

The Adventure Zone: Balance – The Stolen Century: Chapter Four

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Griffin: Previously on The Adventure Zone:

The tendrils retract and they pull that entire plane, and pulls it into the Hunger itself. And the diameter of the Hunger you see, just ever so slightly, expands.

Clint: I have a thing called Zone of Truth.

Griffin: Okay?

Clint: Merle casts Zone of Truth.

Angus: My... My brain feels like it's tingling.

Montrose: I cast Zone of Truth!

Justin: Hell yeah, dude!

Clint: Yeah!

Griffin: (intro): I know, I know. This flashback's been going on forever! But you might find this one illuminating. It's The Adventure Zone!

[“The Unexplained” by Mort Garson plays]

Griffin: The seven of you are now on the 30th cycle of your journey. And the world that you find yourselves in this time is a rich one. It's full of dozens of different civilizations and thriving cities and nations.

And what's kind of unique about this world is you've been to a few planets that are— a few planes, I should say, where there's lots and lots of people and it's very vibrant and alive. But the thing that sort of makes this world stand out is that all of these different thriving nations and civilizations, they're all living in harmony and peace.

And there's actually— there's so much stuff here, there's so much life here, that you have a hard time sort of figuring out where to settle down in this world. And so, you wait for the Light of Creation to fall. And you follow it to one of the sort of oldest civilizations on this planet. A nation called Tesseralia.

And you're greeted warmly in that nation's capital city, and are treated as revered guests. And everybody is very accommodating to you. There's a brief period where some investigative agencies look into your plight as you come and sort of explain what's going on.

And after some time, the governor of this nation attends to you and confirms that yes, they do have the Light of Creation. Specifically, it is in the possession of an institution called the First Monastery. And it is an institution that, as the governor explains it, is nearly solely responsible for the peace and prosperity that this world benefits from.

So, about a month into your stay in this world, the seven of you are brought to the First Monastery, where you are received by Abbess Oriana, who is sort of the leader of this... the spiritual leader of this monastery. And you are given tea and food, served in a spicy, delicious broth.

At this point, you've been traveling together for over 30 years, spending each year in a new reality. But none of you have really tasted anything quite like this before, it's really delicious.

And the abbess explains that the monastery does indeed have the Light of Creation, but that she will need one of you to prove that you are able to handle the tremendous responsibility of this power before the monastery will part with it. And she has a particular recruit in mind. After sort of getting to know you all and sizing you up, she turns to you—

Travis: So, it's power. It's Magnus, right?

Griffin: She turns to Merle. She says—

Merle: Hm?

Oriana: Hi, Merle.

Merle: [stammers] H-h-hi?

Griffin: She says that if you join their monastery for the year and serve them well, and sort of show your true colors... Well, maybe not your true colors. But put your best foot forward. She will relinquish the Light to your party.

Merle: Wh— um...

Magnus: Can we have a second to talk this over with him?

Griffin: Oriana says:

Oriana: Yes, but be quick. I have other matters to attend to.

Merle: Are there like vows of celibacy and shit like that?

Magnus: [quietly] Merle...

Griffin: [laughs]

Merle: Huh, what? What? What?

Taako: I was about to caution him against this exact behavior. But I can see that we're chasing... we're a dog chasing its tail at this point.

Magnus: Yeah.

Taako: I think just, let's... What's gonna be is gonna be, guys.

Merle: I wasn't saying it's off the table? I just want all the information.

Taako: It's off the table, me hearing about it.

Griffin: Oriana says:

Oriana: No, there's no vow of celibacy. And also, yuck.

Justin: [chuckles]

Merle: How about a vow of silence? Or do I have to starve? 'Cause—

Magnus: Yes! Vow of silence. Yes.

Merle: I have a blood sugar thing, I don't know if I could, you know, fast a lot.

Griffin: She says:

Oriana: I see. We don't require our recruits to relieve themselves of the pleasure of life. But we do demand pretty strict training. So, no. You can bone. As long as you show up for work the next day.

