

Opus: The Totally Real, Not Made
Up Story of a Boy and His
Skeleton

by
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CAST OF CHARACTERS

DAKOTA- Male. Early 20s. A shy yet stubborn guy that plays "Animal Town".

MASON- Male. Mid 20s. Dakota's friend and roommate, creator of "Animal Town".

LILA- Female. Early 20s. Dakota's best friend. Practices witchcraft. College dropout that also plays "Animal Town".

OPUS- Male. A skeleton that resides in Hell as the Lantern Bearer, Guardian of the Forest.

ZELL- Female. Mid 20s. Childhood friend/girlfriend of Mason, used to play "Animal Town."

KING- Genderfluid. The Ruler of Hell. Flamboyant, yet dignified.

VIOLA- Female. A hotelier in Hell.

THE GREAT WITCH- Female. A witch that rules over the forest in Hell.

THE FOX- Male. The Great Tempter. Very interested in Dakota.

Setting:

A bedroom and the realm of Hell in "Animal Town"

Production Notes:

The role of THE FOX should be played by the actor playing MASON.

The roles of VIOLA and THE WITCH should be played by the actress playing LILA.

KING's gender presentation should never be used as a joke. KING is a bit flamboyant, but they are never campy.

THE FOX's design should be simple and unrealistic. A man wearing a fox mask will do perfectly.

INTRODUCTION

Under blackout. A few whispers can be heard. These whispers continue while new whispers are heard. This continues to build for several seconds until the whispers turn into a choir of quiet voices. They repeat the lines written below, overlapping each other as THE FOX speaks.

DAKOTA

Why do you hate me so much? What did I do? This is just a game. You're not real. You're not special. You're not my friend. There's nothing here. There's nothing here. There's nothing here.

LILA

There's some dark presence here. Can't you feel it? It's so tangible, malevolent. Please, I just want to help. You're my friend. We can fight this. I'm not afraid. I'm not afraid. I'm not afraid.

ZELL

Please don't. I don't believe this is who you are. It's because of him. I understand. Do you see him? Just out of the corner of your eye. Will you fight? I know he's here. I know he's here. I know he's here.

OPUS

Kid, we always have to move forward. Gotta make up for all the bad shit we did in life. I won't let anything bad happen to ya. You weren't lyin'. This hurts, kid. It hurts. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

THE FOX

Are you who you want to be?

The voices swell and rise in volume until they are a cacophony of conversations filling the room.

THE FOX (CONT'D)

Has the path that you have chosen led you to your desired outcome? Or has this just become another mistake?

The voices all shout "Mistake!" They go back to their conversations.

THE FOX (CONT'D)

"Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vineyards, for our vineyards are in bloom." Has your harvest been ruined?

The voices all shout "Ruined!" They go back to their conversations, growing steadily louder until THE FOX speaks.

THE FOX (CONT'D)

wake up.

Everything becomes silent.

SCENE ONE

DAKOTA's bedroom is tidy. A twin bed is nestled in the corner of the room. Next to it is a set of drawers with a lamp sitting on top of it, and next to the drawers is the bedroom door. A desk is placed near the door with a chair in front of it. Papers are stacked neatly on top of it. A wastebasket sits near it. In the middle of the floor is a plain rug. The room dissolves at a certain point into a sandy forest/desert/beach area with tall trees and cacti.

MASON sits on the rug in the room facing away from the desert area. LILA sits on the same rug facing him. DAKOTA is lying down in the forest area. Everything is still under blackout.

MASON

You awake in a forest.

Lights up on the forest area. DAKOTA wakes up. He stands and brushes himself off. He looks around, confused.

MASON (CONT'D)

The trees around you are black. A slight fog thickens the air around you.

DAKOTA

I walk around for a bit.

DAKOTA walks in circles around the forest.

MASON

As you walk, you notice a hollow quality to the atmosphere around you.

DAKOTA

Am I progressing towards anything?

MASON

Not yet. You're just gathering your bearings.

DAKOTA nods and continues to walk around in circles for a bit longer. MASON stays silent. After a while, DAKOTA stops.

DAKOTA

Um... I'm still walking and walking. Do I see anything interesting?

MASON

You see some creatures edging towards you. They look a bit like coyotes, but something is unsettling about them. Their eyes glow red in the dark. What do--

DAKOTA

I run away.

DAKOTA runs through the forest.

MASON

Somehow, you're able to get away--

LILA

Oh my God, this is so boring! Meta-mustache moment.

Lights up on the bedroom. LILA has her finger above her top lip.

MASON

Lila, what the hell?

LILA

Look, I came here to play a game, but all we've done is watch Dakota run from some monsters.

MASON

We literally, LITERALLY just started.

LILA

He didn't even try to fight them!

DAKOTA puts his finger over his top lip. He speaks without looking in MASON and LILA's direction.

DAKOTA

Well, I figured my forcefield powers are messed up since I'm technically dead.

MASON

Ooooooh, self-imposed restrictions. Love that shit.

LILA

wait, you're dead? when did that happen?!

MASON

It happened last time we played. He accidentally killed Zell, and then The Fox killed him.

LILA

You killed Zell?!

DAKOTA

In my defense, I think she was just tired of playing.

LILA

why does all the good shit happen when I'm gone?

MASON

Maybe you should have been here instead of sleeping with that one girl. What's her name?

LILA

Are you shaming me for having sex?

MASON

Of course not. Fuck everyone in the world, I don't care. But we DID plan for Sundays to be Animal Town nights, so it's not our fault--

LILA

wait a minute. My character is still alive. Am I gonna get to do anything tonight?

MASON

Um... Probably not. It's gonna be a night mostly of Hell stuff.

DAKOTA

wait, I'm in Hell?!

MASON

Shit. I wanted-- Fuck, hang on. Meta-mustaches down.

DAKOTA and LILA both put their fingers down. The lights on the bedroom dim a bit.

MASON (CONT'D)

As you run away, you see a big neon sign.

A neon sign that says "welcome to Hell!" flashes.

MASON (CONT'D)

Dammit, my original reveal was so much cooler.

LILA

Mason, if we're spending the rest of the night playing in Hell, what am I gonna do? I don't wanna just sit here!

MASON

I don't know! Just... Be a character here or whatever. Figure it out. This is Animal Town. There are basically no rules.

LILA smiles and stands up. She runs to DAKOTA.

LILA

suddenly, you see one of the creatures gaining on you. It pounces!

LILA jumps on DAKOTA and pins him to the ground.

OW! what the hell! Mason!

DAKOTA

If she wants to be a monster, she can be a monster. What do you do?

MASON

I push her off and run!

DAKOTA

DAKOTA pushes LILA to the ground and runs. LILA gets up and chases him. The two run in circles.

God, this is pathetic. You keep running until you run into a tree.

MASON

DAKOTA runs into a tree and falls down. LILA laughs.

You're mine now!

LILA

The creature edges closer towards you. Suddenly, behind the creature, you see a skeleton walking towards you.

MASON

OPUS enters holding a lantern on a stick and wearing a tattered red cloak. He waves the lantern in LILA's direction as he speaks.

Back! Away!

OPUS

There's a terrible magic presence in the lantern. As the skeleton waves the lantern, a bright light flashes and forces the monsters to flee.

MASON

wait, really? I just started--

LILA

AND FORCES THE MONSTERS TO FLEE.

MASON

LILA huffs and stomps back to the bedroom. OPUS waits for her to leave, then goes to DAKOTA and extends a bony hand. DAKOTA hesitates, then takes OPUS' hand and stands up.

The skeleton walks up to you and says...

MASON (CONT'D)

Skin-walkers. They're pretty common 'round these parts, but don't worry 'bout 'em. Your skin ain't big enough for 'em to wear.

OPUS

Um, thanks. DAKOTA

He nods and says... MASON

well, good luck to ya. OPUS

...and he starts to walk away. MASON

wait! How did I end up in Hell? Did The Fox send me here? DAKOTA

The skeleton is visibly frustrated. He turns back to you and says... MASON

Listen, kid. I dunno who this fox guy is. what I do know is that you're dead. And you must've done some awful shit to end up down here. My heart goes out to ya, it really does, but I got business to attend to myself, you know? So if it's all the same to you... OPUS

And he starts to walk away again. MASON

I guess I deserve this. wasn't exactly a living saint. DAKOTA
(Pause.)
what am I supposed to do now?

OPUS stops and looks at DAKOTA.

Oh, c'mon, you sad sack. You can follow me to the edge of the forest. No further. OPUS

OPUS gestures for DAKOTA to come with him. DAKOTA follows.

'Sad sack?' I'm literally in Hell right now. weren't you upset when you first wound up here? DAKOTA

Kid, I been down here too long to remember that sort of shit. You'll probably be down here just as long. Best change your mailing address. OPUS

(Pause.)
Name's Opus, by the way. Ronald Opus.

Dakota. DAKOTA

OPUS

Pleasure to meet ya, kid. Wish it was under better circumstances.

MASON

As you two continue to walk, you see fireworks off in the distance.

DAKOTA

Huh. Is it a Hell holiday or something?

OPUS laughs.

OPUS

Not quite. Those are fire magics. Some of the witches are hunting. Must've already caught your scent.

(DAKOTA starts looking around nervously)

Ah, don't worry. The spirit of the lantern keeps them at bay. You're safe, least for the night. 'Course, I don't think it'll help when we get to her house.

DAKOTA

whose house?

As OPUS is about to answer, a cell phone begins to ring. OPUS freezes. LILA pulls out her phone and looks at her messages.

LILA

Oh, SHIT. I totally forgot I have a date tonight, and I'm super late for it!

MASON

what?! We're in the middle of a game that WE JUST STARTED! Can't you-

LILA

Sorry, I'll catch up on it next time!

She runs out the bedroom door. There's a slight pause.

DAKOTA

Should we... keep going?

MASON

I guess not. I need a character for this next part, and she was doing pretty well. Goddammit.

DAKOTA gets up and walks into the bedroom. OPUS vanishes.

DAKOTA

Well, I was having fun at least.

MASON

I've just had some wild shit planned for this campaign, and I can never get through it because Lila won't stick around long enough to actually play.

(Pause.)

So, what do you think of Animal Town? I know it's only been a couple of sessions, but are you having fun?

DAKOTA

It's not quite what I was expecting. Zell told me that one time after a session, she ended up crying for hours.

MASON

I remember that. She didn't talk to me for three days.

DAKOTA

What did you even do?

MASON

Well, I like to personalize campaigns to people. Sometimes, it affects them way more than I expect it to. What else did she say?

DAKOTA

Just some basic stuff. Said you guys have been playing for years. She told me about one of your other campaigns being in some suicide dimension or something.

MASON

Oh, man. I made someone else cry during that one. It messed a lot of us up pretty bad, but it became one of the better stories we ended up making. Actually, Opus showed up in that one too.

DAKOTA

He did?

MASON

He was basically a tour guide for everyone. People really liked him. That was a great story, but a lot of the guys from home stopped playing after it was done.

DAKOTA

Why's that?

MASON

They weren't really prepared to be affected by it so much. We started out super combat-heavy, but towards the end, I don't think we had any fights. Just walked around and talked a lot.

DAKOTA

I can't even imagine Animal Town without fights.

MASON

That's because fighting is all you've done so far. I think the time you've spent being dead is the longest you've gone without crossing someone.

DAKOTA

I like fighting. I thought I'd hate it, but it's my favorite part of the game.

MASON

Yeah, you like it so much that you killed Zell. You're the only person to actually kill another player.

DAKOTA

No way.

MASON

Your playstyle is so different from what I expected. You're so angry in Animal Town, but I don't think I've ever seen you upset in real life. It threw me off, but it's making for a really great story already... Even though you did kill off my girlfriend.

DAKOTA

So if every campaign is different, how are they all still part of Animal Town?

MASON thinks for a moment.

MASON

I've never actually thought about that. I guess there are three things that show up in every Animal Town story. There are always powers that the players can use, there's always a town that needs to be saved, and there's always a fox that tries to destroy the players.

DAKOTA

So you didn't invent The Fox just to mess with me?

MASON

The Fox has been a staple since the beginning. He messes with everyone. Don't feel special.

(He checks the time and gets up.)

well, since we can't play anymore tonight, I think I'm gonna hang out with Zell. She's been kind of upset lately because we don't get to spend much time together anymore.

DAKOTA

why doesn't she just come back and play with us? Couldn't she make a new character?

MASON

Eh, she gets like this sometimes. Too much Animal Town can make her weird.

(MORE)

MASON (CONT'D)

(He walks to the door.)

I'll see you when I get back. We can play video games or something.

MASON exits through the bedroom door. DAKOTA stares at the door for a second, then walks to his desk and sits down. He begins to write. Time passes. MASON does not return. Time continues to pass until it is evident that it is very late at night. MASON still does not return. DAKOTA gives up waiting on MASON and gets into bed. Soon, he is asleep.

SCENE TWO

It is still very dark in DAKOTA's room. THE FOX appears. He walks around with a sophisticated gait and observes some of DAKOTA's things, but he does not touch any of them. He hums a melody for a bit before speaking.

THE FOX

This place. It smells of dust and ash. How one could live comfortably here is beyond me.

(He hums a bit more before continuing.)

Far too small as well. The ceiling seems to be bearing down on me. No, this won't do at all.

DAKOTA stirs and sits up.

THE FOX (CONT'D)

Ah, there it is. A brief air of freshness. How I've missed the presence of new souls.

DAKOTA looks and sees THE FOX.

DAKOTA

Is someone there?

THE FOX

(Without looking at DAKOTA.)

Hello, Dakota. So good to see you again.

DAKOTA

what the hell?

THE FOX grimaces, but still doesn't look at DAKOTA.

THE FOX

You don't remember me? How unfortunate.

DAKOTA

who are you? And what are you doing in my room?

THE FOX

I have no interest in reintroducing myself to you. I'm simply a tourist of sorts, travelling and drifting to and fro. Also, you'll be happy to know that no one else is in your room. The precious prince continues to sleep. This is merely a dream.

DAKOTA

I've never had someone in my dreams be so... eloquent.

THE FOX

You flatter me. My eloquence has always been a point of pride for me. I must confess, my dear friend, I've missed you terribly. Much of the world is just so small and uninviting.

(MORE)

THE FOX (CONT'D)

Your soul reinvigorates my own. It's been so long since I've felt this. I've grown so fond of the scent: pine needles and rain.

DAKOTA

I take it back. You're not making any sense.

THE FOX

Ah, don't waste yourself on the details. I just wanted to breathe you in for a bit, sate my appetite until next I see you. It seems that you are due to wake in a few moments.

(He sniffs the air.)

Hmmm... and by her. Her smell hasn't changed a bit.

DAKOTA

What on earth--

THE FOX

Ah ah ah. Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down. Be sure to keep your spirit light. T'would be a shame to lose yourself to insignificant fears.

(He turns to exit.)

Be sure to give her my regards.

