relative_gender_he_she "she"
        *set living_relative_gender_his_her "her"
        *set living_relative_title "aunt"
        *goto family_epilogue_cont
    *else
        *set dead_relative "Annie"
        *set living_relative "${relative}"
        *set living_relative_gender_he_she
"${relative_gender_he_she}"
        *set living_relative_gender_his_her
"${relative_gender_his_hers}"
        *set living_relative_title "${relative}"
        *goto family_epilogue_cont

*label career_epilogue_cont

"You okay?" Dietmar asks, taking a break from
*if meteor_impact = "none"
    trying out a variety of silly voices and faces into his
tracker.
    *goto sky
*else
    filming endless mood shots of scaffolding and Environment
Agency cordons.
    *goto sky

*label sky
Alix looks up at the sky. It's no longer green, so there's that.
*if meteor_impact = "none"
    But it isn't blue yet, either.
    *if positivity >50
        Alix remains hopeful.
        *goto expression
    *else
        Alix holds out little hope that will ever happen.
        *goto expression
*else
    Instead, the air has a thickness to it. Breathable, but
inhale too sharply and you can feel the grit in your lungs.
    *goto expression

*label expression
*if (alix_supernova)
    She never told them how she really made it out of the
levelled shelter. It seems like a dream now. There was heat and
light and next thing she knew, she was hovering above the
devastation, emanating orange light.

```

```

    *if (annieblazeofglory)
        Like mother, like daughter.

*if (relative_dead)
    She tries not to think about how ${relative} would be here to
    see that sky if Alix hadn't sent ${relative_gender_him_her} running
    off back to her apartment, but the thought haunts her.

Elizabeth catches Alix's expression and throws an arm around her
shoulders, squeezing her. "We have each other," she says, pointedly
ignoring Dietmar's puke noises. "[i]We[/i] made it through."

"I know, I know," says Alix. "I just... I suppose I never thought it
would end up like this." She gestures
*if meteor_impact = "big"
    to the skyline where her apartment block once was,
Environment Agency crews in their hi vis jackets and hard hats
clambering over the rubble even now, assessing and recording and
clearing.
    *goto annie_check
*elseif meteor_impact = "small"
    to the people passing by them, back to their daily lives
almost as if nothing had ever happened.
    *goto annie_check
*else
    in the direction of the hospital where the Annie Akerman
    memorial statue stands guard, replacing that ugly pelvis thing.
    *goto career_ending

*label annie_check
*if annieblazeofglory

    "Annie tried to save us. She punched a fucking meteor, and
    it's like it made no difference. Everything ended up the same."
    *if (anniescarf)
        She twiddles with the silken tassels of the purple
        scarf. She wears it as a belt most days now.
        *goto career_ending
    *else
        *goto career_ending

*label career_ending
*if positivity >50

    "End?" sniggers
    *if (jodiealive)
        *set friend "Jodie"
        Jodie lifting her tablet to continue filming the first
        major project from Bunker Dunk Studios. "Alix, we're just getting
        started."
        *goto billiecheck_career

    *else

```

```

        *set friend "Dietmar"
        Dietmar lifting his tablet to continue filming the first
major project from Bunker Dunk Studios. "Alix, we're just getting
started."
        *goto billiecheck_career
*else
    *if (jodiealive)
        *if not (annieblazeofglory)
            "Enough of us are still here to make a
difference," says Jodie.
        *if (annieblazeofglory)
            "We probably wouldn't have made it without her
smashing the meteorite into smaller pieces," says Jodie. "Isn't
that enough of a difference?"

            "Who says this is the end?" says Elizabeth.
        *set friend "Elizabeth"
        *goto billiecheck_career

*label billiecheck_career
*if ((billie_dead) or (billie_gone))

    "Not Billie, though," says Alix quietly, almost to herself.
    "Billie's not here."

    "Oh, honey," says Elizabeth, coming to a stop and pulling
Alix into a hug. "I'm sorry."
    *if ((billie_gone) or (billie_mood = "angry"))

        It was the fact that they had parted on bad terms,
that's what's really getting to her.

        "If I could go back and do it all over, I would," she
sniffles into Elizabeth's t-shirt.

        Dietmar
        *if (jodiealive)
            and Jodie remain
            *goto career_end2
        *else
            remains
            *goto career_end2
        *elseif billie_mood = "love"

            It was the fact that they had seemed to be really going
somewhere, the two of them. As in, towards happy coupled-om. Why had
she wasted so much time on things that didn't matter when she could
have spent more of it with Billie?

            "We were supposed to end up together!" Alix sobs into
Elizabeth's t-shirt, aware that she's making a scene, aware that
Dietmar
        *if (jodiealive)

```

```

        and Jodie have
        *goto career_end3
    *else
        has
        *goto career_end3
*else

```

It just didn't seem right. Alix was supposed to be a superhero, and Billie was her trusty sidekick. They were meant to make it through together.

"Nothing seems to turn out how we expect no matter what we do," says Elizabeth.

Alix assumes that's supposed to be comforting, but it really isn't. She sighs and moves away from Elizabeth. Perhaps this is it. Perhaps this is

```

        *comment *image end.png
        *gosub_scene csideimg_end
        *finish
*elseif (billie_present)

```

Alix's tracker buzzes. Video calls aren't functioning these days - 'transmission interference' the error messages say. Billie has sent a note instead.

```

    *if ((billie_mood = "love") or (billie_mood = "bestie"))
        [i] Hurry home or
        *if ((petname = "") or (pet_dead))
            the bin
            *goto getsdinner
        *else
            ${petname}
            *goto getsdinner
    *if (billie_mood = "angry")

```

Any anger Billie may have harboured over their previous exchanges is long gone. A near-miss with a meteorite will do that for you. Really puts things in perspective.