Merle: Yeah! I think it sounds really cool. Yeah, let's do it.

Oriana: Okay.

Merle: As long as I get to eat all the chow I want, right?

Oriana: Yeah. We have a whole team of cooks here. And I think you'll find yourself well fed.

Merle: Bring it on, Abby!

Oriana: It's Oriana. And don't.

Merle: Oh, okay.

Griffin: We'll get to Merle's thing, because this is— I sort of— So, I've envisioned... We're close to the halfway point now, of the Stolen Century. And I think we're gonna hit a point where things are just gonna kind of hit critical mass and we're just gonna have to go until we get to the end of it.

But before we get there, each of you is gonna have sort of a featured cycle, where you're gonna kind of carry some more of the narrative weight as we— We're at a point now where we're gonna be, in a major way, filling in the narrative gaps of like, "What does this mean and what's this all about?"

So, this is Merle's. And so, we're gonna get to him last. But Merle— Or Magnus and Taako, you still get to like, take a turn in this world. So, before we get to sort of the main thing, which is Merle's training and what that means, and what's going to come out of that, what do you all want to do in this world?

Clint: Well, can you give 'em a little more about the world? I mean, we know—

Griffin: Yeah, sure. I've sort of envisioned— This world is just like very diverse and very alive. And there are... There's not much military in this world, right? I was thinking like, would you maybe go and train in this new way of fighting you've never seen before? But it's a very peaceful world. It is a world that is just completely at peace. So, I don't know that there would be much in the way of that.

Travis: What about, Griffin—

Griffin: Mm-hmm?

Travis: What about sport?

Griffin: Yes. Okay, that's great. Yeah, there's definitely a lot of sport to like fill— When soldiers became unnecessary, the strong needed something to do. And so, there's a game that these civilizations play, in lieu of combat. And... What do you want it to be, Magnus? What do you want this— What does this sport look like?

Travis: I want it to be like a football-esque, basket— Like a combination of football and basketball. You know, the hoops that you have to dunk it into. But you can hold the ball and run around with tackling. But very, very strict anti-violence rules.

Griffin: I mean... So, no hitting?

Travis: No, there's tackling. But you gotta be like, cool about it. You know what I mean?

Griffin: Okay?

Travis: Like, I don't want any— There's no concussions in this game, you know what I mean? They take good care of it. There's no like spearing, there's no, you know, face masks. Everyone is very civilized in this game.

Griffin: All right. So, while you're like just killing time I guess, in Tesseralia, while Merle trains in this monastery— Which you are not, like, granted access to after this meeting with Oriana, because it's like a monastery and they have a pretty strict closed-door policy. So, you're just like— you get an apartment here. And I think a lot of you are just kind of like living here in the city.

Travis: I imagine there's like a group of neighborhood kids—

Griffin: Okay?

Travis: ... Are having a game. And I kind of, you know, join in. And—

Griffin: And you tackle a child.

Travis: No, I'm not going to hurt him. This person sees me handle the ball well, maneuver well. But not be aggressive towards these children. And I get hired to coach a peewee league that has been... It's got a lot of troubled kids.

Griffin: This is not the way I thought this was gonna go.

Travis: Their team, you know, everybody sees their team as a joke. No hope at making playoffs. And so, one of— like you know, their moms— one of their moms is like, "Hey, you seem like you have— Could you teach our kids? 'Cause like the last coach quit 'cause it was too frustrating." And I'm like:

Magnus: Well, I got nothing but time on my hands. Sure.

Travis: And so, I work with the kids and train `em up. And do we go to state? Hell yeah, we go to state.

Griffin: All right, Coach Taylor, real quick. Coach Taylor, real quick.

Clint: [laughs]

Travis: One, what's the sport?

Travis: Yeah?

Griffin: What's the sport called?

Travis: Uh... Rebound.

Griffin: Okay, the sport is called Rebound. And what is this team, the Tesseralia whats?

Travis: [laughs] The Tesseralia Losers.

Griffin: [chuckles] Okay, the Tesseralia Losers.

Clint: The Bad News Losers.