THE FOX leaves the way he came. DAKOTA lays himself back down.

SCENE THREE

Morning has broken, and there is a knock at DAKOTA's door. He wakes with a start. Another knock at the door. DAKOTA shakes his head and lays back down. The door opens, and ZELL walks in.

ZELL

Hope you're decent, Mason. I'm sorry I'm late for our coffee thing this morning. Buncha shit went wrong, but we're--

(She turns to notice DAKOTA.)

Oh, I'm sorry! I keep forgetting that this is your room and not his.

DAKOTA

It's whatever, Zell. You actually woke me from a really weird dream, so thanks for that.

ZELL

I can't tell if that's sarcasm or not.

DAKOTA

You never can.

MASON

(Offstage.)

Zell, is that you?

ZELL

Yeah, boo.

MASON

I'll be there in a minute. Just finishing my hair.

ZELL and DAKOTA share an awkward silence.

ZELL

So. How are things?

DAKOTA

Things are... fine. How about with you?

ZELL

Pretty good. Pretty good.

Another silence.

DAKOTA

We missed you last night.

ZELL

Missed me for what?

DAKOTA

Animal Town? The thing we do every Sunday?

ZELL

Oh! Yeah. Animal Town. I bet you guys still had fun without me.

Another brief silence.

DAKOTA

Are you angry at me? For killing you?

ZELL

what? Of course not. People die all the time in Animal Town.

(Pause.)

Although, it could've been... cleaner, somehow.

DAKOTA

From what I've heard, your death was pretty tame in comparison--

ZELL

You made my head explode by putting a forcefield around it.

silence until MASON comes in.

MASON

Hey, dude. Ready to go?

ZELL

Yeah.

(ZELL kisses MASON, then turns to DAKOTA.)

sorry for waking you. See you later.

MASON and ZELL exit the room, closing the door behind them. DAKOTA lays back down in the bed. After a beat, there's another knock at the door. DAKOTA groans and answers the door. LILA pushes past him as he opens it.

DAKOTA

Sure, come on in.

LILA

Dakota, the day is wasting away with you in bed. why do you sleep so late?

DAKOTA

It's eight in the morning.

LILA

The sun is shining. Energy is flowing. Magick is in the air.

DAKOTA

whatever you say.

LILA

I'm serious! Today's energy is beautiful. You should take advantage of it. Mercury goes into retrograde soon.

DAKOTA
what the hell does that even--

LILA
Shhhh.
(She listens closely to the room and paces around.)
when's the last time you saged this place?

DAKOTA
Last time, you did it without my permission. You know I hate the way it smells.

LILA
You should do a cleanse in here soon. The energy is a bit off.

DAKOTA
I get it, okay? You're a witch.

LILA
Could've gotten in through someone. Has anyone else been in here recently?

DAKOTA
Zell came in just before you did.

LILA
Oh, that makes sense. She's a weird one.

DAKOTA
And you're not?

LILA
Shut up. What'd she come in here for?

DAKOTA
Looking for Mason. I can't figure her out.

LILA
Well, we don't really know her all that well. She only comes around to play the game with us.

DAKOTA
Isn't it odd? Like, we hang out with Mason for years, and all of a sudden, she just shows up out of nowhere.

LILA
What's her story?

DAKOTA
I dunno. Apparently, she and Mason have been friends forever. Moved here from their hometown. No idea why.

LILA
Yeah, this dark energy could've come from her.

DAKOTA
Stop. You're gonna make me anxious.

 LILA
You're always anxious.

 DAKOTA
More anxious then. whatever.

 LILA
Have you been using the lavender oil I gave you?

 DAKOTA
Yes, yes, I have.
 (Pause.)
It helps sometimes.

 LILA
Special blend from my mom. She's been using it herself for thirty years. I'll bring some more for you soon.
 (She stops pacing and starts looking for something in her purse.)
Well, nothing to be done about this if you won't let me fix the energy in here.

 DAKOTA
Uh-huh. How was your date last night?

 LILA
It was a bust. He was a douche.

 DAKOTA
I thought you didn't date guys?

 LILA
He seemed sweet. Thought I'd make an exception, but all he talked about was hockey and the movie Fight Club. He totally missed the point. It's all about toxic masculinity rising up in response to emasculation.

 DAKOTA
Yeah, how could he miss that?

 LILA
Don't be an ass. Anyway, I left halfway through dinner.

LILA finally finds what she's looking for in her purse and pulls it out. It's a small cloth bag.

 DAKOTA
Oh, come on, Lila. You woke me up for this? You know I don't believe in this stuff. It actually kind of weirds me out.

LILA

It's just tarot, you big baby. And every time I read for you, you end up telling me how accurate it is, how much it's helping you--

DAKOTA

Fine, fine, whatever.

LILA and DAKOTA sit in the floor. LILA pulls a tarot deck out of the bag and begins to shuffle it.

LILA

Getting scared of tarot cards. They're pieces of cardstock with pretty pictures on them.

DAKOTA

My parents always told me that they were tools of the devil or whatever. Not all of us come from a family of crazies.

LILA

Fuck off. My family is awesome.

(She finishes her shuffling and hands the deck to DAKOTA, who also shuffles.)

So it'll be like all the other readings. Just a quick, general spread about your life. Past, present, future.

DAKOTA

I know the drill.

DAKOTA finishes shuffling and hands the deck to LILA who places the deck on the floor. She takes a card with her left hand and places it face up. It's The Lovers card.

LILA

Oh, shit! The Lovers card in the Past position. Obviously, this is talking about the love you're feeling for someone, but it also deals with choices that you're making. So who's the special guy?

DAKOTA

Oh, shut up.

LILA pulls a second card. It's The Hermit card.

LILA

Huh. The Hermit in the Present position. That's a new one.

DAKOTA

What does it mean?

LILA

Well, it's usually indicative of a time of introspection and soul-searching, but it also implies a period of being alone. Doesn't make sense with The Lovers being there. It's all about being with people. The Hermit is all about setting yourself apart.

DAKOTA

Having some trouble?

LILA

Listen, ass. The tarot is complex. There's elements and shit involved. These two cards just clash.

LILA pulls out a third card. It's the Three of Swords card.

LILA (CONT'D)

Oof, tough break. Three of Swords in Future position. This card is all about rejection and heartbreak.

(She takes in the card spread for a bit.)

So you're going through this kind of transitory time, learning about yourself, and it somehow has to do with you and your feelings for someone.

DAKOTA

So if I'm just destined for heartbreak, should I just give up on--

LILA

I KNEW IT! You do like someone!

DAKOTA

Ugh, whatever. Just forget about it.

LILA

Calm down. I'm just messing with you. Listen, the cards aren't prescriptive. The future isn't set in stone. They just tell you the result of the path that you're on right now. If you make a change, the future can change.

DAKOTA

Okay... So what should I do?

LILA

Hell, I dunno. If you're really going through this process of learning about yourself, maybe you should just focus on that. It could help you make the right decisions.

(Pause.)

So who is it?

DAKOTA

I'm not telling you.

LILA

Come on. We're like best friends. Who can you trust if not me?

DAKOTA

I'm NOT telling you.

LILA

Fine. Be that way. Let's see if the cards will help me figure it out.

DAKOTA

What, are they gonna spell out the guy's name?

LILA pulls one last card. It's the King of Wands card.

LILA

Hm. The King of Wands.

DAKOTA

What does that one mean?

LILA

Could mean a lot of things. It's a court card, which usually represents a person in your life.

(She stares intently at the card.)

I was always horrible at remembering these. I'm pretty sure the King of Wands is a guy that is the leader of a group or community. Wands are all about creativity and... Dammit, hang on.

(She gets out her phone.)

My mom sent me an e-book about the court cards.

DAKOTA

I feel like that's cheating.

LILA

How is it cheating? This isn't a game.

DAKOTA

I thought tarot readers knew all the cards by heart.

LILA

There are seventy-eight of these little bastards. You try remembering what they all mean. Okay, here we go. "The King of Wands is a leader that utilizes creativity in order to solve problems. He always listens to his people and changes the world around him in order to solve their problems..." Blah, blah, blah, "excels in artistic expression..." God, Mom, this thing is so long.

DAKOTA

Just forget about it. It's not that important.

LILA

Basically, it's someone that's a leader of an artistic community, wants to help people, compassionate and stuff. Creates a kingdom that promotes freedom, but also challenges his people to better themselves...

(It suddenly clicks.)

Holy shit. Dakota, do you have a crush on--

LILA is interrupted by the door opening. MASON walks in.

DAKOTA
Mason? what are you doing back already?

MASON
Zell's card got declined, and I'm broke as shit. Figured I'd just make coffee here.

LILA
Is Zell here too?

MASON
Nah, she had somewhere to be.
(*He notices LILA.*)
what are you doing here?

LILA
Just thought I'd stop by. Do you want me to leave?

MASON
No, no. I just wasn't expecting... wait. You guys have any plans today?
(*Pause.*)
wanna play Animal Town?

DAKOTA
we had our game night yesterday.

MASON
I know, but we're all here. Crazy shit is about to go down. It could be fun.

LILA
Sure. Let's play a little bit.

MASON
Sweet! I'll go make coffee real quick!

MASON exits. There is a brief pause.

LILA
I take back what I said. You might be destined for heartbreak.

DAKOTA
Do not breathe a fucking word about this.

LILA
I thought you were past the baby-gay, "I love straight boys" phase. He has a girlfriend.

DAKOTA
LILA.

LILA

I'm not gonna say anything. Just. Damn. This really must suck for you.

MASON enters with three mugs of coffee and takes his usual spot on the rug. He hands mugs to the other two.

MASON

(to LILA)

You think you'll still be up to playing even if we stay in Hell for a while?

LILA

If I get bored, I'll just be a monster again.

MASON

Cool, cool. Now, let me remember where we were.

SCENE FOUR

DAKOTA gets up and walks to the forest area.

MASON

So you and Opus were walking through the forest of Hell.

OPUS walks onstage and meets DAKOTA where he is.

OPUS

Welcome back, kid.

MASON

Uh... help me out here.

LILA

Apparently, witches are hunting Dakota because witches are truly evil and vicious creatures in your world.

MASON

Oh, give me a break. It was off the top--

LILA

So you can change it?

MASON

God, fine. The fireworks are actually--

OPUS

--fire magics. Some of the--

MASON
(*loudly*)

DEMONS--

OPUS

--are hunting. Must've already caught your scent. Ah, don't worry. The spirit of the lantern keeps them at bay. You're safe, least for the night. 'Course, I don't think it'll help when we get to her house.

DAKOTA

Who's 'she'?

OPUS

The Great Witch of the Forest.

LILA

Really? What did we just talk about?

MASON

Okay, this was actually part of something I planned ahead of time. It's important that she's a witch. Give me a chance here, will you?

You're the boss.

LILA

Thank you. Anyway--

MASON

She rules this place with some mighty powerful magic. Stay on her good side. She's got a habit of wastin' people that cross her.

OPUS

As in killing them? Can people die when they're dead?

DAKOTA

Anything that bleeds can die, kid. Even in Hell.

OPUS

what happens when someone dies in Hell?

DAKOTA

Somethin' terrible. Don't think on it too much.
(Pause.)
So where you from, kid?

OPUS

A place called Animal Town.

DAKOTA

Pretty odd name.

OPUS

All the Animals there have super powers or something like that. Something to do with toxic waste or some corporation releasing chemicals in the air. What about you?

DAKOTA

Ah, here's the only place that matters to me nowadays. Been here for too long to remember much else.

OPUS

That's depressing.

DAKOTA

That's Hell.

OPUS

Right. So where are we going again?

DAKOTA

To the edge of the forest. Past that is a desert. Past that is somethin' else. Hell's a big ass place. I haven't seen much of it. Mostly only been around this forest.

OPUS

DAKOTA

why's that? Just got comfortable here?

OPUS

It's complicated, but most things are. We should get goin' soon. Desert's 'bout a day's walk from here.

MASON

You two start walking through the forest.

OPUS

So you mentioned somethin' 'bout a fox earlier? what's the story there?

DAKOTA

It's a long one. Short version is that he's the reason I'm down here in the first place.

OPUS

You're the reason you're here. He may have just helped.

DAKOTA

I meant that more literally. He's the one that killed me, but he messed with me, fucked my life up.

OPUS

How'd he manage all that?

DAKOTA

It's hard to explain. He gets in your head, makes you think that he has all the answers, that he really wants to help you, but it's all a lie. He used me to get what he wanted, and then he killed me for becoming "boring".

OPUS

Goddamn, kid.

DAKOTA

Yeah. It's a lot.

OPUS

well, with any luck, maybe you can send him down here someday.

DAKOTA

He's like a spirit or something. Can't just outright kill him. I'm also pretty sure I need to be alive to face him.

OPUS

That does put a damper on things. But who knows? Maybe there's a way to get you back to the other side.

DAKOTA

You think?

OPUS

Hell's a big place full of a ton of strange characters. Someone out there's bound to know a way back.

Pause.

DAKOTA

That sounds great, but I dunno if that would be a good idea. I wasn't exactly a good person, even before The Fox came after me.

OPUS

I'm not gonna tell you what to think about yourself, but from what I've gathered from our short time together, I think you're a pretty good kid. Just got yourself mixed up in some dark stuff.

DAKOTA

You didn't know me when I was alive.

OPUS

Just tellin' ya what I think of you now.

(Pause.)

What would you do if ya got the chance to go back?

DAKOTA

I wouldn't know where to begin. Most of the town kind of wants me dead. I guess I'd try and go somewhere else, get away from that town and The Fox. Try and figure out how to make myself better or something like that. Looking back, I don't really like who I became.

OPUS

You'll find a lot of that down here. Lots of murderers and thieves down here tryin' to find a way to make themselves better. Met a guy a while back, had a bunch of racist tattoos before he died, and they stuck to him when he ended up here. Took a while, but he started feelin' regret for the things he'd done in life. He cut off his tattoos with a knife.

DAKOTA

Shit.

OPUS

Hell's not so forgivin'. His tattoos were back on his skin the next day. So every day, he would cut off his tattoos, and every night, they'd come back.

DAKOTA

Like some racist version of Sisyphus.

OPUS

Last I heard, he spent a couple of days sittin' on the side of the bridge over the pit of snakes. Think he finally couldn't take it anymore.

(Pause.)

I don't mean to say that to discourage you or nothin'.

(MORE)

OPUS (CONT'D)

Just want ya to know that sometimes, it's harder than it seems.
"Long is the way, and hard, that out of Hell leads up to Light."
(OPUS laughs.)

Now that I think about it, I ain't met a greedy businessman or a banker down here that feels the least bit sorry 'bout what they've done. Sumbitches tend to hang around the Demon Capital.

DAKOTA

Hell has a capital city?

OPUS

It's not much for tourism. All the buildings're black, and it looks like Chicago, 'cept made of asbestos.