```

        *goto billiemessage
    *else
        *goto billiemessage
*else
    *if positivity >50
        *goto friendsright
    *else
        *goto career_end1

```

```

*label billiemessage

```

```

[i] Already planning my next visit.[/i]

```

Alix grins. Billie speak for 'made it home safe.' One less thing to worry about.

"Just because we went with your name for the studio, doesn't mean you get any special perks," says Elizabeth. "Get off your tracker and get on with the million and one things we need to sort out!"

```
*goto friendsright

*label getsdinner
gets your dinner x.[/i]
*if billie_mood = "love"
    Alix's heart soars. She can't wait to get home to her amazing
    girlfriend.
    *goto livingarrangements_check
*else
    Alix grins.
    *goto livingarrangements_check
```

```
*label livingarrangements_check
Billie's an excellent cook, even if her flavour combinations are a
little off the wall sometimes.
*if meteor_impact = "big"
```

Since the meteor had levelled Alix's apartment and grounded Billie's flight home indefinitely, they'd both needed somewhere to live, so finding a place together had started out as a convenience thing. But

```
    *if billie_mood = "love"
        one thing led to another and they'd now been dating for
        almost two months.
        *goto friendsright
    *else
        now Alix couldn't imagine living on her own ever again.
        They had fun even though they were technically living through an
        apocalypse right now.
        *goto friendsright
*else
```

Flights will resume soon, but in the meantime, Billie had needed a place to stay, and Alix's apartment was cramped, but better than a prolonged stay in a shelter.

```
    *if billie_mood = "love"
        Given the recent developments in their relationship, a
        hell of a lot better. In fact, now that Alix thinks about it,
        Billie hasn't checked the flight updates in over a month...
        *goto friendsright
    *else
```

It would be strange when Billie moved out, but Alix had seen so much change over the last few months, it didn't seem to terrifying any more.

```
    *goto friendsright

*label friendsright

${friend}'s right. They're just getting started.
```

```
*comment *image beginning.png
*gosub_scene csideimg_beginning
*finish
```

```
*label career_end1
```

```
Who says this is
*comment *image end.png
*gosub_scene csideimg_end
*finish
```

```
*label career_end2
at an awkward distance, pretending to be hard at work.
```

```
Elizabeth strokes Alix's hair.
```

```
"Sorry chick," she says, "Life just doesn't work like that."
```

```
Alix closes her eyes and wishes for another life.
*comment *image end.png
*gosub_scene csideimg_end
*finish
```

```
*label career_end3
begun checking over their filming equipment with an intensity that
verges on desperate.
```

```
"I just wish we had more time, y'know?" she says, quieter, only to
Elizabeth, because who else would be listening?
```

```
"I know," says Elizabeth, holding her close like Annie never did.
"I know."
*comment *image end.png
*gosub_scene csideimg_end
*finish
```

```
*label dreams_epilogue
*set epilogue "dreams"
*if meteor_impact = "big"
    Alix keeps her scarf pulled up over her nose. The air's still
    thick with meteorite dust, and although the environment agency has
    confirmed it's not carcinogenic, they advise against getting a
    lung-full of it too.
    *if (annieblazeofglory)
```

```
        Sometimes Alix wakes gasping in the night. Her dreams
        are often set in space, struggling to breathe against the void like
        Annie must have. She wonders again what could possibly have
        prompted Annie to attempt to take out a meteorite.
```

```
        *if (relative_dead)
```

Sometimes her nightmares are about `{relative}`. They're lying there together, pinned under the concrete of Alix's collapsed apartment, and rescuers come and free her, but not `{relative}`. On those nights, she wakes herself up yelling: "No, go back, `{relative_gender_he_she}`'s still in there!"

```
*goto billiecheck
```

```
*else
```

Alix had almost forgotten what natural sunlight looks like, untainted by meteorite green. Was it always this bright?

```
*goto billiecheck
```

```
*label billiecheck
```

```
*if (billie_dead)
```

```
*goto pet_check1
```

```
*elseif (billie_gone)
```

Alix still regrets the way things turned out with Billie, but as the network is

```
*if positivity >50
```

slowly regaining coverage, she hopes some day they might rekindle their online friendship if nothing else

```
*goto wrist
```

```
*else
```

still patchy and unreliable, she doesn't hold out much hope for them ever getting in touch with one another again.

```
*goto wrist
```

```
*elseif (billie_present)
```

At her side, Billie picks her way through the rubble, keeping a watchful eye on

```
*if (((pet_type = "") or (pet_dead)) and ((meteor_impact = "big") or (meteor_impact = "small")))
```

```
the tumbledown remains of supermarkets and off licenses.
```

```
*if positivity >50
```

Looters are rare, but it doesn't hurt to be careful.

```
*goto wrist
```

```
*else
```

Moribund is crawling with looters, and places which might house tinned goods and alcohol are their natural habitat.

```
*goto wrist
```

```
*elseif (((pet_type = "") or (pet_dead)) and (meteor_impact = "none"))
```

```
the uneven ground, mindful of turning an ankle.
```

```
*goto wrist
```

```
*elseif (((pet_type = "fish") and (meteor_impact = "big")) or ((pet_type = "fish" ) and (meteor_impact = "small")))
```

the tumbledown remains of supermarkets and off licenses, mindful of looters.