Justin: But then like right before the big game's day, he whips out new jerseys and they say, "Winners." Says, "We're changing the name of the team."

Clint: [laughs]

Griffin: Travis, give me that speech right now to these children. These children are sitting in front of you. And your star slammer, the other team came and they, in the middle of the night, they... Well, no, that's a little dark. These are children. Hold on. Wait. Let me do—

Travis: [laughs]

Griffin: He just gets food poisoning. But did the other kids give it to him? The other— You think, maybe. And they took you out. And so, the rest of the Losers are like:

Timothy: Ah, man. We can't win at rebound without our star slammer, whose name was Gerald.

Magnus: Not with that attitude, Timothy. Deborah. Deborah, come in close. Steven, scoot in. Derrick, yes. Susan, you're close enough. You're good. But, no—

[Clint laughs]

Magnus: You know what, Timothy? Two feet to the left. Perfect, right there.

Timothy: I get it..

Magnus: No, wait. Come back. Come back. Come back. I was just trying to put you in my line of sight. You were too far, I couldn't see. I don't wanna have to turn my head a bunch, 'cause I'm about to do a big dramatic speech. And I don't wanna have to move a bunch. Listen, when I came to this dimension— That's right, I said dimension. I'm not from here.

Griffin: [laughs]

Justin: [chuckles]

Magnus: I wasn't expecting to teach one kid how to play a sport I didn't know. Let alone 18 of you. But here I am. And you know what? I've done it, 'cause I'm a winner. And now, because of me, you're all winners too. Because the magic wasn't in you all along, it was in me. And I've made you the winners that you are here, today, now.

Clint: [laughs]

Justin: "But coach, what's gonna happen to us after you leave?"

Magnus: Hey, I'm not done! I'm not done with my speech. What were you saying?

Justin: "What's gonna happen to us after you leave, coach?"

Magnus: I don't know. You might be losers again. That's gonna be up to you. I can't help you after I'm gone. All right? But don't make me look bad or I'm gonna come back.

Justin: [chuckles] "But you said you'd pay for my college?"

Magnus: And someday, I will, as far as you know. Now, as I was saying, when you get out there today, I don't want you to worry about the crowd. I don't want you to worry about the other team. I want you to worry about disappointing me, because that's what really matters. I worked really hard to get you all where you are. Don't let me down. Or I won't save this plane when the Hunger comes.

Griffin: "What's the Hunger?"

Magnus: It's... Well... Ah...

Clint McElroy: Hunger for championships!

Magnus: Yeah! The Hunger— whatever that guy in the corner, the janitor said. It's the hunger for championships.

Griffin: [laughs]

Justin: The one that belligerently refuses to do character voices of any sort.

Magnus: Yeah, that guy.

Justin: Despite him making his living off of doing so for 40 years.

Griffin: That was the janitor in this world, Clint McElroy.

Travis: [laughs]

Justin: [laughs] That's right!

Magnus: He's a loser! Do you wanna be like Clint McElroy, the loser janitor, kids? No.

Clint McElroy: You can do it!

Magnus: Don't listen to him. He's a loser.

Justin: [chuckles] Don't listen to him and his Rob Schneider from Waterboy impressions.

Clint: [chuckles]

Justin: That also don't have a fucking character voice—

Griffin: Don't have a character voice.

Justin: ... Because how could you?

Magnus: Now, here, listen. Be quiet just for one second, kids. I'm proud of you and I love you. Don't tell anyone I said that. Now get out there! And play real hard or whatever. We can win!

Griffin: Wait, are you giving them the winners jersey, or is that not actually happening?

Travis: Oh yeah. And then I open up a crate and it's like:

Magnus: I found these outside and I think they might fit you. Try 'em on, see what you think.

Travis: And then that's the big reveal.

Clint McElroy: Are those jocks?

Magnus: Hey! Get out of here, Clint McElroy!

Griffin: [laughs]

Clint: [laughs]

Magnus: You were fired two weeks ago and you know it!