DAKOTA

There's a metaphor there somewhere. So what would you do with the chance to go back?

OPUS

Hmmmm... Probably wouldn't do anything. Probably wouldn't even take the offer. I got nothin' to go back to, nothin' that can fix what I did. Rather stay here for the rest of eternity.

DAKOTA

That's bleak.

OPUS

That's Hell.

DAKOTA

well, I think you're pretty great. You're helping me out, and you don't even really know me.

OPUS

Just to the edge of the forest. It's not much.

DAKOTA

It's more than I was expecting from Hell. You're a good guy.

OPUS

I'm not a good guy, kid. I'm just an old skeleton that don't know any better.

A cell phone begins to ring. OPUS freezes. MASON and DAKOTA stare at LILA as she gets out her phone. She looks at it for a second, presses a button, and puts it back.

MASON

Do you need to get that?

LILA

No, it's fine.

MASON

Are you sure? We can pause for--

LILA

Shhhhh. Keep going.

MASON and DAKOTA exchange a look as they both attempt to process the true gravity of what just happened.

MASON

Um... okay. Opus stops walking for a second.

DAKOTA

Something wrong?

OPUS

Oh, nothin'. Just... Changin' course. I know a shortcut.

MASON

I'm gonna speed this up because it'll take you forever to get to the desert at this rate. So, you guys walk all day, and you reach a point where you can see the desert through the trees.

OPUS

There it is, kid. The desert. Millions of miles of sand and shit.

DAKOTA

Millions?

OPUS

Hell's a big ass place. After you leave here, you can go wherever you want with all the time in the world to do anything you'd like. You're bound to figure out somethin', maybe even find a way back to the land of the living. It's rough out there, but I think you'll do just fine.

DAKOTA stares out to the vastness of the desert. As he does this, MASON whispers something to LILA. LILA's face lights up.

DAKOTA

This may be out of line or something, but... would you want to come with me? It seems like you're tired of the forest, and it must get lonely here.

MASON physically reacts to this proposition. He didn't plan for this.

OPUS

Ah, kid...

DAKOTA

No pressure or anything. You've already helped me a ton.

There's a silence as OPUS tries to find a way to respond.

OPUS
You know, if I could, I'd leave with ya... but I can't.

DAKOTA
why not?

OPUS
Long story, but basically, I got a curse on me that won't let me leave. It has to do with the lantern.

(Pause.)
There's a real powerful demon that gives the lantern its power. It drives off things that mean to do harm to others. My job is to patrol the forest with it.

DAKOTA
And no one else can do it.

OPUS
If I ever try to leave, the demon will break out of the lantern and hunt me down.

DAKOTA
Could we... Could we fight it?

OPUS
Tryin' to kill this demon, now that's a fool's errand. You're much better off just leavin'.

Pause.

DAKOTA
I'm gonna find a way to get you out of here, okay? I'm not gonna forget about you.

MASON reacts again.

OPUS
Ah, fuck it. Let's get a good head start on this thing.

OPUS sets down the lantern.

MASON
As soon as Opus lets the lantern leave his hand, the forest around you begins to shift.

OPUS
Shit.

MASON
You both find yourselves in the middle of a crossroads somewhere in the forest.

what's happening?
 DAKOTA

only the devil shows up in the middle of crossroads, kid.
 OPUS

suddenly, everything goes black.
 MASON

Blackout. When the lights come up, LILA is in the forest area of the stage. She has assumed the role of THE GREAT WITCH. Her mannerisms and speech patterns change completely.

Lila?
 DAKOTA

The Great Witch of the Forest appears before you.
 MASON

Lantern Bearer.
 THE GREAT WITCH

Bitch of the Forest.
 OPUS

THE GREAT WITCH begins to look DAKOTA over.

Yes, yes. Excellent work, Old Bones. This soul is exquisite. He'll do just fine.
 THE GREAT WITCH

Opus, what is she talking about?
 DAKOTA

I noticed you changed directions earlier. You began to walk away from my house. My poor Old Bones, you've been here for so long. Surely you didn't get lost?
 THE GREAT WITCH

OPUS.
 DAKOTA

OPUS simply looks down.

But I am a firm believer of giving someone the benefit of the doubt. Maybe you did get lost. So instead of making you walk all those miles back, I simply decided to come to you. Aren't I generous?
 THE GREAT WITCH

what do you want from me?
 DAKOTA

THE GREAT WITCH

Oh, how rude of me. Of course he didn't tell you. Why would you have followed him all this way if you knew the truth?

(She laughs.)

Poor thing. Opus has led you into a trap. You see, he is bound by the lantern, and he will continue to be bound to it until I break the curse. He and I have a deal going, you know.

OPUS

Stop this.

THE GREAT WITCH

All he has to do is bring me a soul worthy enough of becoming a delicacy upon which I can dine. He brings me one incredible soul, and I free him from the lantern and my forest. My dear Old Bones, I believe this is the one.

DAKOTA turns to OPUS.

DAKOTA

You lied to me.

OPUS

Kid, you got it all wrong--

DAKOTA

You'd think I would learn by now. You'd think-- I trusted you. A complete stranger, a fucking skeleton that I met in Hell, and I trusted you.

OPUS

Kid--

DAKOTA

I should have learned my lesson from The Fox. I was a perfect fool.

THE GREAT WITCH

My dear, don't blame yourself. It's not your fault. He can be very misleading. Quite the actor, this one. My pied piper of souls.

DAKOTA

Souls? You've done this before?

THE GREAT WITCH

Oh, my precious Bones has delivered countless souls to me over the past fifty years. Just because they don't meet my standards doesn't mean that I can't enjoy them as a snack.

DAKOTA

was this the plan the whole time?

(Pause.)

Answer me!

OPUS

When I first met you... My plan was to take you to The Great Witch. And then, I started to get to know you. And... Dammit, Kid. You're different than the other ones. You're someone that I think deserves a second chance. So I decided to change course and lead you to the desert instead of feedin' you to the Witch. That's the god-honest truth.

OPUS stands in front of DAKOTA and separates THE GREAT WITCH from him.

OPUS (CONT'D)

I'm not lettin' you take him. Do whatever you want to me, I don't give a shit, but you're not gonna touch a hair on his head.

There's a tense pause.

THE GREAT WITCH

Old Bones, you're making a very grave mistake. A soul like this one comes once in a century. If you let him get away, you will be stuck here for a very long time.

OPUS

I'm not stayin' here. I'm leavin' one way or another.

THE GREAT WITCH becomes a bit frazzled.

THE GREAT WITCH

Ronald, you know what the curse entails. You know that you deserve this curse, both for what you did in life as well as death. For all of the people you killed, even still, the people you annihilated during your stay at the Capital. The demon of the lantern will annihilate you as soon as you step into the desert.

OPUS

Then let it. I don't care anymore. I chose to do the things that I did, and I could choose to stay here and suffer, or I could finally do somethin' good and save this kid. Just once, I can be the good guy.

THE GREAT WITCH

What can you even do for him? You can't save him! He is dead and in Hell! What could you possibly do that could make things better for him?

OPUS

I'm gonna to take him to the Demon Capital, to the King themself, and I'm gonna get them to send this boy home.

THE GREAT WITCH and DAKOTA are speechless.

OPUS (CONT'D)

If you'd still be willin' to go with me, that is.

DAKOTA says nothing, but he begins to walk towards the desert. OPUS follows him.

THE GREAT WITCH

THAT DEMON IS GOING TO DESTROY YOU. AND EVERY SECOND IT TAKES TO DO IT, YOU WILL BE IN AGONIZING PAIN.

OPUS ignores THE GREAT WITCH and continues to walk. DAKOTA and OPUS both take one step into the desert and wait.

Nothing happens.

OPUS

It... was a trick. You tricked me. There was no demon. I coulda left this whole damn time.

THE GREAT WITCH's demeanor changes again.

THE GREAT WITCH

I'm sorry, Old Bones. I truly am. I just... Please, forgive me.
(Pause.)
So you're leaving then?

OPUS

I am.

THE GREAT WITCH

Do you think that the king will actually help you with this? After all that happened between you two?

OPUS

I don't know, but I gotta at least try.

THE GREAT WITCH

I'm... I'm going to miss you, Lantern Bearer. You were good for this forest.

OPUS

I'll be back. This forest was good for me too.
(He turns to THE GREAT WITCH.)
Goodbye, Old Bird.

THE GREAT WITCH nods and walks away from the two. She becomes LILA and sits back down on the rug.

DAKOTA

That... wasn't what I was expecting.

OPUS

Death is full of surprises, kid.

DAKOTA

I... I need a minute.

DAKOTA turns away from OPUS.

OPUS

For what it's worth, I was tellin' the truth. I think you're worth savin', and I'm gonna do anything I can to get you outta Hell.

DAKOTA

Out of Hell, back to Animal Town where everyone wants me dead. I'd just wind up here again.

OPUS

You can still--

DAKOTA

Please don't talk for a sec. My head is still spinning.

OPUS complies. After a bit, DAKOTA turns to OPUS.

DAKOTA (CONT'D)

From now on, you tell me the truth. No more hiding anything. No more secrets. Are we clear?

OPUS

Crystal.

DAKOTA

Promise?

OPUS

Cross my heart. It ain't there no more, but... well, you know.

Pause. DAKOTA stares out at the desert again.

DAKOTA

You know where to go from here?

OPUS

First, we cross the desert. There's a beach with a ferry that will take us to the Demon Capital.

DAKOTA

Lead the way.

OPUS walks offstage. DAKOTA walks back to the bedroom.

SCENE FIVE

The three friends all sit on the rug together.

MASON

That seems like a fine place to end for the day.

(Pause.)

You guys good?

LILA

I declined a booty call because of this game.

MASON and DAKOTA have no idea how to process what she has just said.

LILA (CONT'D)

I said no to sex, string-free sex, really GOOD SEX. I mean, this girl has EVERYTHING. Her tongue is pierced, and she's tried every position in the Kama Sutra twice, but I said no because of this.

MASON

Twice is a bit excessive.

LILA

Do you mind? I'm trying to work this out in my head.

MASON

What, are you mad about it?

LILA

I'm more confused than anything. Like, honestly, is this a first for me?

MASON

Yes.

DAKOTA

Absolutely.

LILA

Right?! Is it not weird?

MASON

At this point, I've just learned to expect anything from you. No offense.

LILA

Some taken, but I see you what you mean.

MASON looks at his phone.

MASON

And on that note, I'm gonna leave. Zell managed to scrounge up enough money for a little weed, and I've been sober entirely too long. See you guys later.

MASON exits.

LILA

well, that was something else.

DAKOTA

(not completely there)

Oh, yeah. Yeah, it was.

LILA

what's going on with you?

DAKOTA

what do you mean?

LILA

You just seem a little lost. Is it something about Mason?

DAKOTA

No, I'm fine.

LILA

I mean, we didn't do anything except play the game. That shouldn't-- wait. Did Animal Town get to you?

DAKOTA

It's a game.

LILA

It did! I always thought Mason was full of shit when he talked about how it made people cry or whatever, but--

DAKOTA

Can you not tease me about this? I don't know why, but I feel kind of gross on the inside.

LILA

Gross?

DAKOTA

I feel... betrayed. And it's stupid, and I shouldn't feel like this because it's just a made-up character from a made-up game, but I can't get rid of this sad feeling. But at the same time, I feel really happy? I'm glad that things turned out the way they did.

LILA

well, Mason did say that he makes stories personal somehow. Maybe Opus is giving you something you crave in real life.

DAKOTA

He's not real.

LILA

Neither are the characters in the books we read or the shows we watch, but we still get attached to them.

DAKOTA

I dunno. I'll probably feel better after I get some sleep or something.

LILA

Well, you do that. I'm gonna see if it's not too late to meet up with Cecilia.

(DAKOTA looks confused.)

My booty call.

LILA exits the room. DAKOTA sits in the floor for a moment, then gets into bed.

SCENE SIX

THE FOX paces through the desert area as DAKOTA sleeps.

THE FOX

"Long is the way, and hard." Are you ready to walk that path, or are you too weak to reach the end?

(Pause.)

You truly are lonely, aren't you? Finding substitutes for what you believe you deserve, seeking satisfaction in things that are transient. When you wake up from this fantasy of yours, it will only cause you more grief. Do you know that? Or do you not care?

(THE FOX walks over to DAKOTA. He leads DAKOTA out of the bed and into the desert.)

Either way, this will break you. And I will take such joy in watching it chip away at you.

THE FOX kisses DAKOTA on the cheek and walks over to the bedroom. The lights fade out over the room and fade up over the desert. OPUS enters and walks over to DAKOTA.

OPUS

welcome back, kid.

DAKOTA

Oh, hey there.

OPUS

How ya feelin'?

DAKOTA

Pretty tired. I always heard about death being the final rest, but I haven't done much resting here.

OPUS

If you need some rest, we can rent a hotel for the night.

DAKOTA

There are hotels in Hell?

OPUS

Sure, kid. What did you expect?

DAKOTA

I guess I'm just surprised at how similar Hell is to home.

OPUS

Ah, Hell is just another place to live. Nowhere is completely terrible.

(He looks out over the desert.)

There it is. Let's get you some rest.

OPUS and DAKOTA walk into an abstract hotel and look around. After a bit, LILA walks in as VIOLA. DAKOTA does not recognize her.

VIOLA

Hey there! Sorry no one was here to greet you earlier. I'm Viola. Welcome to the only hotel in the desert!

DAKOTA

The only one?

VIOLA

Yup! You just missed my husband, Hank. He left to go get some supplies for us.

(She looks DAKOTA over.)

Ah, a human! Don't get much of you guys around here. Most of the people living in Hell don't have to sleep, so it's always nice to have one of you come in.

DAKOTA

If no one here sleeps, who gives you your business?

VIOLA

Oh, the occasional human that's on their way to the Capital. Most of our business comes from demons that come here to get to "know" each other. So what can I do for the two of you?

OPUS

We'd like a room for the night.

VIOLA

Alright then.

(She hands OPUS a key.)

You're in room 4. And don't worry about the bed. We wash the sheets everyday. Have a good stay!

VIOLA leaves the way she came. OPUS and DAKOTA look around at their room.

DAKOTA

Hey, check this out.

(He points to a cross stitch on the wall.)

I haven't seen a cross stitch in years. I forgot they were a thing.

OPUS

What's it say?

DAKOTA

"Hell can be Heaven with the right people."

The two sit down. OPUS produces a flask and hands it to DAKOTA.

DAKOTA (CONT'D)

why do you have a flask? You're a skeleton. Can you even drink anything?

OPUS

No, but I always kept it around in case I met someone I'd wanna have a bourbon with.

DAKOTA takes a drink from the flask. He struggles to get it down.

DAKOTA

Oh my God, liquor in Hell is like three-hundred proof.

(He takes another sip. It's clear that the liquor is very strong.)

Ugh, shit.