```
*set pet_dead true
```

```
*goto fish_dead
```

```
*elseif ((pet_type = "fish") and (meteor_impact = "none"))
```

```

        the uneven ground, mindful of turning an ankle.
        *goto fish_alive
    *elseif ((meteor_impact = "big") or (meteor_impact =
"small"))
        *gosub pet_setup
        ${petname} ${pet_move} over the debris. Alix lets
${petname} loose a lot more these days. It isn't as if
${pet_pronoun_he_she} has anywhere better to go - even a
${pet_type} likes to know where ${pet_pronoun_his_her} next meal is
coming from.
        *goto wrist
    *else
        ${petname}.
        *gosub pet_setup
        *goto other_pet
*elseif (petname = "")
    *goto wrist
*else
    *if (pet_dead)
        *goto wrist
    *elseif ((pet_type = "fish") and (meteor_impact = "none"))
        *goto fish_alive
    *elseif (((pet_type = "fish") and (meteor_impact = "big")) or
((pet_type = "fish") and (meteor_impact = "small")))
        *goto fish_dead
    *elseif (meteor_impact = "none")
        *gosub pet_setup
        *goto other_pet
    *else
        *goto wrist

*label pet_check1
*if not (petname = "")
    *if (pet_dead)
        *goto wrist
    *elseif ((pet_type = "fish") and (meteor_impact = "none"))
        *goto fish_alive
    *elseif (((pet_type = "fish") and (meteor_impact = "big")) or
((pet_type = "fish") and (meteor_impact = "small")))
        *goto fish_dead
    *elseif (meteor_impact = "big")
        *gosub pet_setup
        *goto other_pet1
    *elseif (meteor_impact = "none")
        *gosub pet_setup
        *goto other_pet
    *else
        *goto wrist
*else
    *goto wrist

*label fish_alive

```

`{petname}` is in `{pet_pronoun_his_her}` tank back at Alix's apartment. She'd installed an air bubble pump and a little diver and `{petname}` seems to love them both more than Alix would've thought it possible for a fish to love anything. She feels oddly guilty for not bringing `{pet_pronoun_him_her}` along today. They have been through so much together, even if `{pet_pronoun_he_she}` is only a fish.

`*goto wrist`

`*label fish_dead`

It was looters who killed `{petname}`. Since Alix's apartment was almost totally levelled, she was keeping her fish in the portable tank at her temporary accommodation. They had broken in and smashed everything breakable, including the tank, and Alix returned from a meeting with Dietmar and Elizabeth to find `{petname}` glistening and lifeless on the concrete floor. To survive the meteor and then die that way seems cruel, but that wasn't the only cruel loss of life, of course.

`*goto wrist`

`*label other_pet`

The city centre is returning to the swing of things, but out here in the suburbs, recovery is still slow. Which means there's no harm in one `{pet_type}` running loose.

`*goto other_pet2`

`*label other_pet1`

The devastation wrought by the meteor has one small advantage - `{petname}` can now run freely without fear of being run over or trampled underfoot by careless passer by. Even so,

`*goto other_pet2`

`*label other_pet2`

Alix had the strangest feeling when she first set `{petname}` down on the ground, like she was letting `{pet_pronoun_him_her}` go free, to fend for `{pet_pronoun_him_her}`self in this new, 'safer' world. But all that happened was `{petname}` `{petmovement}` off, then stopped and waited for Alix to catch up. `!{pet_pronoun_he_she}`'s been doing that ever since.

`*goto wrist`

`*label dreams_epilogue_cont`

For a moment she wishes she'd stayed home. Out here it's too big, too wide, too unknown. She's not even 100% certain this is the right way. She's avoided coming out here until now.

`*if (alix_supernova)`

The story goes that Alix made it out of the collapsed shelter because she was under a buckled piece of metal from the roof and it protected her from being completely flattened. But that's not true. Alix punched her way out of there with an explosive blast that somehow didn't

`*if (pet_type = "")`

```

        turn her blood to steam.
    *if not (pet_type = "")
        burn ${petname} to crisp.
    *if (annieblazeofglory)
        She can't help but worry that she'll end up like Annie.
Too hot to handle.
    She feels safer indoors these days. Perhaps it's having the
hazard foam within easy reach.

*if (billie_present)
    *if not (billie_dead)
        Fortunately Billie seems to know the way onwards, even
if Alix is unsure.
*if not (relative_dead)
    ${relative} was busy hosting a party, so
${relative_gender_he_she} made some sandwiches for the trip
instead. They're in a lunchbox in Alix's backpack and they bounce
reassuringly against her back as she walks.

The city becomes more distant, the road narrows and eventually
*if not (billie_dead)
    *if (billie_present)
        they're
        *goto footpath
    *else
        *if not ((pet_type = "") or not (pet_dead))
            they're
            *goto footpath
        *else
            she's
            *goto footpath
*else
    she's
    *goto footpath

*label footpath
able to leave it for a footpath through the fields.
*if meteor_impact = "none"
    This green Alix is glad to see.
    *goto ground_rise
*else
    The grass is yellowed and scorch-marked, littered with
smaller scorpions.
    *if positivity >25
        Even out here, small crews of Environment Agency workers
collect the debris in wheelbarrows and take it away to who knows
where.
        *goto ground_rise
    *else
        No-one doing clean-up work out here.
        *goto ground_rise

*label ground_rise

```

```

The ground rises, the incline growing steeper and steeper until
*if not ((billie_dead) or (pet_dead))
    *if (billie_present)
        they're
        *goto balance
    *else
        *if not (pet_type = "")
            they're
            *goto balance
        *else
            Alix is
            *goto balance
*else
    Alix is
    *goto balance

*label balance
bent forwards for balance, gasping for breath.
*if not (((pet_type = "") or (pet_dead)) or (pet_type = "fish"))
    ${petname}
    *if pet_type = "bird"
        naturally has no difficulty with the climb, fluttering
on ahead and landing on a branch at the summit.
        *goto meteor_check
    *elseif pet_type = "cat"
        runs on ahead, coming to a stop at the summit to wash
${pet_pronoun_him_her}self with a paw.
        *goto meteor_check
    *elseif pet_type = "dog"
        is panting heavily too, tail wagging endlessly.
        *goto meteor_check
    *else
        scampers away, giving Alix that sense of unease again
that this is it, the time ${petname} runs free. But as soon as
${pet_pronoun_he_she} reaches the summit, ${petname} comes to a
halt in a patch of sunlight and lies down, stretching out
${pet_pronoun_his_her} long hind legs in order to properly enjoy
it.
        *goto meteor_check
*else
    *goto meteor_check

*label meteor_check
*if meteor_impact = "none"

    The sight of the statue up close takes Alix's breath away.
    She had stayed away from the official opening ceremony and although
    the statue was visible from most of Moribund, she generally avoided
    looking at it. Now, she wonders why she did that. Annie in bronze,
    young and healthy, one hand raised, fingers poised to crush the
    chunk of meteor nestled in her palm.