Clint McElroy: All I do. I clean up, I sweep, I mop and this is the thanks I get!

Magnus: And you also embezzle! Get out of here! You're an embezzling janitor.

Griffin: What—

Magnus: Now anyways, kids.

Griffin: Okay.

Magnus: Here's some jerseys for you. Put 'em on. Go out there and make me proud.

Griffin: "Thanks, coach." They put them on. And I have no— I need help. I have no idea how to rectify this. Because I think there needs to be a roll to determine whether or not they win the big game. Because that feels important to me now in this moment. But I don't know if it's you rolling, plus body, to determine what kind of—

Travis: Griffin, look in your heart. Look in your heart. Do they win the big game, Griffin?

Griffin: No, you're gonna have to roll for this, dog.

Travis: Do you really wanna risk these 18 kids not winning the big game because of your stupid mechanic, Griffin?

Griffin: Yeah, I think I do. Or I—

Travis: Okay.

Clint: [laughs]

Griffin: Here's where I'm at. I don't know if it should be plus body, which represents like you actually physically training these kids and like how well they respond to it. Or plus... just like plus heart. Like, how well you did at this—

Travis: I think it should be plus body, Griffin.

Griffin: I think this is... I think you could say plus body. I think there's a good case to be made here. 'Cause you're physically training these kids. So, roll that.

Travis: Okay good. Then it's a 10.

Griffin: Okay.

Travis: 'Cause if you had made me do heart, it wouldn't have been a complete success. [chuckles]

Griffin: With a 10, it is a decisive victory. Who were they playing?

Travis: I don't know what other play— The Huntington Locomotives.

Griffin: Okay.

Travis: The Huntington Blizzards.

Clint: [laughs]

Griffin: Sure, they were fighting the Huntington Locomotives. Let's go with that. And the short lived—

Clint: Aw.

Griffin: ... Arena football team for our hometown. And how about— No... That's stretching it a little bit too far. Magic Town is the name of the town that they were fighting.

Justin: Much, much better. Much better.

Travis: The Magic Town Bullies.

Griffin: Okay, yeah. The Magic Town Bullies just get creamed. Even though they had the bigger budget.

Clint: And a better dojo.

Griffin: Had a better dojo to like train in. The Tesseralia Winners, now, crush them.

Travis: Now, here's the thing. You might ask yourself, do the Tesseralia Winners win by playing a very straight forward, by the book game? No. No, they didn't.

Clint: I don't think so.

Travis: There was whimsy and trick plays. Oh, like you couldn't even imagine! Picture it in your head. It's even more whimsical than that. The ball— There were balls hidden in sleeves. There were—

Clint: Ah!

Travis: There was like, look over there, guy with a mustache in the stands. What? Turns out that guy with the mustache was the player. It was crazy.

Griffin: [chuckles] Okay.

Justin: [laughs]

Griffin: For this nasty game... I mean, it's a nasty—

Travis: It's not nasty, Griffin! It's just not by the book. They're playing like no one's ever seen. They're not cheating, per se.

Griffin: Okay. I'm gonna give you plus two bond, as you celebrate with the most wonderful pizza party afterwards. And these kids are just in love with you and you've just like... Man, you just changed their lives. And, I don't know...

Goofs aside for one minute, is it kind of tough knowing like, "Oh, man. In a year, these kids... this town is gonna probably..." Either it'll be consumed by the Hunger, or best-case scenario, it might be a little rough for them when the Hunger arrives. Just to like put a bow on this.

Magnus: As a reward for winning, I'm gonna take you all on a campout. Far, far outside of the city limits.

Griffin: [chuckles] Okay, we can say that you do that close to the end. And you get all the requisite permission slips. And—

Magnus: Your parents are gonna go with us and all of your pets, and favorite belongings too.

Griffin: "This sounds—"

Clint McElroy: How about me, coach? Your friend, the janitor?

Magnus: No, janitor! Get back in your prison cell!

Justin: [chuckles]

Griffin: "This sounds like a whole big production. Are you... We have to bring our pets?"