OPUS

So, if you don't mind my askin', what'd you do to land yourself here?

DAKOTA

Could be a lot of different things. My hands aren't the cleanest. The Fox helped me kill someone really important. That's why everyone back in town wants me dead.

OPUS

Makes sense.

DAKOTA

God, how do I make up for that? Killing someone is so permanent.

OPUS

Hey, now. Don't think like that. Nothin' to do except to do the best you can.

DAKOTA

I just wish that I had done things differently. I was a real selfish prick. Too headstrong.

OPUS

The way I see it, we've all done some bad shit, but the real mark of a man lies in how he makes up for that. That's what life is about. Atoning for all the stuff you wish you hadn't done, and you can't just wallow in regret over all of it. I spent my first fifty years in here feelin' sorry for myself, and that netted me nothin' but heartache.

DAKOTA

I didn't expect people in Hell to be so nice. Figured the whole "torture the damned" schtick was really popular down here.

OPUS

That's sorta how things used to be. The new King of Hell really hates the torture thing. They care a lot about the people that live here. Things 'round here have gotten a lot better because of them.

DAKOTA

And that's who we're going to see about sending me back?

OPUS

That's the one.

DAKOTA

You two have history together?

OPUS

Now that one's a long story.

DAKOTA

All of your stories are long.

OPUS

I used to be part of the King's Court.

DAKOTA

wait, really?

OPUS

Yup. But I did a lotta shit I had no business involvin' myself with, so I had to leave.

DAKOTA

Like what?

OPUS

Buncha stuff. I don't like thinkin' 'bout it. Take yourself one more swig and get yourself some sleep.

DAKOTA takes one more laborious sip and immediately passes out. Time passes until it is morning. MASON enters, but he does not interact. OPUS shakes DAKOTA awake. It is clear that DAKOTA is hungover.

OPUS (CONT'D)

Mornin', kid. How you feel?

DAKOTA

I think dying felt better than this.

OPUS

Yeah, probably shoul'da warn'd ya 'bout that. Liquor here kicks the piss out of ya.

VIOLA comes in. She's carrying a tupperware container filled with cookies.

VIOLA

Did you both enjoy your stay?

OPUS

Yes'm. The kid's just gatherin' himself after his first time drinkin' down here.

VIOLA

Oof, I remember my first. I have just the thing for this.
(She takes a cookie from the container.)
 Eat it.

DAKOTA

If I eat anything, I will vomit on you right now.

VIOIA

Trust me. Try it.

DAKOTA hesitates, then takes the cookie and eats it. After a few seconds, his hangover disappears.

DAKOTA

Holy shit.

VIOLA

Feeling better?

DAKOTA

How did you--

VIOLA

It's a recipe I came up with a while back. When the only thing you can drink destroys you, you try to find ways to get around it.

DAKOTA

Hell may actually be the best place ever.

VIOLA

Here.

(She hands the container of cookies to DAKOTA.)
 For the road. On top of being a great hangover cure, they taste pretty good, if I do say so myself.

OPUS

How much do I owe ya?

VIOLA

You know what? Don't worry about it. I don't know why, but I get a good vibe from you two. We'll have three groups of demons come in today that'll make up for the loss in profit. You guys travel safe, okay?

VIOLA walks over to the bedroom and becomes LILA again. She sits down.

OPUS
Well, we're pretty close to the beach now. We're gettin' close to the Capital.

DAKOTA
Yeah. I guess we are.

OPUS
Ready to keep goin'?

DAKOTA
Yeah, I guess I am.

OPUS walks offstage. DAKOTA stays where he is.

MASON
Okay, anyone else feel like taking a small break? I'm super hungry.

DAKOTA whips around.

DAKOTA
When did you two get here?

LILA
Are you serious? We've been playing together for the past two hours.

DAKOTA
But-- But it was just Opus and I--

MASON
Dakota, you've been sitting here with us the whole time.

LILA
Are you just messing with us?

DAKOTA says nothing.

MASON
You know what? Let's take fifteen. Get some food in us, make some coffee.

LILA
Oh, let me make the coffee! I found this super cool recipe for cinnamon mochas that are supposed to be delicious.

MASON
Sure, but I don't think we have cinnamon.

LILA
You two are hopeless.

LILA stands up and exits the room.

MASON
Okay, what's going on, dude?

DAKOTA
I don't know.

MASON
I can't help you if you don't tell me what's wrong.

DAKOTA
It's just... The game is getting more real for me somehow.

MASON
Oh, is that it? Don't freak about it. You just get absorbed into the game, your imagination takes over for a while. Zell had the same thing happen to her.

DAKOTA
Really? Because when I say 'more real'--

MASON
Trust me. It's probably because we've spent so much time on your story. Might just be having a bit of overload.

DAKOTA
I guess.

MASON
We can take a break from playing if--

DAKOTA
(a bit too quickly)
No, no, I want to keep playing.

MASON smiles.

MASON
Oh, man. I got you.

DAKOTA
what?

MASON
which part is it for you? Is it just the story? Or is it the cool shit that happens in Hell?

DAKOTA
what are you talking about?

MASON
You're getting absorbed, you don't want to stop playing. This eventually happens to everyone. I just want to know which part got you there.

Pause.

DAKOTA

It's Opus. He's just a really good character. That's it.

MASON

I knew you'd like Opus! He's one of my favorite characters to play with. He's like the perfect dad, except dead.

DAKOTA

Yeah. He's something.

MASON

So you excited to come back to life?

DAKOTA

I mean... I wouldn't mind staying in Hell for a while.

MASON

wait, for real?

DAKOTA

I'm having more fun there than I was in Animal Town.

MASON

well, yeah. But fun stuff will happen when you get out of Hell too, you know. I have a whole arc planned.

DAKOTA

Yeah.

MASON

And Zell said she may even come back and play with us!

DAKOTA

wait, what?

MASON

Yeah, she has an idea for a new character. Told me she wanted to start playing again soon.

DAKOTA

I thought she quit.

MASON

She just needed a break for a while. It happens every now and then with her.

(Pause.)

Is there something wrong?

LILA enters the bedroom with three mugs of coffee.

LILA

Coffee's on! So I didn't have the ingredients to make the exact recipe because your pantry is atrocious, but I made do.

MASON

Fuck off.

OPUS appears in the desert. Only DAKOTA can see him.

OPUS

Welcome back, kid.

DAKOTA

Opus...

MASON AND OPUS

Ready to keep goin'?

DAKOTA is compelled. He nods and walks over towards the desert area.

SCENE SEVEN

The sound of the ocean can be heard.

MASON

You two have walked the desert until you finally reach the beach. Garbage litters the shore, and every wave washes more up.

OPUS

Here we are, kid. The edge of the desert, the famous beaches of Hell. Just a ferry ride away from seeing the King.

DAKOTA

we're... really that close, huh?

OPUS

Yup. Just a little further, kid. Then you'll be back up top.

DAKOTA sits down.

DAKOTA

Hey, Opus? what happens when we get to the Demon Capital?

OPUS

we find the King and get you home. They have the power to resurrect you.

DAKOTA

It's that simple?

OPUS

Just about. Things are gonna be fine. Don't worry 'bout it.

DAKOTA

what if... what if we just don't go?

Pause.

OPUS

what's the matter? You gettin' cold feet?

DAKOTA

I don't know.

OPUS

what's goin' on, kid? what're you feelin'?

DAKOTA

I don't think there's a word for what I'm feeling.

OPUS

well, make one up.

Uh... gorbefeld? DAKOTA

Gorbefeld. What's it mean? OPUS

It means... Sad. And angry and confused. And homesick, but for a place I've never been to. And full of this, this desire, almost like an ache to stop and just be still for a minute. DAKOTA

Gorbefeld is a good word. OPUS

So can we? I mean, can we just be still? DAKOTA

OPUS sits next to DAKOTA.

We can be still. OPUS

They are still for a long, quiet moment.

Thank you. Things just got a little too fast for me. DAKOTA

Life's that way sometimes. Death, even moreso. So what's on your mind? OPUS

I don't want to go back. I'm not ready yet. DAKOTA

Okay, what will make you ready? OPUS

I don't know. More time? Or some lesson that I'm supposed to learn? I don't know. I just know I can't leave yet. DAKOTA

Do you need more stillness? OPUS

I need something that'll make me stop feeling so gorbefeld. DAKOTA

Well, we can't be still forever. The ferry comes around in an hour. OPUS

It comes that soon? DAKOTA

(Pause.)

(MORE)

DAKOTA (CONT'D)

You know, when I was really little, my dad would take me to the beach every weekend. We lived about an hour away from the coast, but he would take me. Every Saturday at ten in the morning. He'd pack me a candy bar and a cooler full of juice or some fuckin' kind of kid's drink, and we'd spend all day just playing around in the water and sand.

(Pause.)

Haven't seen the ocean in years. I missed it.

OPUS

I did too. It's been a long time.

DAKOTA

I just wish there wasn't so much garbage on the shore. why's there so much trash here?

OPUS

It comes from the Demon Capital. Dunno how they make so much. Guess King hasn't visited the beaches over here in a while. They'd be furious if they knew there was so much pollutin' goin' on.

DAKOTA

Something in Hell was bound to suck. But besides the garbage, it feels just like those trips.

OPUS

How's bein' still?

DAKOTA

Helps.

OPUS

So, you don't wanna leave?

DAKOTA

I don't have a lot to go back to.

OPUS

I understand that. I do, but you have a chance to go back and have a another shot at life. Some people would do a lot for that.

DAKOTA

what if a second chance isn't what I want?

OPUS

Alright, lemme ask you this. what *do* you want? If you could have anything or any place, what would it be?

DAKOTA hesitates. He's never thought of this before.

DAKOTA

I guess to be happy?

OPUS

Naw, kid. Everyone wants that. Tell me what you really want. Specifics.

DAKOTA

I... Uh. I want sunshine all the time. Doctor told me it's good for mental health and... I like being warm. This is silly, and I feel dumb.

OPUS

Keep goin'.

DAKOTA closes his eyes. The words flow out of him, a trickle at first, then a waterfall.

DAKOTA

I want to be around people all the time and feel their energy around me. I feel better when I'm around groups, even if I'm not part of them. I want to drink beer, really good beer, and do silly stuff, and it's okay because that's what everyone else is doing too. I want to experience things the way I eat wafer cookies. Like, you bite, and the flavor is faint, then it hits your tongue all at once. Taking one step into a puddle and the next into the ocean. And I want it to feel like Friday all the time because Fridays feel different, you know? They feel like freedom and adventure. And I want my dad to be there so he can make up for all the stuff I missed out on after he left because I deserve that, don't I? I deserve more memories than the beach. And all of this stuff may be selfish, but that's what I want.

OPUS

Can't get none of that in Hell. Always feels like Sunday night here, and the beer is awful.

DAKOTA

But I can change. And what I want can change too. I can adapt, and I could really get used to this place. And honestly, what do I have back at Animal Town? Everyone hates me there. They'd probably just kill me again. Or The Fox would find me. Here, I've actually found someone to care about, and I don't want to lose that. I was alone for a long time, and I don't want that again. And all the time I've spent here with you, I've really never felt more at home.

OPUS

But here's the thing, kid: You ain't dead. You've got a fightin' spirit like nothing I've ever seen, and you can make a hell of lot more difference up there than you ever could down here with me. And as much as it's going to hurt me to watch you go, I know the world needs you more. You saved me, kid. I'm a weary old skeleton, and you showed me that there's more to life than just what the lantern light touches. That's some genuine goodness inside you, and I want you to share that goodness with everyone else.

(He stands up and begins to exit.)

Give 'em hell when you get back up there.

There's a brief pause, then DAKOTA turns to OPUS.

DAKOTA
I'm gonna find a way to come back! It may not be for a long time, but I'm gonna come back, and when I do, I better see you. Okay?

OPUS
I'm not going anywhere, kid.

OPUS exits.

DAKOTA
"Hell can be Heaven with the right people."

ZELL enters the beach.

ZELL
That was touching.

DAKOTA whips around in surprise.

DAKOTA
Zell?

ZELL
No, really. That was something I didn't expect from someone so hateful.

DAKOTA
What the hell are you doing here? Are you playing again?

ZELL
Mason told me all about you, how you were this really nice guy, fun to hang out with. How could he have been so wrong? So blind?

DAKOTA
Stop dodging my questions! Why are you even here?

ZELL
I never could get you. Why did you hate me so much?

DAKOTA is taken aback by this question.

DAKOTA
I don't know. I think we were just so different--

ZELL
No, no, no. I know why you hated my character. Why did you hate me, the person that is Zell?

DAKOTA
That's not--

ZELL

Dakota, it's fine. I know how you feel about me. I also know that you killed me because of that. What I don't know is why.

DAKOTA

Mason, I don't want to play anymore. I want to stop.

Silence. MASON is nowhere to be found.

DAKOTA (CONT'D)

MASON!

ZELL

He's not here. It's just us.

DAKOTA

This is just a fucking game!

ZELL

Tell me.

Pause.

DAKOTA

You got in the way. I... I established my place here, had the friends I wanted. Not many, but enough. It was boring and normal, but it was nice.

ZELL

And then what? What about my presence disrupted your world so much that you hated me?

DAKOTA

You started to... You took him away from me.

ZELL

There it is.

Pause.

DAKOTA

Please don't tell him.

ZELL

I won't.

DAKOTA

For what it's worth, I'm sorry.

ZELL

I know you are. Thank you for telling me the truth.

ZELL fades away.

DAKOTA

Mason?

There is no response. OPUS walks back onstage.

OPUS

The ferry is here. Ready to keep goin'?

(Pause. DAKOTA doesn't move.)

You can't keep still forever.

DAKOTA

Can I have one more day?

OPUS looks down and walks offstage.

INTERLUDE

DAKOTA

If I could find the words to say, I would say them, but they turn to dust in my mouth. I don't know what happens now. I just look at you, and I see home. You feel like home. I imagine all the time how soft your hands must be, how your heartbeat sounds in the middle of the night. All the things I'm saying right now aren't important, but what I feel. What I feel is gorbefeld. But when I'm with you, I feel whole. I feel like I'm right where I need to be, and it hurts. It fucking hurts me. I don't know why I have these stupid, powerful emotions inside of me, but they fill me up, and I overflow, and if I could just find the words to say, I would say them. But I can't.

DAKOTA stays still for a bit, then walks back to the bedroom.

SCENE EIGHT

MASON

Well, that seems like a good place to stop. We'll finish up the Hell stuff tomorrow. Sound good?

LILA

God, yes. I missed actually playing Animal Town.

MASON

Oh, shut up. You've loved this shit. Admit it.

LILA

Well yeah, but I want my awesome story to happen too, and it can't happen if I'm not even in the picture!

(She stands up and stretches.)

I'll catch you two later. I have a bowl at home that's calling my name. I'd invite you guys, but...

LILA exits. MASON stands up.