    *if not (jodiealive)

```

It's a shame Jodie never got a statue, but maybe her fans will see to that. They're a resourceful bunch.

```
*if (billie_present)
    *if not (billie_dead)
```

"Do you think she'd like it?" Billie asks, looking up at the imposing figure.

```
    *goto whynotgold
    *else
        *goto whynotgold
    *else
        *goto whynotgold
*elseif meteor_impact = "big"
```

On the hilltop, the smog is thinner. Looking down across Moribund, and further, to the city, the extent of the devastation is visible, even when partially cloaked in dust clouds. The skyline is forever changed. The tallest tower blocks, Dietmar's and Alix's included, are all gone. Environment agency workers in their hi-vis jackets look like radioactive ants in the wasteland.

Alix spreads out a blanket on the thin grass.

```
*label billie_blanket
*if not (jodiealive)
```

It's one Jodie got for a lipstick promotion, so it has red sequined lips all over it. Alix plucks at one absentmindedly and misses her friend.

```
    *if (billie_present)
        *if not (billie_dead)
            Billie sits and pats the blanket beside her.
            *goto pet_invite
        *else
            *goto pet_invite
    *else
        *goto pet_invite
*else
```

On the hilltop, the sun is bright, and the views of Moribund and the big city are expansive. The worst of the damage is already repaired. In terms of bricks and mortar, at least.

Alix pulls a blanket from her rucksack and spreads it on the ground.

```
*goto billie_blanket
```

```
*label pet_invite
*if not (((pet_type = "") or (pet_dead)) or (pet_type = "fish"))
    ${petname} takes that as an invitation, and rushes to get
    onto the blanket.
    *if (billie_present)
        *if not (billie_dead)
```

```

                They laugh, and
                *goto alix_sit
            *else
                *goto alix_sit
        *else
            *goto alix_end
*else
    *goto alix_sit

*label alix_sit
*if not (((pet_type = "") or (pet_dead)) or (pet_type = "fish"))
    Alix sits, scooping ${petname} up into her lap.
    *goto love_check
*else
    Alix sits.
    *goto love_check

*label love_check
*if ((billie_dead) or (billie_gone))

```

There's an empty space next to her where Billie should be.

```
*if (billie_dead)
```

Billie's death was harder than Annie's in some ways. The crematorium was working overtime and even if any of Billie's relatives had survived the Lifun disaster [i]and[/i] the network failures had allowed Alix to contact them, flights were grounded. Billie deserved more of a funeral than that, deserved more in general.

Alix wipes her eyes.

```
*goto alix_endings
```

```
*else
```

Maybe once the network was back, they might be able to-  
Alix didn't even dare finish the thought.

```
*if positivity <25
```

Hope was dangerous.

She sits in tortured silence long, you begin to feel uncomfortable. You have to say something.

```
*goto alix_endings
```

```
*elseif (billie_mood = "smitten")
```

Billie's head drops onto Alix's shoulder. Neither plans on moving for a while.

```
*if meteor_impact = "none"
```

```
*comment *image end.png
```

```
*gosub_scene csideimg_end
```

```
*finish
```

```
*else
```

```
*goto dreams_final
```

```
*elseif (billie_mood = "love")
```

```

Billie turns to gaze into Alix's eyes.
*if meteor_impact = "none"
    *if (daytrip)
        Alix had thought the day they spent together
reading comics and wishing in the fountain was the best she would
ever feel, but now she realises how wrong she was.
        Safe beneath Annie's feet they share a kiss, the first
of many.
        *comment *image end.png
        *gosub_scene csideimg_end
        *finish
    *else
        *if (daytrip)
            Alix had thought the day they spent making wishes
in the fountain and buying comics with misprints was the high point
of their relationship, but now she knows she was wrong.
            They kiss.
            *goto dreams_final
*else

    You're not sure what you expect to happen next. An appearance
from Annie's ghost perhaps, glowing white and with fabulous hair? A
flashback to her funeral, maybe? Everyone wearing purple instead of
black? Neither thing happens. The drawn out silence makes you
uncomfortable. You have to say [i]something[/i].
    *goto alix_endings

*label dreams_final

So much was lost, but the important things remain.
*comment *image end.png
*gosub_scene csideimg_end
*finish

*label whynotgold

"She'd say: 'Why isn't it gold?!'" says Alix, spreading a blanket
at her mother's feet.
*if (anniescarf)
    She never had got around to giving Annie that scarf. She had
thought about putting it in Annie's coffin, but could just imagine
Annie's annoyance at having something she hadn't picked herself as
part of her final ensemble. Now seems the right time and place.
Alix stands on tiptoe and loops the scarf round statue Annie's
neck. Maybe she can come and replace it each year, make a tradition
of it.