Magnus: Hey, you earned it. You're winners now. And bring any important documents, like legal documents. Anything you wanna make sure you have with you to establish new lives.

Clint: [laughs]

Griffin: Okay. Taako?

Justin: I think this is the first world we've been to where Taako would want to— where the culture would be such that he would really wanna get down in the local cuisine.

Griffin: Yeah.

Justin: So, I feel like I'm gonna spend this year like just sort of getting reacquainted with cooking and sort of seeing what the local flavors are like. And sort of immersing myself in that.

Clint: Oh, that broth.

Griffin: I was—

Clint: You wanna try the broth.

Griffin: Yeah, I was really hoping you would go in this direction. Because yeah, this is the most culturally rich world that you have been to. And food is like a huge element of that. And it's just like... You cooked a lot while you were in your home world, before you went on this journey.

And Lup did too, I think. Lup comes with you on most of this eating quest. Because when she had that broth, I think your eyes met and you had this unspoken moment of like, "Oh shit."

And so, you do go around and you eat all of this food that you've never really eaten before. And learn about all these new flavor profiles and like... I don't know if you've ever had umami before, but that's like real big here.

Clint: Mmm.

Travis: And the sequel, Two-mami.

Griffin: There's also a lot of like, spicy flavors. And yeah, I think it gets you into cooking. What do you wanna— Like, what do you wanna do? Do you

have any sort of like— Beyond just going around and eating a bunch of food, are you wanting to like train up your cooking and work on getting better at cooking?

Justin: Maybe— I don't— I mean, it depends on what is available here...

Griffin: I kind of want you to roll for this. But I think that roll is just you learning like... 'Cause there's thousands and thousands, and thousands of restaurants here. And I think a plus mind roll would just be like you finding out what the best stuff is. Like finding out where's the best— Obviously, there's the places with the good Yelp review or whatever. But what's the secret best shit to go get.

Justin: Yeah, right.

[sound of dice thrown]

Justin: Let's see here... Got a 9.

Griffin: And I don't— Do you wanna spend an asset to upgrade that to—

Clint: I will spend my one asset.

Griffin: Oh?

Clint: To make it a 10.

Justin: Woah, you don't have to do that. I got lots laying around here.

Clint: No, I want to. I want to.

Justin: Okay, fine.

Clint: Yeah, I use my asset to give him a 10.

Griffin: Okay. You have to tell me what that asset is and how it like, helps him find the good food here.

Travis: He gives him his copy of Zagat's.

Justin: Ugh...

Clint: It is a... it is a mortar and pestle that I carved out of a very large piece of coral, which allows— the holes in the coral allow the air to get into whatever you're grinding, mortar and pestle. And that will help him get the subtle flavors out of the different spices that he's researching.

Griffin: Okay. I think you do that. But more importantly, you... I think the way that asset is sort of spent, is you find this street guide who is like, really plugged into the culinary world. Who talks to you about... talks to you about some of this culture here, and takes you to some of the best restaurants.

But the chef community here is very insular and doesn't just like wanna let in some rando from another dimension. But he eyes this mortar and pestle and says if you give it to him, he'll take you to the best restaurant in this entire world that will change your life. And it will plug you into this community in just a really complete way and you will learn things you could never even imagine about food.

Taako: Yeah, now be careful with it. I really treasure it.

Griffin: [chuckles] Okay, you hand it over and this guide is like, he says:

Guide: I'm gonna get those good spices out of this one, that sea salt flavor. Mm, mm, mm. You got no idea what a treasure you're giving up here. This thing was made by a friend with a lot of love, I can tell that much. Mm, mm, mm.

Taako: Oh yeah, it's really paining me. Anyway.

Clint: Were you going for a Bourdain thing there?

Griffin: I don't know what I was going for there. You are taken— You and Lup are taken to a restaurant that is in the basement of another restaurant. And sure enough, it's just chefs here. And you guys are— You and Lup are both good at cooking, but this is like... they are on some next level shit.