MASON

The home stretch is here, man! You're about to meet the king of Hell! Are you stoked?

DAKOTA

I suppose so.

MASON

Aw, come on. Quit being such a downer, dude. It's a game! We're having fun, right?

DAKOTA

I'm just a little attached to Hell, and I'm still not super excited about going back to actual Animal Town soon.

MASON

Don't take this the wrong way, but that might be because you made everyone in Animal Town hate you.

DAKOTA

Yeah, I get it. I played a pretty angry character, and I killed your girlfriend, and everyone in town probably still wants me dead.

MASON

I've been meaning to ask you. Why'd you do that? I mean, more power to you. Play how you want. It's just so weird to see you play someone so angry when you're a nice guy in reality.

DAKOTA

It was just a character I wanted to play, I guess.

MASON

I've played this game for a long time. There's always a reason behind someone's play style.

DAKOTA

I don't know, I don't know. I just played that way, and it was fun for me, so I kept playing that way until it wasn't fun anymore. Not every choice that someone makes in your game is based in some personal trauma or something. Not all of us are like Zell, playing damaged characters because they're damaged, pushing their tragic circumstances onto everyone else. Some of us just want to have a good time.

Pause.

MASON

Um. I'm gonna go for a little while. I'll see you later.

MASON exits. DAKOTA waits for a moment.

DAKOTA

I'm sorry.

DAKOTA gets no response. He sits down at his desk and stares at it.

THE FOX enters the desert.

THE FOX

Now, now. You should play nice with your friends, Dakota.

DAKOTA looks up to see THE FOX.

THE FOX (CONT'D)

Ah, and there it is. There is the recognition that I've been waiting for.

DAKOTA

I'm not playing right now. You shouldn't be here.

THE FOX

Oh, it's so entertaining to hear you struggle. Knowing that you have no answers makes watching you try to find them so satisfying.

DAKOTA

This doesn't make sense. You're a character in a game. Are you in my head?

THE FOX

I've always been in your head. From the moment you decided to play the game, I've been with you.

DAKOTA

why do you want to fuck with me so badly?

THE FOX

I never get the chance to explain this part! You see, you are what I like to call a "new soul", or in your terms, a "new player". These are people that get caught up in your little game that have never played before. They intrigue me so, and they smell divine.

DAKOTA

So why haven't you tried anything with Lila? She's new too.

THE FOX

Oh, I couldn't care less about her. She has a path that she holds herself to, and honestly, the effort it would take to try and ruin her is not worth the reward. But you... I see you and your confusion and your passivity. You made it too easy to kill Zell.

DAKOTA

It's just a game.

THE FOX

You truly are oblivious. But it's just as well. The less you know, the easier it becomes to control you. I hope you're having fun, Dakota.

THE FOX exits. DAKOTA stares towards the desert area. He looks around his room, then stands up and walks to the boundary between the room and the desert. He turns away.

DAKOTA

This is fucking stupid. It's just a game.

He keeps his back to the desert for a moment, then turns back to it. He slowly reaches out his hand. It passes the boundary. He steps through and finds himself in the desert. OPUS walks into the desert.

OPUS

welcome back, kid.

MASON enters the bedroom.

MASON

Okay, you really didn't have to be so shitty about-- Dakota?
(He looks around the room.)
Dakota, are you in here?

OPUS

Ready to keep goin'?

MASON

Dakota?

END OF ACT ONE

ACT II
SCENE ONE

Under blackout, voices can be heard.

THE FOX

You hate her, don't you?

LILA

(quietly, from a distance)

Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid.

ZELL

Dakota, why? why are you doing this?

THE FOX

You need her gone. Out of the picture. She has taken what's yours.

LILA

where have you gone? why are you so angry?

THE FOX

You are beginning to BORE ME.

ZELL

what did I do?

DAKOTA

If I could find the words to say--

THE FOX

DO IT NOW.

ZELL

Dakota, please!

A loud pop is heard, followed by a thud.

THE FOX

Hmph. How boring.

DAKOTA

This isn't right.

LILA

what are you running from? why won't you just let go?

THE FOX

well done, my friend. My beautiful puppet.

DAKOTA

If I could find the words to say--

THE FOX, ZELL, AND LILA

THEN FIND THEM!

DAKOTA

If I could find the words to say, I wouldn't need to say anything at all!

Another loud pop is heard as the lights snap on. OPUS is sitting at DAKOTA's desk whittling a stick. DAKOTA is laying on the floor of his bedroom. He bolts upright.

DAKOTA (CONT'D)

FUCK!

(After his outburst, he looks around himself.)
Did I fall asleep on the floor?

OPUS

You seemed tuckered out, so I let you lay there. Didn't wanna disturb ya.

DAKOTA

I mean, you could've put me in bed or some--
(He stops abruptly and looks directly at OPUS. OPUS waves at DAKOTA.)
what in the HELL?

OPUS

That's one way to greet the mornin'.

DAKOTA

You... You're...

OPUS

Ronald Opus. The Lantern Bearer. The one and only. C'mon, kid, you know who I am.

DAKOTA

Is this some kind of joke? Because if it is, it's not funny.

OPUS

No joke. It's me.

DAKOTA

This is just some sort of weird dream. I'm gonna close my eyes and open them, and you're gonna be gone.

DAKOTA lays back down on the floor and closes his eyes. He then opens them and looks at OPUS.

OPUS

still here.

DAKOTA

Oh God, I'm going crazy. I'm hallucinating.

OPUS

You're not goin' crazy, kid. It's me, in the flesh.
(He motions to his body.)

well, you know.

DAKOTA

No no no no no no, you're a fictional character in a game. You can't be here.

OPUS

And yet, here I am. This bit's gettin' stale.

DAKOTA

But you're just a part of Animal Town. You're not real. How are you here in my bedroom right now?

OPUS

well, I'll give you the short answer. You remember last night when you came into Hell from your room?

DAKOTA

I just thought I dreamed that up.

OPUS

Nope. You stood right in front of me. I dunno how exactly, but you thinned the barriers between this world and mine. You wanted one more day before gettin' on the ferry, so here I am. Ta-da.

DAKOTA

But that would mean that the world of Animal Town is--

MASON enters the bedroom.

MASON

Hey, I hope you're not jerking it or something, but I--
(He notices DAKOTA in the floor.)
 Dude, did you fall asleep on the floor?

DAKOTA

I guess so?

MASON

whatever. where'd you go last night? I came in to talk to you, and you weren't here.

DAKOTA

wait, do you seriously not see--

OPUS holds a finger to his mouth.

See, what?
MASON

Um.
DAKOTA

MASON
Stop trying to change the subject. I wanted to talk to you about last night. You said some pretty shitty stuff about Zell, and I don't want to just keep quiet about it or it'll fester inside of me.

DAKOTA
I'm sorry. I didn't mean--

MASON
Like, I get that you two don't get along, but you don't have to be such a dick about it.

DAKOTA
I know. I shouldn't have said what I did. I'm really sorry, okay?

MASON
Why don't you like her? She tried really hard to get along with you because she knows we're friends. I was kind of excited for you two to meet, and it just--

LILA peeks in from the open door.

LILA
Hello, you two! I couldn't sleep last night, so I made some cookies for us to eat while we play--
(She notices DAKOTA on the floor.)
Dakota, did you fall asleep on the floor?

DAKOTA
So nobody notices anything strange around here?

LILA
Besides you being on the floor?

DAKOTA
Oh my God, just forget it.

There's an awkward silence.

LILA
I feel like I interrupted something somehow? So, I'll just go out and come back in a bit.

LILA exits the bedroom.

MASON
You're acting really weird, man. Is something wrong?

DAKOTA

No, I'm fine.

MASON

'Cause I've never seen you blow up like you did last night. And, you know, if there's something wrong, you can tell me. We're friends. I wanna make sure you're okay.

DAKOTA

I promise, I'm fine. I just had a bit of a rough day yesterday, and I took it out on you and Zell, and I shouldn't have.

MASON

I'm having a hard time believing you, but okay. Just... If anything is wrong, don't feel like you can't talk to me about it. Okay?

DAKOTA

Thanks. I really-- Yeah. Thanks.

MASON hesitates, then exits the room.

OPUS

He's a good guy. You should be better to him.

DAKOTA

What makes you think I'm not good to him in the first place?

OPUS

Friends don't talk shit about their friends' girlfriends.

DAKOTA

I'm more than just some friend. I am-- I am talking to an imaginary skeleton about--

LILA enters the bedroom again.

LILA

Is bro talk over? I'd hate it if I was interrupting bro talk.

DAKOTA

Please never call it that again. I'm too secure in my gayness to be a bro.

LILA

You rushed a fraternity in college.

DAKOTA

We were just talking. Nothing 'bro' about it.

LILA

Well, I just wanted to bring over some snacks for when we play-- Did you do a cleanse in here?

DAKOTA

No. Why would I?

LILA

I just feel something different. Like, something sweet. A really warm presence in here. It feels like clean laundry in here.

LILA hovers around the chair that OPUS sits in. OPUS continues to whittle.

DAKOTA

A warm presence?

LILA

My parents always told me I was sensitive to energy or spirits or whatever. There's something good in here.

(She twirls and laughs.)

I have a gift for you.

LILA pulls a small bag of joints from her purse and tosses it to DAKOTA.

DAKOTA

Holy shit, Lila.

LILA

My parents sent me a little extra money since I'm in between opportunities at the moment.

DAKOTA

So you spent it on weed?

LILA

I may have mentioned your anxiety to them, so they threw in more cash so that I could get you some medicine. They know exactly what I was getting.

DAKOTA

Wow.

(He laughs.)

wow. Thank you so much. And tell your parents I said thanks too.

LILA kisses DAKOTA on the cheek.

LILA

I know things have been weird and rough for you lately, and I know I kid around a lot, but I do love you with all my heart, Dakota.

DAKOTA

I love you too, Lila.

LILA

I'll be back later today to play with you guys. Be sure to take your medication.

LILA exits. OPUS laughs.

OPUS
'A warm presence'. That's the first time I've gotten that.

DAKOTA walks over to OPUS.

DAKOTA
Can I... Can I touch you? I just... I need to know that you're actually here.

OPUS nods. DAKOTA reaches out and touches OPUS' bony hand, then collapses to his knees and hugs OPUS.

DAKOTA (CONT'D)
Oh my God. You're real. You're real, and you're here. It's really you.

OPUS
'Course I'm real.

DAKOTA
You *are* warm. Warmer than I expected a bag of bones to be.

OPUS
Okay, watch yourself now.

DAKOTA gets up from the ground.

DAKOTA
So, why are you here? I mean, not that I'm complaining, but there must be some reason, right?

OPUS
You asked for one more day. This is me givin' it to you.

DAKOTA
So instead of hanging out in Hell...

OPUS
I decided to meet you here instead. Didn't even know if I could do it, but when I saw you come to Hell, figured it'd work the other way around too.

DAKOTA
And the other two can't see you?

OPUS
They're not the ones that need me. You are.

DAKOTA
works for me.
(He grabs OPUS' hand.)
(MORE)

DAKOTA (CONT'D)

Come on! The sun is shining! Let's go out for a bit, get some food or something. It'll be fun!

DAKOTA almost drags OPUS out of the chair. OPUS laughs.

OPUS

Easy, kid. These bones ain't what they used to be.

The two exit the bedroom. There is a moment of static.

THE FOX enters the desert area. He checks his wrist for a watch that isn't there, then passes the barrier into DAKOTA's room. He starts to rummage through DAKOTA's belongings again.

THE FOX

I can feel my flesh knitting back together. Tendons tightening, muscles forming all over again. Painful, yes, but also invigorating. I wonder what happens for our little adventure next.

LILA enters the room again.

LILA

Hey, Dakota. I forgot to mention that my--

She stops. THE FOX looks directly at her. She cannot see him. She shifts uncomfortably and looks around the room, as if she is trying to find out what is 'wrong'. THE FOX circles her a bit. LILA becomes smaller somehow. She feels unsafe.

THE FOX

Can you feel me? Do you feel the weight?

LILA does not hear him.

LILA

Cold.

THE FOX

So confident, and yet, you are so small. Speak your fear.

LILA

This presence... It's so cold.

THE FOX

Bend. Break. Tell me, do you want to run?

LILA

(as a simple, powerful fact)
I'm not afraid of you.

*LILA looks around the room a bit more, then exits.
THE FOX is taken aback.*

THE FOX

You will be a problem. So you will be the first to go.

*THE FOX kicks over the wastebasket, and the
contents spill out onto the floor. He then exits
the way he came.*

SCENE TWO

Time has passed, and it is now evening. OPUS and DAKOTA enter the bedroom. They laugh and carry on.

DAKOTA

I swear to God! He just stood up in front of the whole class and told us all to 'fuck off.' Quit his job that day!

OPUS

I wouldn't buy that story for a wheat penny!

DAKOTA

Believe what you want. All I know is that I got an A in Sociology because the president didn't want our parents to--

(He notices the trash in the floor.)

what the hell? who trashed my room?

OPUS

You mean you don't keep it like this all the time?

DAKOTA

No, I'm serious. It wasn't dirty when we left. who would do this?

OPUS

Ah, I'm sure one of us just knocked over the trash can when we left. No big deal.

DAKOTA

Yeah. Sure.

(He begins to pick up the trash.)

Or maybe Zell came over and decided to mess with me.

OPUS

That the girl you killed in Animal Town?

DAKOTA

well, yeah. But I thought we made up. You remember? She was on the beach and we had that talk?

OPUS

wasn't there for that, I suppose.

DAKOTA

well, we had this moment, and I apologized for killing her, and I thought we sorta made up, but whatever. If she wants to keep acting like this, it's her prerogative.

OPUS

You did kill her, kid.

DAKOTA

I think she's more upset about the why than the what.

OPUS

If you don't mind my askin', why did ya kill her?

DAKOTA

well, part of it is because The Fox wanted me to, and I wanted him on my side.

OPUS

And the other part?

Pause.

DAKOTA

Doesn't matter.

DAKOTA finishes cleaning his room. He goes to his desk and pulls out the bag of joints. He fishes one out and lights it up.

DAKOTA (CONT'D)

The perfect end to the perfect day.

(He takes a hit.)

God, I wish you had lungs. It'd be rad as hell to get high with you.

OPUS

(He laughs.)

Can't smoke. Can't drink. I'm a bit useless when it comes to parties.

DAKOTA

Ah, you're probably a riot.

(Pause.)

Can I ask you something?

OPUS

Shoot.

DAKOTA

what did you do to land in Hell?

OPUS

I was a bad guy when I was alive. Got involved in a lot of crime and stuff. Killed a few people. I think the biggest thing that made me end up in Hell was how I treated my son.

DAKOTA

Mistreating your son is worse than murder?

OPUS

The people I killed deserved it, but the shit I pulled with my son, I coulda easily ruined an innocent kid's life.

DAKOTA

what happened with that? I mean, your son.