    She nods to herself, and sits down, cross-legged.
*if not (((pet_type = "") or (pet_dead)) or (pet_type = "fish"))
    *goto petnestle
*else
    *goto dreams_ending

```

```

*label petnestle
${petname} nestles in her lap, and dozes, as Alix looks out across
Moribund. She can see her apartment from here.
*goto love_check

*label dreams_ending
*if not (((billie_dead) or (billie_gone)) or ((pet_dead) or
(pet_type = "fish")))
    *if (billie_present)
        Together they sit,
        *goto mood_check
    *else
        *goto pet_check

*label mood_check
*if ((billie_mood = "smitten") or (billie_mood = "love"))
    fingers interlinked,
    *label pet_check
    *if not (((pet_type = "") or (pet_dead)) or (pet_type =
"fish"))
        ${petname} nestled between them and
        *goto dreams_end
    *else
        *goto dreams_end
*else
    *label alix_end
    Alix sits down and reaches into her backpack again, taking
out her laptop. She turns it on and opens it, and after logging in,
somehow, she looks through the screen and straight at you. Her eyes
are soft, faintly amused as she registers your alarm.

    "Why so shocked?" she asks.
    *if alix >20
        "Thought I didn't notice all the help you've been giving
me?" Her smile turns sad. "It's a shame you couldn't help her too."
        *goto alix_endings
    *else
        "Feeling bad about everything you've done to me?" She
looks away for a moment. "Although I suppose I can't blame you for
Annie. Not entirely."
        *goto alix_endings

*label alix_endings
*choice
    #I was just trying to progress the story...
        *set rating + rating2
        *set rating + rating3
        *set rating + rating4
        *if ((alix >20) or (rating >20))
            *if alix >20
                "Well, I'm glad that you did. Thank you,
really. But our time together is almost over. Are there any final
words you'd like to say to me?"

```

```

        *temp nonsense_text
        *input_text nonsense_text
        Alix reads your words and smiles. "I thought
you might say that," she says.
        *comment *image end.png
        *gosub_scene csideimg_end
        *finish
    *else
        "The ratings were nice I suppose. I
appreciate you reading my work. But the other stuff? What do you
have to say about that?"
        *temp nonsense_text
        *input_text nonsense_text
        Alix reads your words, her eyes blank and
hollow. After what seems like an eternity, she says only: "Do
better next time," and logs off.
        *comment *image end.png
        *gosub_scene csideimg_end
        *finish
    *else
        Alix sighs and looks away. "So was I," she says.
        "This is your last chance. Don't you have anything better to say
than that?"
        *temp nonsense_text
        *input_text nonsense_text
        As you are typing, Alix closes the lid of her
laptop. Now, she's smiling. She draws back her arm and flings the
laptop down the hill.
        *if (billie_present)
            The last thing you hear is Billie saying:
            "Don't you need that?"
            *comment *image end.png
            *gosub_scene csideimg_end
            *finish
    #I'm sorry
        *set rating + rating2
        *set rating + rating3
        *set rating + rating4
        *if ((alix >20) and (rating >20))
            "For what?" asks Alix, tilting her head. "Bad
things happen, but they're not always down to you." She smiles.
            "You're not quite the omnigod you think you are." She's silent for
a moment, letting her words sink in. Her expression is playful.
            Eventually she shifts her weight, like the laptop's weighing heavy
on her legs. "I'm going to miss you, you know." She says.

            She kisses her fingers, touches them to her laptop
screen, then closes the lid.
            *if (billie_present)
                A little muffled, you hear Billie say: "Who
was that?"
            *if (writing1)

```

A notification pings in your inbox. A new story's just been posted on wiff.net...

```

*comment *image end.png
*gosub_scene csideimg_end
*finish
*elseif ((alix >20) and (rating <20))
    "For what?" asks Alix, tilting her head. "Those ratings?" She doesn't wait for you to respond. "In the grand scheme of things, what do they matter? I mean, they matter but..." She pauses, scratches her eyebrow. "You were there with me," she says. "Through all of it. That counts for something."

```

She holds your gaze as long as both of you can stand it, before finally breaking the connection.

```

*if (writing1)
    A notification pings into your inbox.
Someone just posted a new short story on wiff.net...
*comment *image end.png
*gosub_scene csideimg_end
*finish
*elseif ((alix <20) and (rating >20))
    "Are you?" She waits just long enough for you to start to defend yourself, then speaks over you. "You could have helped, you know. Not with some of it, of course. It's not as if you could stop a meteor. But the small things. You could have helped with the small things a little more." Tears well in her eyes, but before they can fall, she turns her laptop off.
*comment *image end.png
*gosub_scene csideimg_end
*finish
*else
    "You'd better be apologising for more than those stupid ratings," she says through gritted teeth. "Do you even know why you're apologising at all?"
*temp nonsense_text
*input_text nonsense_text
    Alix reads your words, gives her head an almost imperceptible shake, and flings her laptop down the hill.
*comment *image end.png
*gosub_scene csideimg_end
*finish
    #If I had known, I might have done things differently.
    "Really?" asks Alix. She sounds surprised and hopeful. "Well, then you know what to do." She turns her laptop off, cutting you off abruptly and leaving you to go back to
*comment *image beginning.png
*gosub_scene csideimg_beginning
*finish

```

```

*label dreams_end
Annie above them, staring out over Moribund. In the distance, Alix's apartment, Dietmar's luxury tower block, David Jones Memorial, all still standing because of Annie.

```

Indirectly, because of you.

```
*comment *image end.png
*gosub_scene csideimg_end
*finish
```

```
*label family_epilogue
```

The food is like something from another era - misshapen foil-wrapped lumps sprouting little wooden skewers bedecked with lumps of hard cheese, chunks of soggy pineapple and greasy olives. There are hot dogs too and mini pizzas, and fondues of the cheese and chocolate variety, but some things are sacred.

```
*if (party1)
```

The karaoke machine is notably absent, though.

Alix can barely contain her delight. She pops a cheese lump off a cocktail stick and tosses it into her mouth.

