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(Saved On: 4/19/2022 10:17:35 PM)

The consequences of your taunts…

> Wake Up

You open your eyes. Not your proudest moment, there.

> remember who you are

You fail to remember who you are, as you already know the answer. You find it somewhat irrelevant, although checking for damage caused by any cognitohazards is not a terrible idea.

Not right *now*, though.

> look around

You find yourself in a plush office; it is haphazardly assembled, with some walls suffering from significant structural rot, but someone has already moved some furniture, as well as fixed the lights.

This is... decidedly *not* where you usually return to. You have the inkling that something may have tampered with it.

Ah. Speak of the devil.



So it appears to have decided to make itself comfortable, then. It stares at you expectantly, waiting for you to... do, something, aside from being on the floor.

> remember where you came from

Right. You were... gathering information on L-U-000, at the Westerville Mayor's Court, when you... had your slip of the tongue.

You internally writhe at the thought. It *appears* no one respects the work that it takes to research anything anymore. No matter. It is not your job to dispense moral judgement if they decide to endanger themselves.

> ask how she changed where you return to

You are about to open your mouth before you... do not. Forgetting how your curse works after a recent fatality is how 98.4% of your successive deaths occur. You instead stare up at her, clearly unimpressed by its shenanigans.

It rolls its eye at you. "I've told you before, girl! Esoteric waste bullshit. I don't get how that isn't a fair... answer..."

The anomaly trails off as it stares at your sword, then back to you. It never returns the eye contact. "IIII don't know if that's normal, and I'm not going to-- ask. I'm not gonna do that. But we have a lot to talk about! Or I guess I talk to you, huh?" It shrugs. *"Can* you give me a sign or something?"

> wait curse

You *suppose* it is more a tool than a curse; you have chosen it as much as it has chosen you, after all. The Armor protects you, and in exchange, you are to live by its tenets: between those, no talking, and no weakness. Of course, you have to feed it, as well.

*...why* are you recounting all of this? All of this is clear to you.

> whats wrong with your sword

It's just your sword. Your hands are busy gripping onto it. It is only logical, really. This one has been trouble in the past, and it clearly seems interested in toying with you now.

> think about what sort of signs you could give her without activating your curse

You have found that you can communicate most things by staring really, really hard. The occasional nod and shake of the head works, but you are sure that unless it specifically gives you an instruction, that won't work here.

> brandish your sword at her

You fail to brandish your sword at her. You are not sure why.

> stare at her intently until something happens

You make a point to stand up, staring at her with as much intent as your body can muster.

"Oookay! I-- I **GUESS** that's a no! Okay! Got it! Excellent! I am so glad we're getting to know each other!" It leans back on its chair, eye shot open. Its grin remains unrelenting, even as she stares back to what your hands are hovering towards.

"Listen. I'm going to keep this short, then." The anomaly puts a hand on the skull on its desk, patting it. "This thing is amazing. This is worth its weight and more. Love looking at it, and... stuff. Great find! " it says, leaning forward to you. It then conspiratorially lowers its voice. "But I feel like I totally cut you raw on that, you know? I mean, I gave you some information, and you got me this skull, and I... don't... think that iiiis. Fair. So! I want to cut you a deal! Or something. Give back to the community. Girl to girl? Smash the glass ceiling?" it shrugs. "I think I saw some magazines that said that."

> steal the skull

You eye the skull with a malicious glint, but when you try to let go of the sword, you do not.

This. This is logical, *obviously.* What would that skull even do for you? You wouldn't want to let your guard down.

> stare in a way that implies you have no idea what she could possibly give you

It gives you back a knowing smile. "Well, you're trying to get info on us, right? That's cool and all, but you can't just bitchin' sword your way out of-- most. Things." It's staring again. It shakes its head. "But! Peewee wiped you with some strong FLAMING, and we can't have you dropping like a fly every time a gamer outgames you, right? So I thought, well, End-- can I call you End?-- is pretty resourceful, and I got something out of her, so it only makes sense that you! Get something out of me."

It's practically beaming in excitement at its own words. "What if I taught you how to be a GAMER, huh? Huh?? Ooon two. Two conditions."