It's a lo--
OPUS

All your stories are long!
DAKOTA

Too true. All right, settle in.
OPUS

DAKOTA sits on his bed, regularly smoking throughout the scene.

OPUS (CONT'D)
So, I met this girl in a speakeasy one day. Keep in mind, this was almost a hundred years ago, during prohibition 'n stuff, so--

So speakeasies, yeah. I got it.
DAKOTA

OPUS
Right. So we get to talkin', one thing leads to another, and next thing you know, out pops a little one. She was always real progressive, a true to life flapper, so she wasn't the kinda girl to just settle down, but she did want the little guy to have his dad in his life. We didn't stay in contact or anything, but she wanted me around as much as I could for his sake. He was... good. A real sweet kid, and I could see that. In my heart, I knew he would never be like me, and I kinda wanted an heir, y'know? Someone who could sorta be my heir when I died, and I tried so many goddamn times to get him to see the world my way. But Eddie, he just proved to be completely uninterested in what I had to offer, and I just... stopped comin' around. It didn't hurt me so much as disappoint me at the time, but... Hell changes a man. Now, I'd give the whole fuckin' world just to go back and be able to make things right.

No wonder you lay in so thick with the 'second chance' thing.
DAKOTA

Told ya, kid. Lotta people would take that chance in a heartbeat.
OPUS
(Pause.)
You remind me a lot of him, you know? You even look like him a little. Spittin' image of his father.

Oh yeah, I can totally see the family resemblance. I got your cheekbones.
DAKOTA

MASON enters the bedroom.

Dude, what are you doing?
MASON

Smoking weed and talking to Opus.

DAKOTA

How high are you?

MASON

Real fuckin' high.

DAKOTA

Okay, point number one: I'm very jealous. Point number two: you wanna play Animal Town? Lila texted and told me she's on her way over.

MASON

Yeah, we gotta get back there soon.

OPUS

DAKOTA takes a moment to think.

You know, I think I'm a little too high to play right now. I don't think it'd be great.

DAKOTA

wait, seriously? we're so close to wrapping up your arc in Hell!

MASON

It can wait one more day, can't it?

DAKOTA

I mean... I guess that's fine. I'll just play a little with Lila and Zell tonight, do some stuff to set up the next arc.

MASON

Zell is coming over?

DAKOTA

well, yeah. She wants to start playing again. I told you that.

MASON

Gotcha.

DAKOTA

You two are good, right? Like, I don't want that awkward 'best friend vs. girlfriend' thing to happen to me.

MASON

No, no, we're good. Don't worry about it, man.
(He extends his joint to MASON.)
wanna hit before you go?

DAKOTA

You are a temptress.

MASON

DAKOTA

If you're not making bad decisions, I'm not doing my job.

MASON grabs the joint and takes a hit.

MASON

wow. It has been way too long.

DAKOTA

Thought you and Zell got high the other night.

MASON

Nah, her guy fell through, so we just dicked around and played *Sonic '06* all night.

DAKOTA

You two have the strangest dates.

(He gets the bag of joints and hands one of them to MASON.)

Here. For the road.

MASON

I could kiss you. You're the best.

(He takes the joint.)

well, I'll see you tomorrow. Get hype!

MASON exits.

OPUS

Okay, kid. You can't just keep delayin' this thing.

DAKOTA

Hey, we're having fun, aren't we? C'mon, hanging out with me has got to be better than being alone in Hell, right? what are we hurting?

OPUS

well, nothin', I guess. I do have to get back to the other side sometime tonight though. Bein' out this long is really makin' my bones creak.

DAKOTA

Seriously? You have to leave?

OPUS

I can always come back. Just need to recharge a little.

DAKOTA

will you at least wait until I fall asleep?

OPUS

I can do that.

DAKOTA lays down in his bed. OPUS stays in his chair. Very soon after he relaxes, DAKOTA is asleep.

OPUS (CONT'D)

Tired little guy.

THE FOX enters the desert again and walks towards the bedroom. At the same time, OPUS gets up from the chair and walks towards the desert. They meet each other at the boundary.

THE FOX

Well, as I live and breathe, if it isn't the Lantern Bearer!

OPUS

And you are?

THE FOX

Oh, my name's not important. I'm just passing through.

OPUS

Just passin' through this kid's bedroom?

THE FOX

I'm sure it's no business of yours what I'm doing here.

OPUS

Uh-huh. You must be that fox that he's been talkin' 'bout. Heard a lot about you.

THE FOX

Ah, my reputation precedes me! I do often leave impressions on my friends.

OPUS

From what I've heard, you're not a great friend.

THE FOX

I'm just unconventional.

OPUS

What are you doin' here?

THE FOX

Lantern Bearer, it's none of your concern at all. I just need to speak with dear Dakota over there.

OPUS

And why should I let you?

THE FOX

Because if you don't, I will make his life an unbearable hell, and it will be all your fault.

The two stand off against each other.

OPUS

He's told me the things you've done to him. If you touch one hair on his head, I'll end you.

THE FOX

I have more power than you will ever be able to comprehend. So if you would please shut the fuck up and stand aside. Your empty threats don't intimidate me in the slightest.

OPUS crosses into Hell while THE FOX walks into the bedroom. As OPUS walks away, THE FOX turns to him.

THE FOX (CONT'D)

I must warn you. He will tire of you and leave you. Just as you forsook your own son, so too will Dakota forsake you, and it will hurt you more than you have ever been hurt before. I joyfully await that day.

OPUS hesitates, then exits. THE FOX takes OPUS' chair and sits it next to DAKOTA, then sits in it. He plays with DAKOTA's hair as he talks.

THE FOX (CONT'D)

Wow, you are truly a marvel when you sleep. Breathtaking, really. I always had a fondness for the way you breathe while you dream. But dreams are fleeting, and we have things to discuss.

THE FOX slaps DAKOTA in the face. DAKOTA wakes up.

DAKOTA

Ow! what the hell?!

(He notices THE FOX.)

what the hell?

THE FOX

Surprise! It's me! Aren't you delighted?

DAKOTA

why are you here? *HOW* are you here?

THE FOX

well, Opus was able to come through to this world. why can't I?

DAKOTA

I actually want him here. I want you dead.

THE FOX

Such sharp words from such a lovely face. It drives me wild.

DAKOTA

You're such a creep.

THE FOX

Thank you. Now, I would like to discuss some things with you, namely the plans for breaking the barriers down.

DAKOTA

I'm not doing anything, especially anything you want.

THE FOX

(He shrieks with glee.)

Yes! You are so smart. That's exactly what you have to do. Nothing. And let's face it, doing nothing is the only thing you're truly good at.

DAKOTA

Shut up. I'm trying to sleep. Go away.

THE FOX

I WILL NOT BE SHUT OUT, DAKOTA!

(A tense pause. THE FOX laughs quietly.)

You... You're the only person to bring out the rage inside of me so easily. Wear that badge with pride.

DAKOTA

Fine. You wanna talk? Let's talk.

THE FOX

Look at you. I knew that you had a diplomatic side. I'll do away with the bullshit and speak directly. We both have things that we want, but they can only be acquired if we help each other out.

DAKOTA

What do you want?

THE FOX

It's really quite simple. You see, I unfortunately suffer from the same malady as your skeleton friend. I can manifest myself over in this world, but only for a certain amount of time. I always, ALWAYS have to return to the other world and recover myself, but you've made it so much easier to stay here longer. You keep the barrier thin between this world and my own, and you don't even have to do anything! Soon, the barrier won't even exist, and I will be able to stay here!

DAKOTA

So your goal is to just be able to stay on this side?

THE FOX

Precisely.

DAKOTA

Yeah. You can get fucked.

THE FOX

Oh, but I have a few things that I can help YOU with! Don't think that I'm approaching this negotiation without something to offer!

DAKOTA

What could you possibly be able to do for me?

THE FOX

Well, you benefit from the breaking of the barrier in two ways. Number one, your friend Opus can stay here for as long as you want.

DAKOTA

Um.

THE FOX

Don't interrupt. Secondly, and I'm just throwing this out there, I can help you win back Mason.

Pause.

DAKOTA

How?

THE FOX

Aha! I knew I had something wonderful to offer to you. I have a powerful influence on him. A few pulls of some strings, and I can have him eating out of the palm of your hand.

Another pause.

DAKOTA

And I don't have to do anything to achieve this? Like, I don't have to kill anyone or anything like that?

THE FOX

You don't even know your own power. My precious friend, you've kept the barrier between two different worlds open simply by your will and heart alone! You truly don't do anything, and my goals are still met. What I DO need you to do is to make Mason aware of your feelings. The seeds must be sown before one can reap a harvest, after all.

DAKOTA

How do I even do that?

THE FOX

You grow a fucking backbone and tell him. Write him a letter, make him a video, I don't give a shit, but let him know somehow. I'll take care of the rest. Understand?

DAKOTA

And why should I trust you at all?

THE FOX

why, indeed?

(THE FOX stands up and puts the chair back in its place.)

I'll let you have some time to think about it. I'm not a monster, but I'm also not very patient. You have until the end of tomorrow to choose. Farewell, Dakota.

THE FOX walks back into Hell and exits. After a moment, DAKOTA gets up and walks to the desk. He sits down and begins to write.

SCENE THREE

Morning breaks. DAKOTA has been writing all night, and his wastebasket is full of discarded sheets of paper. He has fallen asleep on his desk. ZELL enters the room.

ZELL

Mason, I'm here! What--

(DAKOTA bolts up, startled by ZELL's entrance.)

Dakota?

DAKOTA

Zell? What are you doing in my room?

ZELL

Meant to go to Mason's room again. Did I interrupt another weird dream?

DAKOTA

You have a habit of doing that. You're literally here all the time. How can you not tell Mason's room apart from mine?

ZELL

I dunno. I just can't. What are you writing?

DAKOTA

What am I--

(He looks down and immediately starts turning papers over so ZELL can't see them.)

Uh, nothing. Nothing. I was just... trying to get to sleep.

ZELL

By writing.

DAKOTA

Some people count sheep. I write nonsense.

ZELL

Right.

(An awkward silence.)

So are you gonna play with us today?

DAKOTA

Play?

ZELL

Animal Town? The only thing we play together.

DAKOTA

Oh! Animal Town! Right. Well, I would play today, but I'm exhausted. I was writing all night, you know.

ZELL
writing all night... to try and fall asleep?

Pause.

DAKOTA
Right. Yeah.

ZELL
Okay, look. I understand wanting to take a break, but you should at least tell Mason about it. He's gonna think that you're avoiding him or something.

DAKOTA
I don't need a break. I'm not so fragile that a game makes me have an emotional crisis.

(Pause.)

Oh God, that sounded so bad. I'm sorry.

ZELL
Huh. Well, I'll just tell him that you can't make it today, then. Sorry for waking you.

The two share another awkward moment. ZELL begins to leave.

DAKOTA
Zell, wait. Can I ask you something?

ZELL
Yeah, I guess.

DAKOTA
Why did you stop playing the game in the first place?

ZELL
Why do you ask?

DAKOTA
I just... I dunno how to put this. I guess the game is getting more real to me than it should. I found myself getting so absorbed that I forgot--

ZELL
You forgot that there were other people playing.

DAKOTA
Uh. Yeah. And I started to feel kind of heavy after a session.

ZELL
Like something had rubbed off on you, and you couldn't shake it.

DAKOTA

(Cutting the bullshit.)

Zell, what is this game? What is it doing to us?

ZELL

Those questions are a bit loaded.

DAKOTA

Please, tell me.

ZELL hesitates, then takes a seat on DAKOTA's bed.

ZELL

Animal Town is a lot of different things for a lot of different people. Usually, it's whatever they need whenever they need it. That's kind of how Mason structures the game. He finds something the players need, and he tries to manifest that through whatever story he's trying to tell. Sometimes, he just does it too well. The story becomes personal, so it starts to get a little hyper-realistic.

DAKOTA

I don't understand what that means.

ZELL

It gets difficult to distinguish the story from reality. I started--
(She hesitates.)

The story just started to affect me too much in real life.

DAKOTA

What happened?

ZELL

The thing that-- The thing Mason tries to do with the game is to make people realize the faults that they have that are really detrimental to their health or happiness or whatever. In-game, he tries to go about helping them fix that stuff, or at least he tries to put them on a path that leads to them getting better. Usually, it works out fine.

(Pause.)

And then sometimes, it doesn't get better. He points out that shitty thing about yourself, and yeah, he tries to get you to realize how you can get past it, but something doesn't click, and it doesn't work. You just realize this awful thing about yourself, this thing that you were completely ignorant of, and it just becomes so glaring. You notice it in every interaction you have with anyone, in every mundane thing you do, but you have no idea how to make things okay. That's what happened to me.

DAKOTA

He did that to you? What was so awful that you couldn't keep playing?

ZELL

When you met me and started playing, I was going through this character shift. Super Lawful Good. Like, I always played a good character, but this time was different. Looking back, I think I was trying to be a role model for you and Lila since you two were new players. But you... You were playing as a character-- Like, I've played with Chaotic Neutrals before, but there was a darkness about you. I became obsessed with finding out why you were so angry so I could help you get past it. It was during our fight when I realized that I was just trying to force you to play the way that I was. I felt superior to you just because you were new and making choices that I didn't agree with. When I finally realized that--

DAKOTA

You let me win.

ZELL

I could have beaten you down, but I would have taken away the spirit of Animal Town. The whole point is to create the story that you want to create so that you can learn more about who you are. To deny you that would be a betrayal to the game that taught me so much.

DAKOTA

That doesn't explain why you quit playing.

Pause.

ZELL

The hyper-reality got to me. I started feeling like I could hear the voices of characters even when I wasn't playing. Before you came along, The Fox liked to come for me. Whether that was Mason being a dick or something that actually happened organically, I'm not sure. But I would notice The Fox starting to follow me around in real life. I would always see him out of the corner of my eye, and I started to hear his voice. I always told myself it was just me getting anxious over nothing, but deep down, I just felt like something more sinister going on.

(Pause.)

And this may sound completely ludicrous, but after that fight, I felt lighter. More clear. Animal Town may be just a game, but there's a genuine darkness that surrounds it. The breath of fresh air I got the next day... I knew I couldn't go back right away.

(A heavy silence weighs down the room.)

Is everything okay with you? Really?

DAKOTA

Yeah. I think I'll be able to manage it.

ZELL nods and gets up to exit.

DAKOTA (CONT'D)

You really do know where Mason's room is, don't you? You've just been checking up on me.

ZELL

Goodbye, Dakota.

ZELL exits. DAKOTA stares at his desk, then turns over the paper he was hiding from ZELL. He starts to read it.

OPUS enters the desert and walks to the boundary at the edge of the bedroom.

OPUS

Kid, can you hear me?

DAKOTA

Opus? Where are you?

OPUS

Over here.

DAKOTA looks to the desert, then gets up and walks to the boundary.