```
*if ((anniescarf) and (annie >25))
```

```
    *if (relative_dead)
```

It looks just like one of  $\{relative\}$ 's spreads.

```
    *if not (relative_dead)
```

She wipes her fingers on her jeans, careful not to get any cheese grease on the purple scarf tied around her waist. It doesn't go with many of her outfits, but she wears it most days anyway. It's not like she was ever a follower of fashion.

```
*if (billie_present)
```

```
    *if not ((billie_dead) or (billie_gone))
```

Billie has found the biscuits, tasteless little flat rings topped with brightly coloured sugar icing in pink and yellow. She has one on each finger.

```
        *goto meteor_effect
```

```
    *else
```

```
        *goto meteor_effect
```

```
*else
```

```
    *goto meteor_effect
```

```
*label meteor_effect
```

```
*if meteor_impact = "big"
```

The back wall of the house is still a gaping hole, but there's a tarpaulin sheet in place to keep the swirling dust at bay. Everyone is behaving like there's nothing amiss, like they've just hired a marquee for someone's back yard. It's pretty convincing.

```
    *goto missing
```

```
*elseif meteor_impact = "small"
```

Alix sidles over to the kitchen window and looks out into the back garden. The shed over  $\{relative\}$ 's bunker is squashed flat. The scorpoid rock has been taken away, but no-one has repaired the shed yet. It would have been much worse if the meteor hadn't broken up before impact, of course. Still, Alix makes a mental note to call Dietmar and Elizabeth

```

        *if (jodiealive)
            and Jodie
        for a shed-building party.
        *goto missing
*else
        *goto missing

*label missing

The only one missing is
*if (relative_dead)
    ${relative}.
    *set dead_relative "${relative}"
    *if dead_relative = "Aunt Maude"
        *set living_relative "Uncle Simon"
        *set living_relative_gender_he_she "he"
        *set living_relative_gender_his_her "his"
        *set living_relative_title "uncle"
        *goto relative_check
    *else
        *set living_relative "Aunt Maude"
        *set living_relative_gender_he_she "she"
        *set living_relative_gender_his_her "her"
        *set living_relative_title "aunt"
        *goto relative_check
*else
    *set dead_relative "Annie"
    *set living_relative "${relative}"
    *set living_relative_gender_he_she
"${relative_gender_he_she}"
    *set living_relative_gender_his_her
"${relative_gender_his_hers}"
    *set living_relative_title "${relative}"
    Annie.
    *goto relative_check

*label relative_check
*if dead_relative = "Aunt Maude"
    The loss of Annie hurts too, of course, but Maude was always
such a fixture at these things. Alix used to get so irritated by
her neurotic insistence on checking everyone's drink was topped up,
miming drinking at each guest in turn. She'd give anything to see
that silly hand motion today.
    *goto relativedeath
*elseif dead_relative = "Uncle Simon"
    Losing Annie hurts too, of course, but Simon is the one Alix
is used to always seeing at these things. Alix used to find the way
he loitered on the sidelines so creepy. Now she realises he was
probably doing exactly what she's doing now. Looking around,
noticing who isn't there, wondering how to connect with those who
are.
    *goto relativedeath
*else

```

Not that Annie would be seen dead at one of these things. Alix imagines her in her heyday, strutting in, tossing her hair and strutting straight back out again. [i]Seen dead![/i] Alix stifles a strange laugh with another piece of cheese.

```
*if (billie_dead)
```

Alix's overactive imagination moves on to picturing Billie here. She would have loved it. She'd have charmed them all. The cheese suddenly sticks in Alix's throat and she has to swallow hard.

```
*page_break Deep breaths.
```

```
*goto billiedeath
```

```
*else
```

```
*page_break Mmm, cheese!
```

```
*goto deadpet_check
```

```
*label billiedeath
```

If only Alix hadn't sent Billie off to fetch

```
*if petname = ""
```

```
    that stupid scarf.
```

```
    *goto cheapapartment
```

```
*else
```

```
    ${petname}
```

```
    *goto cheapapartment
```

```
*label cheapapartment
```

If only Alix's apartment hadn't been built on the cheap so its foundations crushed the bunker beneath when the building came down.

If only Billie had stayed at the hospital and Alix had gone instead. Perhaps Billie would still be here.

```
*if (pet_dead)
```

```
    Perhaps ${petname} would still be here too.
```

```
*goto ifonly
```

```
*label relativedeath
```

If only Alix hadn't sent \${relative} back to the apartment. If only Alix's apartment block hadn't borne the brunt of the meteor strike.

If only \${relative} hadn't stayed in the apartment's crappy shelter. Perhaps \${relative} would still be here.

```
*if (pet_dead)
```

```
    Perhaps ${petname} would be here too.
```

```
*goto ifonly
```

```
*label ifonly
```

If only.

```
*if (billie_gone)
```

```
    If only she hadn't had that stupid fight with Billie.
```

```
*page_break If only.
```

```
*goto deadpet_check
```

```
*label deadpet_check
```

```

*if petname = ""
    *goto billiefight_check
*elseif (pet_dead)
    In some ways, she feels even worse about ${petname}, because
    the responsibility is entirely Alix's own. ${petname} had no say at
    all about being left behind. None.

    Alix is glad to be here amongst what remains of her family.
    It keeps the loneliness at bay a little.