> stare at her until she starts making sense

"Yeah! Okay! A woman of action! What are words for, right?" It pulls at its collar. "I'll make it one condition! It's fine! Didn't need the other one! It's gone! Woosh!"

Its expression turns a lot more... serious. It is clearly afraid. *As it should be.* "Clean up. Please? I didn't wanna bring it up? I didn't want to get in your business? But you uh... you came back... uh... *wrong*. There's a bathroom right across the hall! We just moved in, it's not a hellmaze yet, you'll see it. Just. You know."

The anomaly shoots you a pleading look.

> stare at the skull some more

> stare at her some more

You stare at *it.* You stare at the skull. It is starting to sweat, but it does not seem like it will talk to you unless you 'clean up'.

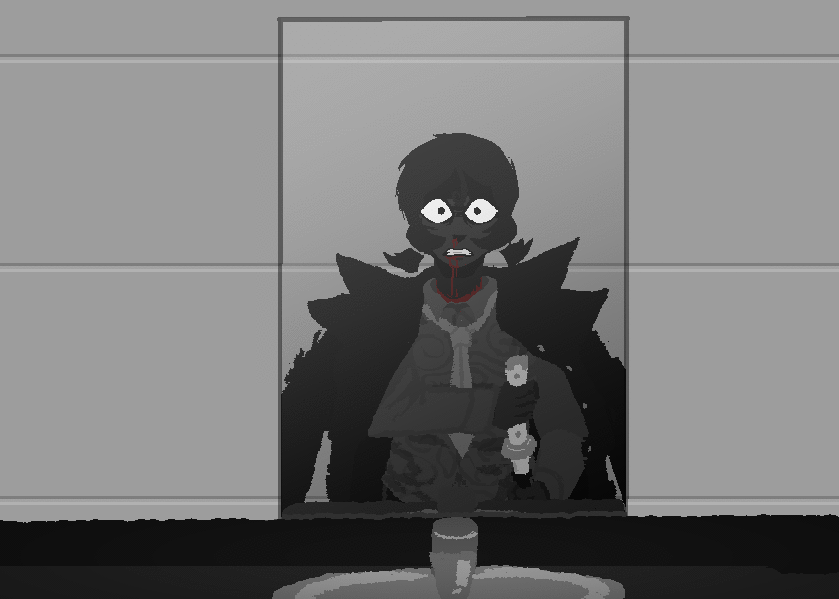
> go clean up

You suppose you can do that. If this anomaly truly is willing to teach you a useful skill, then perhaps it is wise if you fulfill its request. For now.

You stride out the office room and make your way down the still-unpainted walls, and, sure enough, this building appears to have *a* bathroom sign. Not that you have ever been a fan of this particular anomaly, but it seems the HQ can only become more dangerous incrementally. Curious.

The bathroom is nice enough for the building it is in. Some tiles are cracked, and there is graffiti on the stalls, but it is otherwise quite standard. Well, you may as well do what you came here to do. It can't be that bad.

You look in the mirror.



Ah. It meant to say 'you look deranged'. Noted.

> are you bleeding

> oh god

You have found that the gods of this reality are not ones you would like to invoke, but, in the context of expressing an emotion, yes. 'Oh god' is a valid reaction.