DAKOTA

What are you doing? Come back and chill with me a little bit.

OPUS

We may have some problems. I need you to come over to Hell.

DAKOTA

What kind of problems?

OPUS

C'mon, kid. There's someone smarter than me over here that'll probably be able to explain it better than I can.

DAKOTA pushes past the boundary and walks into Hell.

DAKOTA

It's really weird that I can just do that.

OPUS

Well, that's kinda why I brought you here.

DAKOTA

Where are we going?

OPUS

We're skippin' the ferry and goin' straight to the head honcho for answers.

DAKOTA

Wait, we're gonna go see the King?

OPUS
They may know what's goin' on and how to fix it.

DAKOTA
Opus, what needs to be fixed?

OPUS
The Fox went into your bedroom last night.

DAKOTA
Oh, that? Yeah, I know. We talked.

OPUS
You talked to him? What'd he want?

DAKOTA
Just wanted me to do something for him.

OPUS
Kid, do you remember what happened last time you helped him?

DAKOTA
Come on, he can't do anything to me in the real world.

OPUS flicks DAKOTA on the arm.

DAKOTA (CONT'D)
Ow! The hell'd you do that for?

OPUS
I don't know how to make it any more clear to ya, but we're real! We can do things, real things that can hurt the real you! You go back to him thinkin' that things'll be different this time, but he's gonna fuck you up all over again! Jesus, kid, why would you even think about helpin' him?

DAKOTA
But he said he would help me too!

OPUS
Oh really? What was he gonna do? Because I'll tell ya right now, it ain't worth--

DAKOTA
He was gonna help me with Mason, okay?! He told me he could help, and I don't even have to do anything--

KING
(*Offstage.*)
My, what a rabble! What in the Hell is going on out there?!

KING enters the desert area. They are dressed in a gorgeous gown, and their makeup is impeccable.

They walk with dignity as they approach DAKOTA and OPUS. OPUS immediately bows.

OPUS

Your Grace.

KING examines OPUS.

KING

Opus, darling, is that you?

OPUS

Indeed, it is.

KING

Goodness, how are you, dear? It seems like it's been centuries.

OPUS

Mere decades, Your Grace. Still as beautiful as ever.

KING

Oh, you flatter me, you sweetheart! Why haven't you come to visit?

OPUS

Forgive me, Your Grace, but do you not recall my banishment?

KING

Banished? My Opus? Surely I didn't!

OPUS

Weren't no one's fault but mine. I was a fool in my younger days.

KING

Hm... Let me see your eyes, Dearie.

OPUS steps forward. KING takes OPUS' head in their hands and stares at him. After a time, KING takes their hands away.

KING (CONT'D)

Goodness. That was very dark. These are stained bones, my dear.

(Their demeanor immediately changes.)

But all water under the bridge now!

OPUS

Forgive me again, but--

KING

Darling Opus, don't you trouble yourself with one more thought of those times. I am a new and improved King! I had such an enlightening spiritual awakening a few decades back. Took a fast in the desert and truly got to know the denizens of Hell. Completely changed me. I'm a King of the people now. Annihilations are at an all time low!

Annihilations?
 DAKOTA

Oh, and who is this?
 KING

This here is my friend, Dakota, but I just call him 'kid'.
(He turns to DAKOTA.)
 Bow your head, kid.

There's no need for that now. Dakota, I am King Eldar the XVII.
 Truly a pleasure.
 KING

The pleasure is all mine.
 DAKOTA

See? He has manners. So what brings the two of you into my court
 today?
 KING

Well, Your Grace, we may have a problem.
 OPUS

MASON enters the bedroom.

He's been acting weird! You know he has. And he just cancels on
 Animal Town today? And he's not even fucking here!
 MASON

What's happened, my dear Opus?
 KING

I don't want to go in. There's something malevolent in there.
 LILA
(Offstage.)

Oh, for God's sake, come on. Please?
 MASON

Well, this one has somehow thinned the barriers between this world
 and another. He actually doesn't come from here.
 OPUS

Oh. Oh, this is not good. And you have been to the other world as
 well?
 KING

Yes, Your Grace.
 OPUS

*LILA enters the bedroom. MASON begins to look
 around the room.*

LILA

I don't like this. I don't want to snoop around here.

MASON

We're not snooping. We're just looking for anything out of the ordinary.

LILA

That's literally the definition of snooping.

KING

Child, how have you done this?

DAKOTA

I'm not sure, Your Grace. The Fox told me that I just had the ability to do it without even trying.

KING

The Fox? Darling, who is that?

DAKOTA

He killed me and sent me to Hell in your world. In my world, I'm still fine. I'm not really sure how this stuff works.

KING

Tell me, Child. Was this Fox able to enter your world?

DAKOTA

Yes, even before Opus appeared in my world. He recently asked me to... to thin the barriers even more.

MASON

He's hiding something from us. Something is wrong with him, and he won't tell me.

LILA

If he wants to tell us, he'll tell us. Otherwise, it's none of our business, so can we please just go?

KING

My dear, this is a very serious situation. Our worlds were never meant to intersect this closely, and this Fox sounds incredibly powerful and dangerous, especially to you.

MASON

Aren't you worried about him?

LILA

Of course I am, but that doesn't mean that I rummage through his room to find stuff out.

OPUS

Yeah. Kid here even agreed to help The Fox stay in the real world indefinitely in exchange for help in his love life.

DAKOTA

Okay, really? You had to throw me under the bus like that?

OPUS

well, it's true!

MASON

what if it's something big? what will we do if something bad happens to him?

LILA

He would talk to us. I'm sure of it.

MASON finds a piece of paper on DAKOTA's desk.

MASON

well, he's at least written something here.

MASON begins to read what's on the paper.

KING

My dear, you have put your life in severe jeopardy. You must reestablish the barriers between our worlds immediately.

MASON

what the hell?

DAKOTA

what? No! I need Opus with me!

KING

Every second that the walls are down, you are putting yourself at risk. Do you realize how much damage could be done?

MASON

"If I could find the words to say, I would say them, but they turn to dust in my mouth."

LILA

Oh, shit.

DAKOTA

King, with all due respect to the both of you, I can take care of myself just fine.

OPUS

Dakota!

MASON

"I just look at you, and I see home. You feel like home. I imagine all the time how soft your hands must be, how your heartbeat sounds in the middle of the night." Lila, what is this?

I don't know.

LILA

You're his best friend! He must have told--

MASON

It's not my place to tell any of his business!

LILA

It's true!

DAKOTA

You're actin' like a little kid!

OPUS

Boys, please!

KING

Is this about--

MASON

Surely you had to have known about this. You've had to have some sort of inkling that he felt this way.

LILA

Dakota, I need you to understand. You're in danger.

KING

Dude, whatever. I'm going back home.

DAKOTA

I mean, maybe I did. I just... I mean, come on, Lila.

MASON

Fuck you, Mason. I'm not gonna be the bad guy here. You talk to him yourself.

LILA

LILA exits. MASON begins to read again.

Opus, are you coming?

DAKOTA

You can't keep stalling, kid. This sort of thing wasn't ever supposed to happen.

OPUS

So you're just gonna stay here?

DAKOTA

(Pause.)

Opus?

OPUS

I can't go back yet.

DAKOTA

You can't be doing this to me right now.

OPUS

I don't think you understand how severe this is, kid. I'll check in with you soon. I'd... never forgive myself if something bad happened to you.

DAKOTA

Wow.

MASON

"When you smile at me, I feel like I could burst. When we're together, I feel like I can fly. I don't exactly know how to say what I want to tell you, but if I could find the words to say, I wouldn't need to say anything at all... I love you."

(Pause.)

"I love you."

KING

Darling, I implore you, end this soon. Things can truly only get worse.

DAKOTA

You know what?

MASON

I love you too.

DAKOTA

Screw both of you.

OPUS

Dakota--

DAKOTA

No. You're not even real. You're just a character in a game that I got too attached to. You're not my *fucking* dad.

OPUS

Kid, please--

DAKOTA

You want me to move on so bad? Fine. Then never come back. Never come to my side again. If you want me to hurt this bad--

OPUS

I never meant to hurt you.

MASON

But I can't.

DAKOTA

YOU CAN'T JUST LOVE ME AND EXPECT ME TO LET YOU GO.

(A heavy silence.)

But I guess that's what you want. So leave me alone. Don't ever bother me again.

MASON exits the bedroom as DAKOTA enters the bedroom. DAKOTA lays on the bed. LILA enters the room.

LILA

Dakota? Where were-- How did you get back in here so quick?

DAKOTA

What is it, Lila?

LILA

Well. Uh... Mason found your letter.

DAKOTA bolts upright.

LILA (CONT'D)

God, why did you write that? Were you gonna give it to him or something?

DAKOTA

I just wanted to get it-- How did he find it?

LILA

He thinks there's something wrong with you. You haven't been playing. You've been really distant.

DAKOTA

It's nobody's fucking business!

LILA

That's what I told him, but he was just really worried--

DAKOTA

Oh, God. I'm gonna throw up. I'm gonna be sick.

LILA

We're just concerned about you. There's something... dark in here.

DAKOTA

Oh God, not this again.

LILA

I'm just telling the truth! There's something in here!

DAKOTA

There is nothing here! It's just you and me. There's no ghost or spirit or demon in here, so stop acting like you feel some evil presence or whatever.

LILA

Dakota--

DAKOTA stands up.

DAKOTA

You know what your problem is? You will do anything to make yourself feel different or special. 'My name is Lila, and I sleep with everyone I meet! My name is Lila, and I'm a witch! You have anxiety? Lavender's great for that!'

LILA

I don't--

DAKOTA

'My name is Lila, and I date girls because my feminism won't let me be happy with a man, but I'll still fuck dudes because I'm such an empowered, sexy woman, and I'm so special! Please tell me how cool you think I am! Please like me!' You try to pick all these things that are weird or just absurd, and you piece all these things together to make you, but you're not special. You're just a bunch of stuff that someone has already made up. There's nothing original about you. So don't tell me about your girlfriends, don't tell me about your new fair trade coffee, and don't tell me that you can feel ghosts because it's all bullshit, and I don't care anymore!

LILA stands still for a second, then leaves the room. Through the open door, THE FOX comes in.

THE FOX

She was right.

DAKOTA

Go to hell.

THE FOX

And you knew she was right, but you told her that it wasn't true. How intriguing.

DAKOTA

What do you want?

THE FOX

I wanted to see if you've considered my offer.

DAKOTA

Go away. I'm in no mood to negotiate with you.

THE FOX

Oh, Dakota. Don't do this. Don't make me angry at you.

DAKOTA

No, you know what? I'm sick and tired of everyone trying to make me do what they want, listen to what they have to say. Do you know what I want?

THE FOX

I'm sure I don't care.

DAKOTA

Then get the fuck out of my room!

THE FOX

Remember who you are speaking to, you insolent child. I can destroy you with no effort at all.

DAKOTA

You're not real. You can't do anything at all.

THE FOX

Perhaps not yet, but I will be soon enough.

DAKOTA

You're full of shit.

THE FOX

Believe what you want. It makes no difference to me.

DAKOTA

You are a made-up character, and this is a dream or a hallucination or a delusion or whatever, but you're not real.

THE FOX

whatever you say.

THE FOX walks to the door.

DAKOTA

why me?

(Pause.)

If you are real, or you will be, why are you so obsessed with me? You could be torturing anyone in the world. You could be after Mason. He's the one that made you up. Why do you hate me so much?

THE FOX

You know what's funny? I haven't decided that yet either. Maybe it's because you're weak, easy prey. Or because you have a beautiful face that I just want to smash. Or maybe it's because you defy me, you betrayed me, you tried to sabotage me, and no one crosses me and lives. You knew that, but you tried to get one up on me anyway, and I can't stand you for that.

DAKOTA

It was a game! It was made up!

THE FOX grows bigger, and his voice booms as he speaks.

THE FOX

My existence is not a game! I was born millennia before your pathetic game. I have grown with every fable and every parable and every tale told about me. The Fox. The Trickster that spoils the grapes of the vine, that burns the fields with its tail, that seduces and destroys the lustful eyes of those that dare look at my face. I have existed forever. Your friend simply borrowed me. It was YOU who thinned the barriers and gave me form, and when they finally break, I will destroy you and burn your remains to ash, and that is a promise. And deep inside, you truly want that. Don't you?

(Pause.)

DON'T YOU?

DAKOTA

You don't know me! You know my character, but you don't know me.

THE FOX

Oh, grow up, Dakota! Your character is simply a better version of yourself. He was a thin veil under which you hide, but he was you. I truly do know you, and I know what happens to you when you start to lose hope. This is your fault. You gave me this power, and I'm playing the part you assigned me. Your mistake was believing that I wouldn't fucking murder you for what you've done.

THE FOX exits. DAKOTA stands still for a very long while, then he lies down in his bed. He doesn't sleep.

SCENE FOUR*(KING and OPUS sit in Hell.)*

KING

Darling, you know he didn't mean those things. He's just quite upset at the moment.

OPUS

Even if he didn't mean 'em, he still said 'em. There has to be enough truth to 'em for those words to just come outta his mouth.

KING

Opus, stay with me. Come back to my court. We can make this place a decent place to be again. Remember Hell two thousand years ago? How wonderful and beautiful it was?

OPUS

Can't say I do. Only been here for about a century.

KING

Oh. Well, it was a tremendous place. Absolutely breathtaking.

OPUS

I can't.

KING

I know it may take some adjusting, but things can just go back to how they were. I'm thinking of taking some time to visit the forest, and I know you may miss it there--

OPUS

The Fox knew. He knew what would happen. He was right.

KING

Please, Darling, don't give that fox another thought.

OPUS

He really did just turn his back on me.

KING

Opus...

OPUS

I'm sorry, Your Grace, but these bones are weary, and I don't think I can keep goin' for much longer.

KING

I forbid you to say those words. I forbid you from thinking that way. You must continue to exist! Annihilation is out of the question!

OPUS

Forgive me for this, Your Grace, but I can't-- I don't know if I can handle it one more moment.

KING

Please. I'm begging you to reconsider.

OPUS

You were always so kind to me. I thank you for that. I will never forget you. Hope your reign continues to be as dignified as always.

OPUS exits. KING yells in his direction.

KING

Opus, I am still your King, and I command you to come back this instant!

(No response.)

why... why can't I...

KING exits.

SCENE FIVE

DAKOTA is still in his bed. A knock is heard at his door.

Who is it? DAKOTA

It's me, dude. Can I come in? MASON

I know you read the letter. I don't wanna talk about it. DAKOTA

Please, man. Just let me in. MASON

After a second, DAKOTA gets up and opens the door. MASON walks in.

Thanks. MASON (CONT'D)

MASON tries to sit in the desk chair.

Not that chair. DAKOTA

Uh. MASON

Just-- We can just sit in the floor. Is that okay? DAKOTA

I mean, I guess. MASON

The two sit in the floor. They are quiet for a bit.