And I think the thing I wanna get out of this scene is, you... you eat this... you eat this dish, Taako. And it's not a taco. But it is... it's spicy. And it is like... It's really spicy. And it is savory and it is delicious, and you've never had anything like it before.

And it is absolutely the best, the best thing you've ever eaten. It's kind of like an open-faced sandwich situation, almost. With like this spicy sauce and this really creamy purée sort of on the side of it, that has this sort of nutmeg-like substance grated over it. And it is like—

Justin: Mm.

Griffin: And it is this flavor profile that you have never quite tasted. And how much like— Obviously, Taako and Lup do a lot of cooking. But how much invention of meals do you do?

Justin: I feel like I've had to get relatively creative in the past 30 years because I've had to deal with whatever I've had access to.

Griffin: Yeah.

Justin: So, I feel like ingenuity is kind of a strong suit.

Griffin: I don't know how to describe this. But as you eat this dish, you feel this like... You feel a pulling at something inside of you. And you don't know what it is. Because, in a way, it's intangible. But at the same time, it's real, because you can feel it.

The moment you eat this meal, the moment your mind starts reeling with all of these new culinary possibilities, a bond is created. And imagine a long thread with one end tied around you and another tied around a person, a moment. When people talk about destiny, this is the kind of thing that they talk about.

And you feel it now, because there's so much power in it, Taako. And whatever's on the other end, whoever, they feel it too. And you feel it the entire time that you're eating this dish. And as you like... you just kind of

come to your senses and look down and your plate's empty, because you just finished. And Lup is like:

Lup: Taako, did you hear me?

Taako: What? What? What happened? Where am I?

Lup: We're in this restaurant. This is fucking unbelievable, right?

Taako: Yeah, it's... That's the word for it. Unbelievable.

Griffin: And I think just like, at times when you're not doing something and you're not running away from the apocalypse, and you're not you know, fighting off the horde of darkness. In the quieter times, when you don't have much else to do, you just think about this dish and you think about that feeling of something waiting to be unlocked.

Justin: Mm-hm.

Griffin: I don't think it— like, it's not tormenting you. It's just like... it's just there and it's inside of you. And you reminisce about it. And I think maybe you try to recreate this dish from time to time, and you can do it fairly well. But it's not the dish you wanna— it's not the dish you wanna make.

Justin: Yeah, it's like a dream that I just barely— I just woke up and I could just barely sort of remember. But every time I grasp a fragment of it, it dissipates in my hands like sand.

Clint: Wow. That was beautiful.

Justin: Mm-hm.

Griffin: Let's say this roll represents your like... No, you know what? You found this restaurant with that good mind roll. And I think just also, just in this one night, you learn more about cooking than the 30 odd years that you've been on this journey. So, go ahead and take plus two experience.

Justin: Nice.

Griffin: And Merle, let's get to your thing. So Merle, you have been training. You spend this year training, here at the First Monastery. And you've been living at the monastery. And that has maybe been a little bit uncomfortable, right? Like, you don't really know anybody there except for the abbess, who sort of pitched you this deal that she would give you the Light if you trained under her.

And it was a pretty slow start. Like, a lot of just meditating in a room for days. And like carrying buckets of water to prove that you are patient. And I guess I can leave that up to you. What kind of spiritual training do you think Merle kind of underwent in this monastery?

Clint: I think he did a lot of looking within.

Griffin: Mm-hmm?

Clint: I think he used his third eye to look deep, deep into the maelstrom that is his soul.

Griffin: Shit.

Justin: Mm-hm.

Clint: And found himself wanting. [laughs]

Griffin: [laughs]

Justin: [laughs]

Griffin: Yeah, all right.

Clint: A lot of introspection. And reading? Would there be reading?

Griffin: Yeah, sure. There's lots of books and lots of reading. I mean, this is a world of just full-blown harmony. And so like, all of these cultures sort of... It's not uncommon to like, go into a library, like the one in the First Monastery, and find literature and, you know, textbooks and poetry. And all

kinds of arcane tomes from all these different cultures who are kind of you know, sharing with each other to create a richer civilization for all of them.