    *goto billiefight_check
*else
    *goto billiefight_check

*label billiefight_check
*if (billie_gone)
    She had hoped she and Billie would get their friendship back
    on track once things had settled down but
    *if positivity >50
        so far, things are still tense.
        *goto slideshow
    *else
        it seems Billie meant it when she told Alix not to call
        any more. She's changed her vid ID and unsubscribed from Alix's
        channel.
        *goto slideshow
*elseif (billie_mood = "angry")
    Things were a little tense between her and Billie for a while
    after their clash, but it was inevitable tempers might flare given
    the stress they'd been under, and now their friendship is on the
    mend.
    *goto slideshow
*else
    *goto slideshow

*label slideshow

A slideshow cycles photos on the living room wall. Alix wonders
where ${living_relative} got them all. There are stills from the
video she made
*if videotype = "pet"
    with ${petname}. Close-ups of her beloved ${pet_type}.
    *goto stills
*elseif videotype = "hosp"
    at DJ memorial. The nurse with the penchant for dirty books,
    frozen in mid-laugh. Alix can't remember what she said to make her
    laugh like that.
    *goto stills
*elseif videotype = "boxx"
    of her daily routine. It's from a joke time-lapse sequence
    where she sits at her desk eating cheese pops for sixteen hours
    straight. Hunched over her desk, dimly lit, orange dust all over
    her chin. Not the most flattering picture.

```

```

    *if (rock)
        You can see Billie's rock on the corner of her desk
    though, which is cool.
    *goto stills
*elseif videotype = "party"
    about all the parties just like this one. She felt weird
    about asking her family to take part, so it's just Alix in a grey
    wig and a floral shirt even though none of her relatives look or
    dress like that. She's wearing thick-framed glasses and gurning.
    *goto stills
*else
    for the Bunker Song. Alix in a hard hat, doing some semblance
    of dancing, although in the still image, it looks more like she's
    flicking gang signs. Good grief.
    *goto stills

*label stills
Alix doesn't even have any stills from that herself.
*if (alix_supernova)

    She still hasn't told anyone how she really made it out of
    the collapsed shelter.  $\{living\_relative\}$  thinks it was some kind
    of miracle, the rescuers finding her just in the nick of time. It's
    a fantasy Alix is keen to encourage, but the truth is, it was down
    to genetics.
    *if (annieblazeofglory)
        Turns out she has more in common with Annie than
    expected.
*if (billie_present)
    *if not ((billie_dead) or (billie_gone))

        "Everything ok?" asks Billie, offering a biscuit-decked
    finger.

        Alix declines. "Just thinking," she says carefully,
    "about how things have changed."

        She's glad they're here together. One good change. They
    both made it out with barely a scratch.
    *goto cake
    *else
        *goto cake
*else
    *goto cake

*label cake

At that moment  $\{living\_relative\}$  bursts in with a cake. A
chocolate caterpillar with a spine of lit candles. "Everyone!"
 $\{living\_relative\_gender\_he\_she\}$  cries, "HA-." Pauses a moment,
obligating everyone to join in. "Happy Birthday to you, Happy
Birthday dear- where's the birthday girl?" The singing carries on

```

for a moment, before tailing off as everyone realises Aunt Serita's not there. Low mumbling. Someone saw her nip to the toilet.

```

*if not (jodiealive)
    Alix's stomach clenches. She should have gone after Jodie.
That's something she'll always have to live with.
    *goto serita
*else
    *goto serita

*label serita

"Here she is! HA-"

Serita returns to a wall of sound, blushing.

Then there's the hip hip hoorays, and someone suggests making
cocktails, which naturally leads into karaoke,
*if (party1)
    (of [i]course[/i] the infernal machine didn't stay missing
for long)
until
*page_break THE EARLY HOURS OF THE MORNING
*if not ((billie_dead) or (billie_gone))
    *if ((billie_present) and (billie_drinks))
        "I haven't been this drunk since Puzzles," says Billie,
lolling against Alix. They're on
            *goto sofa
    *else
        Alix is on
        *goto sofa
*else
        Alix is on
        *goto sofa

*label sofa
${living_relative}'s sofa, pleasantly muzzy-headed from the night's
festivities.
*goto pet

*label pet
*if ((pet_type = "") or (pet_dead))
    *goto cleanup
*elseif (pet_type = "fish")
    *goto cleanup
*elseif (pet_type = "bird")
    ${petname}, previously shut up in ${living_relative}'s spare
room, is now fluttering around the living room, landing on
discarded paper plates to peck at crumbs, and sidling up to
discarded beer cans to inspect them.
        *goto cleanup
*else

```

\${petname}, previously shut up in \${living\_relative}'s spare room, is now roaming the living room, inspecting crushed up beer cans and licking crumbs from discarded paper plates.

    \*goto cleanup

\*label cleanup

"Need any help with the clean up?" Alix yells into the ether, but she can't envision getting up right now, never mind stooping over with a bin bag. The cocktails are at war in her stomach, it feels like. Fortunately, when \${living\_relative} materialises in the doorway, \${living\_relative\_gender\_his\_her} hands are empty.

"Room for me on there?" \${living\_relative\_gender\_he\_she} asks, and Alix scooches along so her \${living\_relative\_title} can sit down. \*if ((billie\_present) and not ((billie\_dead) or (billie\_gone)))

    It means Billie's squashed up against the arm rest, but she doesn't seem to mind.

The slideshow cycles on.

\*if (visit)

    Digitised versions of those pictures Alix looked through with \${relative}. Alix and her father at the beach. \${relative} in \${relative\_gender\_his\_hers} bad wig. Annie in her Protectorate bunk with pants on her head.

    \*goto wrist

\*elseif annie >25

    \*if meteor\_impact = "none"

        Annie in her Protectorate uniform on a hilltop, looking a lot like her commemorative statue. Her hair and stance suggest it's from a Protectorate marketing campaign, which is probably what the sculptor used as reference.

        \*goto wrist

    \*else

        Annie in her hospital bed, reaching for the camera, angry. Annie in her civilian clothes, glass raised high, making a toast, Alix's father in the background, smiling. Annie in her Protectorate uniform on parade day, Uncle Simon and dad and

        \*if (simonsecret)

            Aunt Maggie in a line, all fresh-faced recruits.

            \*goto wrist

        \*else

            all the other fresh-faced recruits standing in a row.

        \*goto wrist

\*else

    \*if not (petname = "")

        \${petname} back when Alix first got

    \${pet\_pronoun\_him\_her}, looking tinier than Alix ever remembers

    \${pet\_pronoun\_him\_her} being. \${petname} enthusiastically eating

    \${pettreat}s. \${petname} blurred because \${pet\_pronoun\_he\_she} just couldn't stay still long enough to be photographed.

        \*goto wrist