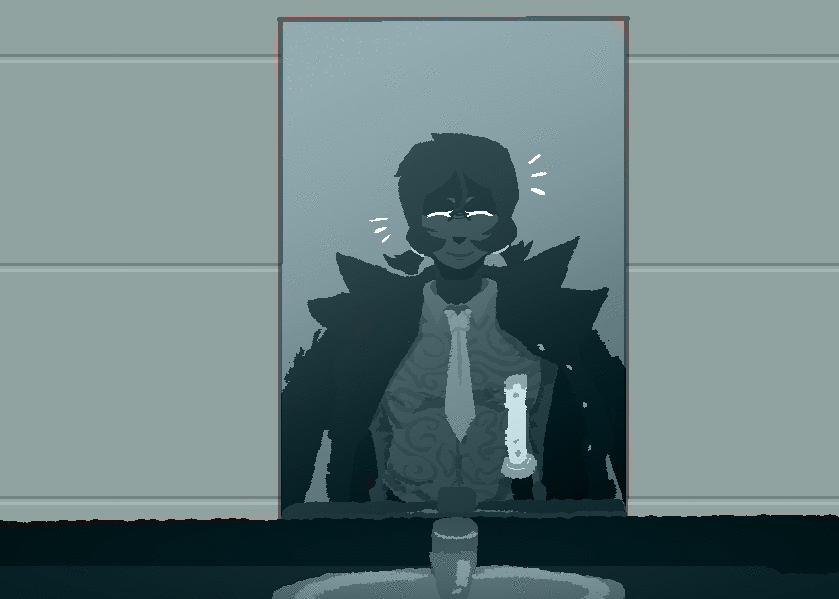
> are you bleeding

Indeed. Not that you go out of your way to die, but-- and you know this is a crude explanation-- knife goes in, blood comes out. The process of dying is quite messy, no matter how clean your patron's cut is.

It appears the memory of this particular death has stuck, somewhat.

> clean up

Agreed. You wash off the blood in the sink, while attempting to prevent the blood from traveling further into your shirt.



There we go. Much better!

Normally you would button up your jacket, but strangely enough, civilians find it upsetting. This more 'casual' look lets you perform your various tasks without much interruption-- except for the occasional child asking about your height.

> how tall ARE you?

You have honestly never measured! The only ones to ever measure you... well. They are. Not currently around, astrologically speaking, to answer that. Perhaps you will look into it later.

> is this the first time a wound has stuck around?

Negative, although it is rare. Not only do you not have a strong enough death ratio to tell anymore, but thinking about the deaths you *do* remember is a waste of time. You have people to protect and research to do, after all.

> go back to the staring contest

You dutifully make your way back to the office, where the anomaly appears to be poking at the skull. Its brow furrows as if lost in thought, but it snaps back to you as soon as you enter the room.

"Hey, you're back! Cool!" It grins at you, now no longer cowering at you. You feel somewhat disappointed by this, but it's not like a stressed anomaly is beneficial. Especially this one. "So! You feel ready? Give me a sign if you feel ready or something. Stare intently I guess."

> stare intently while wondering why you would want to be a gamer

You get lost in your own train of thought for a second. Your fellow coworkers have had a stronger interest in these videogames than you. It occurs to you you have never tried one. Perhaps after you are done, you will try these 'videogames', but you do not believe that is going to be any time soon in the next century.

"...I think there's a bunch of benefits to being a GAMER, personally," it responds, apropos of nothing. "Games themselves are fun, and they let you focus on these small goals which are meant to be achievable-- but in something that makes more sense to you, I mean, reality is a game, you know? The stuff that Peewee can do is stuff anyone can do with the right mindset, and stuff. You're not gonna have any luck tracking us down if you don't know how to exploit it."

> wait does the staring work. can you hear this

> wait wait do that but while staring

Well, of course the staring works. You find yourself to be quite expressive, actually.

The anomaly seems to chuckle under its breath. It appears it was trying to hide it. It does not work.

> wait you can learn how to do all that weird stuff peewee can do?

You raise an eyebrow at it. It would be convenient to not have to worry about that damn snake phasing into the walls, like that stunt it pulled last time.

"You can do a whole bunch of stuff that guy can do! Everything and more! I'm more of a GAMER, so I'm even better. You have the best teacher you could have on the cryptic arts of gaming, End! Unless he learns what you learn. In theory. That could happen. But that still puts you one step ahead from where you were!"

> fine, you'll accept this EGO gift

You stare at her some more, and then you give her a single nod.

It pumps its fist in the air. "Yessss! Operation Gaming is a go!"

**You have started the Route:** Operation: Gaming!

You successfully avoid being contaminated by its excitement. You stare at it unamused, instead.

The anomaly jumps out of its chair as its pulls out a bag of papers from underneath the desk, all carefully cut out and filled with words. "I figured it was gonna be hard asking you to pick a gaming term, so I went ahead and put a whole bunch of stuff in this for you! So you just pull three things out and I'll teach you those three things, how about?"

This is the most enriched you have ever seen this monster.

> look into gaming bag

You look into the bag. You see the folowing terms:

* Aggro
* AFK
* Ganking
* GOAT
* Grinding
* No-clipping
* Inventory
* Cheese???
* Crafting
* RageQuit ("Don't you already know that one?")
* F
* Skins (The anomaly takes that one out of the bag without saying a word)

> no-clipping, peewee won't get away again

It nods sagely. "Yeah, that's always a wise choice. Just don't get stuck!"