I really don't want to talk about this, dude. DAKOTA

I can't just ignore it. If we want to stay friends, we have to acknowledge the fact that... MASON

You can't even say it. DAKOTA

It's just a weird thing for me, okay? I've never been in this situation. MASON

DAKOTA

I'm so sorry that it's weird for a guy to like you.

MASON

Dakota, just shut up and listen for a second, okay?

DAKOTA complies.

MASON (CONT'D)

You know me. You know I don't have a problem with you being gay.
(He searches for the proper words.)
How long have we been friends?

DAKOTA

I guess for a few years.

MASON

We've been friends since freshman year of college, and that was a long ass time ago.

DAKOTA

So we've been friends for a while.

MASON

You don't think I noticed? I'm not completely oblivious.

DAKOTA

You never mentioned it.

MASON

I knew it was something you weren't comfortable with, so I never brought it up. I like being friends with you, and this doesn't change anything.

DAKOTA

Mason... It's more complicated than that.

MASON

Yeah, I know that too.

(Pause. MASON laughs.)

I remember back in college when I used to mess with you all the time, get you all turned on, and then just stop and leave you all frustrated.

DAKOTA shoves MASON and laughs.

DAKOTA

You dick.

MASON

It was just fun. I dunno. I'm fuckin' sadistic. It's a curse.

DAKOTA

Sure, whatever.

(Pause.)

I remember, uh... I remember asking you to be my best friend, you know? Like a little kid would.

MASON

Yeah, and we made that little contract thing.

DAKOTA

And it had like those caveats or whatever. Rules and stuff about how we would settle things when we fought, what to do if one of us was drunk and couldn't drive home so--

MASON

So the other one would promise to get them home safe.

DAKOTA

And that cheesy thing at the end, where we promised that...

DAKOTA AND MASON

Nothing would ever fuck us up.

MASON

I remember.

(Pause.)

I always knew you had a little bit of a crush on me, and I never let it get in the way of us being friends. But then, I read your letter.

DAKOTA

I didn't mean to ruin anything.

MASON

Do you love me?

(Pause.)

Dakota.

DAKOTA

Yes.

MASON

why?

DAKOTA

You make me feel comfortable.

MASON

Is that it? I make you comfortable? Nothing else?

Another pause.

DAKOTA

The first time I saw you, I knew you were special. I've loved you since freshman year, and I'll probably always love you.

(MORE)

DAKOTA (CONT'D)

I see you, and I see what my future could be. Just... you. And me. Like, best friends, but something more. And we could just have that, and you make me feel comfortable. You feel like home. You always have.

MASON

You're only gonna get hurt by this, by liking me.

DAKOTA

I know, but I can't just stop it.

MASON

Dude, I don't want to hurt you. I want things to be normal with us, like it used to be.

DAKOTA

Didn't you hear me? I've always liked you. The normal times were the same as they are now. I'm sorry.

MASON

Don't apologize. I guess it's not something you made happen. It just... did.

(Another pause.)

I... I've actually kind of been thinking... I mean, since I read the letter... I just... I think that I may like you too?

Pause.

DAKOTA

what?

MASON

I mean, we spend a lot of time together, and whenever we're hanging out, I feel really... good. And not in just a friendly way, I think.

DAKOTA

Oh, no. Please, don't say this.

MASON

And, like, it's weird, right? Because I'm not into guys at all. It's just you.

DAKOTA

Don't do this.

MASON

Dakota... I love you too.

(A heavy pause.)

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you.

DAKOTA

If it didn't hurt, it would mean that I didn't care, and I care so much. Maybe too much, but that's how I know that how I feel about you is real.

MASON

You know, I'm happy with Zell... but if there were to be anyone else, it would be you.

DAKOTA

Is that supposed to make me feel better?

MASON

It's supposed to be the truth.

DAKOTA

Part of me wishes you hadn't told me.

MASON

what? why?

DAKOTA

Because you can just say it. And when this conversation is over, you can forget it, and you can go hang out with Zell and never think about it again, but the words you just said, they're all I have, and I'll cling to them and repeat them over and over in my head. And you'll always have a piece of me, but you'll have your own life to lead. what a... what a wonderful thing.

(Pause.)

So what happens now?

MASON

I don't know.

DAKOTA

Fuck.

MASON hesitates, then kisses DAKOTA on the lips. DAKOTA kisses back. It does not last long, and MASON pulls away. He looks away from DAKOTA, but takes his hand. DAKOTA stares at their hands. They share a beautiful, terrible moment together.

MASON

I have to go. I just... I wanted to talk to you first.

MASON lets go of DAKOTA's hand and exits the room. DAKOTA sits in the same place for a long time. After a while, KING walks into the room holding a beer bottle. They are wearing an incredible suit with a full face of beautiful makeup.

DAKOTA

Oh, goddammit. why are you drinking my beer?

KING

well, I rummaged through your fridge, but you seem to be all out of Cabernet Sauvignon, so I decided that this would have to do.

DAKOTA

Yeah, that's me. I just love Cabernet.

(He gets up and takes the beer bottle from KING's hand, who takes another beer from their pocket.)

what do you want?

KING

I want to talk to you about Opus.

DAKOTA

Listen, I told both of you to fuck off, didn't I?

KING

If I could be quite frank, I don't give a shit about what you want. I want my Opus back. He's gone, and I fear the worst has happened.

DAKOTA

what's the worst that he could've gotten himself into?

KING

Did he ever tell you what annihilation was?

DAKOTA

No, but--

KING

See, if one is in Hell, that means that they are dead. Can't get anymore dead than dead. But there is a second death that one can suffer. Annihilation. If one dies after they have already died, their existence just ceases to be. No second chances. No afterlife. They are wiped from the face of the earth completely.

DAKOTA

And what does that have to do with Opus?

KING

I think my darling Opus has decided to annihilate himself.

DAKOTA

what?

KING

After your little outburst, he wandered off despite my pleas. I've never seen him so downtrodden.

DAKOTA

why are you telling me this?

KING

Because I want you to fix this. You made him feel this way. You're the only one that can save him. And I know deep in your heart that you still care for him.

DAKOTA

You're the King of Hell. You have all the power in the world. Why don't you fix this?

KING

Don't you think I've tried? I love Opus dearly, but there's a hold on him that I'm not able to break. You are the one that has broken him, and as such, you are the only one able to make this right.

DAKOTA

I'm not in a good place to do this right now.

KING

I'm sorry to break this news to you, but I don't care what kind of place you're in! You must do this, and you must do it now! You are the one with the power here, and you must make a decision.

Pause.

DAKOTA

Take me to him.

The two exit the room.

SCENE 6

OPUS stands in Hell. He looks around him, but there's nothing but emptiness.

OPUS

And we will go to the ends of the earth to save each other, won't we? We will save each other, and we will be glorious together.

(He pulls a tattered picture from his cloak.)

Ah, Eddie. It's been so long, but I'm grateful for that. It means you ended up somewhere better.

(Pause.)

I blew it, son. I had one more shot, and I just blew it. I don't wanna think about how things could've ended, but it's all that runs through my head. I just can't win. I guess this should have happened a long time ago.

(Pause.)

I love you, son.

OPUS sits down and waits. THE FOX walks up to him.

THE FOX

I warned you.

OPUS

Please, can I not have one moment of peace before I go through with this?

THE FOX

Actually, that is precisely why I am here. To help you and your desire to end it. Who says I don't care about the wants of others?

OPUS

"Long is the way, and hard."

(OPUS puts the picture back into his cloak and turns to THE FOX.)

Will you do it quickly.

THE FOX

No.

THE FOX puts his hand out. OPUS cries out in pain. KING and DAKOTA run onstage.

DAKOTA

Opus!

THE FOX

Right on time!

THE FOX holds his hand out towards KING. KING is flung to the ground. They begin to bleed.

THE FOX (CONT'D)

You are so predictable.

DAKOTA

what did you do?!

THE FOX

I set a trap! I'm quite good at doing that. If you won't open the barriers, then I'll just kill you while you're here.

(He looks at OPUS.)

But in order to maximize your pain, I think I'll kill this one first.

THE FOX raises his hand towards OPUS again. OPUS convulses and shouts in pain.

DAKOTA

Stop!

THE FOX

You know, had you just done what I told, this pathetic skeleton would have left our situation completely unharmed. How does it feel to be responsible for the death of the only person that cares about you?

DAKOTA

Leave him alone!

THE FOX

You're such a child.

THE FOX raises his other hand. OPUS shouts again. DAKOTA, wildly and impulsively, tackles THE FOX.

THE FOX (CONT'D)

Yes, Dakota! Give me your rage!

DAKOTA

SHUT UP!

DAKOTA puts his hands on THE FOX's throat.

THE FOX

Pathetic!

(He flings DAKOTA away.)

You have not one iota of power compared to me. I'm going to destroy your precious Opus, and then, I'm going to destroy you.

THE FOX raises his hand towards OPUS to deliver the final blow. DAKOTA raises his own hand to THE FOX. THE FOX convulses and is flung to the ground.

THE FOX (CONT'D)

what--

DAKOTA raises his hand again. THE FOX writhes on the ground.

THE FOX (CONT'D)

YOU CAN'T DO THAT!

DAKOTA

This is still Animal Town, and this is still MY story! There are no rules!

DAKOTA raises his hand once more. THE FOX begins to bleed. THE FOX touches the blood. He is aghast.

THE FOX

I... I can't--

(He becomes enraged.)

I CAN'T BLEED. I'M NOT SUPPOSED TO BLEED.

DAKOTA

Anything that bleeds can die. AND YOU KNOW WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU DIE IN HELL!

DAKOTA grabs THE FOX by his collar. Suddenly, THE FOX begins to speak with a voice that is not his own. He speaks calmly, but with terrifying and dreadful seriousness.

THE FOX

You know I can never fully leave. I am everlasting. I am eternal. I can never be bound. I will always return, and I will always be a piece of you that you can never scrub away.

DAKOTA

I don't care. I don't care. What I know now is that you can be beaten, and if you ever come for me again, I'll beat you into the ground like the piece of shit you are. If you ever come back, I'll finish the job. I *will* kill you.

THE FOX

You can't.

DAKOTA

Try me.

DAKOTA lets go of THE FOX. THE FOX disappears. DAKOTA then runs to OPUS. KING stands back up and walks over to them both.

THE FOX

That dreadful creature ruined my ensemble.

DAKOTA

Please, please tell me Opus is okay.

KING examines OPUS.

KING

He's taken quite a beating, but he will be fine with some time. I will care for him, but you will have to leave and close the barriers, lest The Fox come into the real world where you have no powers.

DAKOTA

why does it always go back to this?

KING

All things have their resolution, darling. You mustn't fight it. Beating away at the wind doesn't make it any less strong. We move forward.

DAKOTA

I know, I know. But... can I just pause for one more moment?

KING nods. DAKOTA looks down at OPUS.

OPUS

I thought you were done with me.

DAKOTA

Turns out I can't be done with anything. You have a hold on me, you bag of bones.

OPUS

Kid, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I tried to push you away from me before you were ready. I just didn't want anything bad to happen to you.

DAKOTA

You're such a dad.

OPUS

(He laughs.)

A sorry excuse for a dad.

DAKOTA

You're still the best one I've got. I'm sorry I wouldn't listen to you. I just-- I don't want to lose you.

OPUS

It's hard, kid. I know it is, and I don't wanna lose you either, but we both have to keep goin'. *You* have to keep goin'. Do it for me. Show the world what I saw in you.

DAKOTA takes OPUS' hand.

DAKOTA

I'll never forget you.

OPUS

And I'll never forget you, kid.

DAKOTA stands up and walks to his bedroom.

KING

Take care, darling.

The lights over Hell snap off. DAKOTA whips around. He feels his wall for the barrier, but he can't pass through it anymore. He falls to the ground and cries for a bit. There's a knock at his door. He doesn't answer, but the door opens, and LILA walks in.

LILA

Hey.

DAKOTA rubs his tears away hard.

DAKOTA

Hey.

LILA

Are you okay?

DAKOTA

Probably not. But I guess I will be.

LILA

It feels different in here again. Not malevolent. Not warm. Just sort of... blank.

DAKOTA

It is. It's just... gorbefeld.

(Pause.)

I'm really, really sorry about what I said to you. I was in a bad way.

LILA

I felt the energy in the room. Something wasn't right. But... thank you for apologizing.

DAKOTA

Are we still friends?

LILA

Fucking of course we are, you idiot. We just hit a bit of a rough patch. Hand me one of the joints over there.

DAKOTA gets the bag of joints and hands one to LILA. She lights it. The two exchange it during the scene.

Opus was real, wasn't he? LILA (CONT'D)

Pause.

would you believe me if I said he was? DAKOTA

How was that? LILA

Like losing my dad all over again. DAKOTA

Did you have fun at least? LILA

The most fun I've had in years. DAKOTA

LILA sits on DAKOTA's bed. She leans back and feels something under the pillow. She pulls out a cross-stitch.

what is this? LILA

what is what? DAKOTA

"Hell can be Heaven with the right people?" LILA
(She hands the cross stitch to DAKOTA.)
 where'd you get this?

I-- I didn't-- DAKOTA

Opus? LILA

MASON enters the room with ZELL.

Burning one down this early? MASON

Time is an illusion. LILA

Hand him one. DAKOTA
(without looking away from the cross-stitch.)

LILA hands MASON a joint. He lights it and shares it with ZELL.

ZELL

How are things, Dakota?

DAKOTA

They're better. Better now that I'm getting high.

(He looks at MASON.)

How are you two doing today?

MASON

We're doing fine.

ZELL

What've you got over there?

DAKOTA hangs the cross-stitch on his wall.

DAKOTA

A gift from a friend.

ZELL

I like it.

MASON

We just wanted to come over, see if you wanted to play A.T today.

A pause, as everyone expects DAKOTA not to say...

DAKOTA

Yeah, let's go ahead.

MASON

Wait, really?

DAKOTA

Why not? Playing Animal Town high should be an experience.

Everyone sits in a circle.

MASON

So you were in Hell, waiting for the ferry--

DAKOTA

You know what? Why don't we skip ahead to me coming back to life? You know, since we're all together.

Lights up dimly on Hell. OPUS walks into Hell to observe the group playing. He is holding his lantern. KING follows shortly after OPUS.

MASON

You sure? I know how attached--

DAKOTA

I'm sure, man. I wanna see what Zell's new character is like.

MASON

Okay, then. So you walk through a portal, and you find yourself at the top of a hill that overlooks the whole of Animal Town. People are going to work. Kids are getting on buses to go to school. The sun is shining, and it's a new day. A new you to do whatever you want. What do you do?

DAKOTA

I kick the dust off my feet--

OPUS extinguishes the lantern. Blackout.

DAKOTA (CONT'D)

--and I run.

END OF PLAY