```

    *else
        Alix and some kids from school she never sees any more.
        Dad at some other relative's wedding, looking thin and cheerful,
        his hair oddly long and curly. Alix and ${relative}, on this same
        sofa. Alix wonders who took that one.
            *goto wrist

*label family_epilogue_cont
It's painful, of course, but it gives Alix a flash of inspiration
too. "Hey ${living_relative}," she says, "Why don't I show you some
of my photos?" and as ${living_relative} nods, she commands Oju:
"Oju? Photo set one, please."
*if not ((billie_dead) or (billie_gone))
    *if (billie_present)

        "It's so sweet that you say please to her," Billie
        sniggers. Alix sticks out her tongue.
            *goto family_end
    *else
        *goto family_end
*else
    *goto family_end

*label family_end

"Who's this?" asks ${living_relative}.

"That's Dietmar."

"Why does he have a traffic cone on his head?"

"He's just-"
*if not (pet_dead)

    A very recent one of ${petname} next, but so out of focus,
    ${living_relative} just squints and nods in response, prompting
    Alix to quickly skip on.

    "Oh, well I know who that is!"

It's Annie.
*if (annieblazeofglory)

    What an incredible woman, underneath it all.
    *if (meteor_impact = "big")

        She faced off against a meteorite, even though she must
        have known it would change nothing. She had gone out on her terms,
        facing insurmountable odds to the very last second. Isn't that the
        best any of us can hope to do, in
            *comment *image end.png
            *gosub_scene csideimg_end
            *finish

```

```

*elseif (meteor_impact = "small")

    Her actions have saved countless lives. She didn't stop
    the meteorite, which was no doubt her intention, but she gave it
    something to think about, breaking it up into a thousand smaller
    chunks which still hit, but without the catastrophic loss of life a
    full sized impact would have had.

        And here she is, immortalised forever.
        *goto gown
    *else

        Going out in a literal blaze of glory, smashing that
        meteorite to particles of space dust.

            You wouldn't think it to see her in this photo.
            *goto gown
    *else
        *goto gown

*label gown

In her hospital gown.

Giving Alix the finger.
*if (((visit) and (pet_type = "dog")) and (dead_relative =
"Annie"))
    *page_break After they've remembered all the memories...

    Alix stands up. "Actually ${living_relative}, there's one
    thing I want to do for you. To express my gratitude for everything.
    All the parties, and the photos, and the hospital visits."
    *if not ((billie_dead) or (billie_gone))
        *if (billie_present)

            Billie takes her cue and disappears upstairs for a
            moment.

                *goto puppy
            *else

                Leaving her ${living_relative_title} sitting
                frowning in confusion, Alix races upstairs to the cardboard box she
                had to spend every free second of the party checking and shushing.
                *goto puppy
            *else

                Leaving her ${living_relative_title} sitting frowning in
                confusion, Alix races upstairs to the cardboard box she had to
                spend every free second of the party checking and shushing.
                *goto puppy
    *elseif meteor_impact = "none"

```

Photo after photo after photo. The final one is of Alix and `{living_relative}` cutting the ribbon on Annie's statue, the plaque underneath it unreadable at that distance, but of course, they know what it says.

```
    Gone, but never forgotten.
    *comment *image end.png
    *gosub_scene csideimg_end
    *finish
*else
    *goto family_end_final
```

```
*label puppy
```

She returns with a puppy, a little ball of fluff, `{petname}` in miniature.

`{living_relative}` has `{living_relative_gender_his_her}` hands outstretched, tears in `{living_relative_gender_his_her}` eyes. As the puppy is placed in `{living_relative_gender_his_her}` hands `{living_relative_gender_he_she}` says: "It's a little girl isn't it?" Alix nods.

"Then you already know what I'm going to call her, don't you?"

Alix nods again.

`{petname}` is turning circles on the rug. `!{pet_pronoun_he_she}` can't wait to meet the new puppy. Alix can't decide if Annie would be pleased or pissed off about `{living_relative}`'s choice of name. Probably a little of each, which makes it an excellent decision.

"Let's take a... do you call them selfies?"

"I believe that's what the kids call them, yes," Alix laughs and they all scrunch in together and order Oju to take their picture. It's nice to look back on old memories, but creating new ones, that's important too.

```
*if not ((billie_dead) or (billie_gone))
    *if ((billie_present) and (billie_mood = "smitten"))
```

```
        Alix squeezes Billie closer and smiles for Oju.
    *gosub_scene csideimg_end
    *finish
```

```
*else
    *comment *image end.png
    *gosub_scene csideimg_end
    *finish
```

```
*label family_end_final
```

Like the ending of an old cartoon,

```
*if not ((billie_dead) or (billie_gone))
    *if (billie_present)
```

```
        they all
        *goto laughing
    *else
        they both
        *goto laughing
*else
    they both
    *goto laughing

*label laughing
throw their heads back and laugh. Alix gets why so many cartoons
ended that way now. It feels like a nice way to round things off,
*if (((relative_dead) or (billie_dead)) or (pet_dead))
    pretend that everything's ok,
even if it's a little fake.
*comment *image end.png
*gosub_scene csideimg_end
*finish
```