> aggro, you do like being aggressive

It stares at you for a moment before it just gulps and accepts it fate. "Welp! Guess I did put that one in there! Sure."

> what is a ....GOAT?

"It's a sheep," it states, expression completely flat. "It's a-- it's a sheep. The things you have to kill to time travel are sheep. You know. That's the joke. Greatest of all time. Time Goat. I. I promise it's funny. You've. You've seen sheep. Right?"

You cock your head. The last sheep you saw was an anomaly that would make you brush its mane, and then when it breached it would turn your skin into metal wire and spawn more of itself. The bristles hurt a lot. R4 cannot be let near most metal fences anymore because of that.

It looks away from you. "Just choose one of them so I can run you through it."

> noclip, otherwise peewee will escape again

You ominously shove the 'no-clip' paper at her, hand firm with stated finality.

It grabs the piece of paper. "Okay! So! No-clip it is!"

The anomaly moves further away from the desk and closer to the room. It has, for some reason, not let go of the skull. You hope this does not become a habit. "So no-clipping is all about corners! Whenever you find a spot where two items collide, like walls, or furniture, or whatever-- if it's touchable, you can no-clip through it! It can hurt a lot if you get it wrong. Or get stuck. Or-- end up somewhere you aren't supposed to be? But as long as you're in a room, there's corners everywhere! Don't. Don't get stuck in a cave. That might be harder."

You see it step over the edge of the bookshelf and its body ricochets, before finally flinging itself *through the wall*. You. Suppose that is a sign to follow.

> no-clip, aggro, GOAT seem good

You do agree these choices seem useful. You still wonder what 'skin' was supposed to do.

> wedge yourself into a corner and try to no clip after her

You aren't quite sure where to start. You kick at the furniture-- one of the bookshelves falls off over you, and it hits you in the back as most of of its contents fall off. You take the hit like a champ, simply shrugging it back into position from its resting place on your shoulder. That was close. Any closer to your neck and it might have... been a complication.

While you're prodding around the room, you hit the corner of a strangely rectangular potted plant; your body receives massive whiplash as you go flying away from it, and you experience a set of bodily reactions that you have never experienced in your entire life. However, because you didn't notice, you are in no control of where you go.

The narrator kindly asks the observer to pick a number between one and six.

> 3

It appears you are trying to go WEST.

You cannot go WEST. Your body bounces around the room for a very painful 13.3 seconds (you counted!) and it seems to show no sign of stopping. You knock a book off a shelf, which makes it hit the potted plant, and it too starts going apeshit. The room is filled with the noise of the Half Life collision engine.

Would you like to go one number up, or one number down?

> down down

The observer has selected: DOWN.

For a second, you think you might just be bouncing here until something hits you in just the right place. You think about this loop, and all it has taught you. Perhaps it was hubris to let the most dangerous anomaly try to teach you... anything, actually. This was all very, very stupid. You wonder about your team, and about if they will reconnect even without your intervention. Perhaps you should try that sometime.

This loop, while short, has been somewhat enjoyable. You feel a lot more talkative inside your brain, like there is some back and forth, and you are not sure why-- but you certainly cannot complain, as the monologue is appreciated. Perhaps, after you investigate whether this was some sort of alteration to your psyche, you should invest in some imaginary personnel. Reports note that it is almost like having friends. Maybe this learning experience will lead to some exciting prospects for your report--

**WHACK**

The book smacks onto you like a down aerial and you shoot off into the ground.

> hey, it seems you have changed appearance drastically this loop

You do not think you have changed *that* much. You have noticed some irregularities here and there-- the spiral motif, for one-- but they are largely inconsequential and have not affected your work. Regardless. Of what your co-workers have to say.

**You are fine, actually. You are. Not entertaining the thought any further.**

> try to stick the landing

Oh, landing is trivial to you. The issue is finding where to land.

You manage to grip onto the inside of a basement wall, slowing your descent quite a bit, until you hit the inside of its roof. You appear to be in a storage room.

...for a moment you become aware that if you had not stuck that landing, you might've kept falling forever. This 'no-clipping' is going to be hard to master, but it seems you have the first steps nailed down.

> investigate storage room

You doubt there is anything to explore here. Even if there was, you would prefer not investigating this extremely dangerous location while you are currently on a mission.

> no clip back to the office

You can certainly attempt it. You push your foot to one of the corner pipes, now with intent, and this time you shoot upwards. It takes you a couple more tries to land in the office-- you catch a glimpse of some QINs walking off with some fruit-shaped-babies, as well as of a set of stickers hanging underneath the floorboards? You do eventually make your way there, though.

On cue, the anomaly flies back into the office. "Oh! You went that way! I guess I didn't explain uh, directions. Sorry!" It laughs. "I was going to look for you, but it seems like you got it all good! Good job!"

It looks like it's about to offer you a fistbump, but then you see it furrow its brow as it appears to remember your condition, and just starts wiggling its fingers at nothing in particular.

> appreciate the sensitivity

You fail to appreciate it. Whether or not this thing deems it fit to keep you alive is not your concern. It is also not your concern that it appears to have concepts of fairness and play, and how it is deriving enrichment out of your very obvious continued suffering, and...

Wait. Why are you smiling. Stop that. You quickly rectify this.

It does not seem fazed by this, instead giving you a wide grin. "Don't worry about the office, by the way! It's super early, so this room is gonna end up being like... some weird hedge maze later. I just thought having it set up would be nice."

You shift your gaze to the books strewn across the floor.

"Oh, those are all decorative. I have no idea if they even have words on them!"

> try out GOAT next

You grab the near-ripped paper with 'GOAT' printed on it from your pockets and pass it to the anomaly.

"Hm..." it rubs its chin in thought. "I mean, you've been there already, right? It's just teaching you how to go backwards. Off to the maze!"

She is already gone. It would not be hard to follow. Although your usual contraption is not... nearby...

Wait. Where is the Armor?

> panic

You fail to panic. Panic is weakness. You are stone-cold at the idea that your Patron is missing. You would not bother looking if you knew it was not an anomaly, which means it needs to be taken care of, as well. You at least know it is still here, in the grand scheme of things, as your hands hover to grasp your sword. **They are itching to take a life.**

> find the armor

How far should you look for the Armor? Your usual armor is very far away from... what is this? Italy, correct? What a strange name for a country.

> do you have a way to get to the maze without the armor?

You figure it is definitely possible, but you have come to understand that themes and 'memes' are powerful in this place. Some anomalies travel through the phone lines. Most residents get obsessed really, really hard. Your patron makes you toss people into coffins. The monsters of this world have many underhanded ways to connect to that place.

> consider if you would know if you were close to the armor

You can certainly tell that it is still ...connected, to you. The bastard likes slipping out of your grasp whenever it can, however, so even though it cannot walk and therefore cannot breach, you would rather stop civilians from getting hurt by putting it on.

> wonder if the flower chick knows where your armor is

Perhaps, but you would rather not owe an(other) anomaly, if you can help it. You have seen it happen before, and to do so would be unwise. Either way, it would be unwise of the anomaly to change your spawnpoint without the Armor-- your best best is it is probably nearby.

> then search as long and as far as it takes, learning to be a GAMER can wait

> no clip if you need to get into inaccessible places

Practice *does* make perfect.

Where you only knew no-clipping before, you master it here. You bounce across the city of Naples, checking any places you think would be appropriate for it to spawn. It's not in HQ, you at least confirm. You find an uncomfortable amount of people-shaped birds painting walls. You accidentally leave a you-shaped paint splotch on the floor when you land out of there.

You do find it, eventually. It's noon outside, and you're standing in a cemetery. The dirt sinks into your shoes as you examine your surroundings. No one seems to be here right now, which is a relief.

And then, there it is. The wedge coffin stands straight against a tombstone, surrounded by crimson butterflies; they rest on it and flutter towards the graves, laying in droves on the dirt.

One of them lands on your shoulder, and you sigh, as the wings flutter in judgement, as if asking about where you were all this time. Yep. It is like it was never missing.

The intermission has stopped! Reason: You have not encountered this NPC yet!

Reloading previous savefile...