And so yeah, there's books in here that are just, they're unbelievable. And you also, I think, eat some great food here too, at the First Monastery. I think they take pretty good care of you here.

Clint: And martial arts too? I mean, I assume I'm learning, you know... training my body.

Griffin: Yeah, fuck it. Why don't you roll plus body, real quick? And I think there— 'Cause there is sort of a— I think a like, physical training component to what you do here.

Justin: Hold on, time out. Dad's making a jerk off motion at me. So, I assume he forgot his dice.

Clint: No, it's a— I forgot to grab my dice. Can I—

Justin: Go get your dice then.

Clint: Can I use your dice?

Griffin: He just needs—

Justin: No, 'cause we're gonna do this whole thing—

Griffin: He just needs two six-sided dice.

Travis: You don't use another player's dice? What are you talking about?

Justin: I know. He'll get his old man funk all over them.

Griffin: It's two six-sided dice! Just go crack open a Monopoly box.

Travis: Would you drive another man's hog?

Clint: All right, wait a minute. So, what am I rolling?

Griffin: Plus body.

Justin: Dice.

Clint: Plus body, okay.

[sound of dice thrown]

Clint: That's a 5 and a 2, and a -1!

Travis: Whoops! Whoops-a-diddle.

Griffin: All right, so you're not... Yeah, you're not so good at— I was gonna give you an experience opportunity here. But I don't— I think that you— You just never really pick up—

Justin: To be fair, he did have— you did give him an experience opportunity. It's just not one that he managed to capitalize on. [chuckles]

Griffin: Right, exactly.

Travis: We call that a stopportunity.

Griffin: You got a stopportunity. And so, you prove that you're not so good at the physical stuff. And actually, the abbess is like, a little bit concerned that maybe you don't have what it takes to be a part of this monastery. But all of this introspection and quiet sort of reflection that you're capable of doing, shows a profound sort of stillness that I think is what earns you the trust here at the monastery.

Travis: If I may, I don't wanna fill in story for Merle. But I picture a scene where there's, you know, a teacher sitting down to instruct him on the art of meditation and search of inner peace. And the instructor's explaining to him that it can take a lifetime to find and after like 45 seconds Merle's like, "Okay, got it. Yup, I'm inner-peaceful."

Griffin: "Crushed. Super peaceful."

Travis: "Done."

Griffin: I think another thing is just to sort of play to your strengths, there's a garden here. And you help it grow maybe. Like that's sort of your— that's sort of your whole— that's sort of your main strength. And seeing how this garden flourishes under your care, the Abbess Oriana calls you into her quarters and explains to you what the First Monastery has done.

And what she explains is that the monastery and the people who train there have created a technique that they have taught to the different rulers across this entire world for decades now. And it's allowed all these different nations to find peace during times of potential turmoil. And this power, she explains, is called parlay.

And thanks to the training you've undergone, Merle, and the way you've sort of proven yourself, you are taught this ability also. And this takes like— This is the rest of your year, working one-on-one with the abbess, as she teaches you this ability of parlay.

And what you learn is that it allows you to summon any entity into an extra-dimensional space that you create. And in this room, you are able to communicate with your visitor and discuss terms of peace and sort of learn about your potential foe.

And in this place, sort of come to an understanding with them. But in order to do so, it requires an act of absolute humility, because at any time, the visitor, the person that you call into this space to talk about peace, can harm you or kill you.

Which kills you both in this space and in the real world. But you have no such option. You are there solely as an arbiter, as a peacemaker. You are humbly waging your life in an effort to cease conflict between yourself and a rival.

And so, the different nations have been using this technique for years to meet with their enemies and discuss terms of peace with them, in this place where they could be killed at any second. And in humbling themselves like

that, they are able to find sort of the peaceful accord that this world has come to. And so, you—

Travis: Griffin, is it possible that this might come up again sometime in the future?

Griffin: It's about to come up in the next 10 seconds.

Travis: Oh, okay.

Clint: And we have to do it naked, right?

Griffin: That's up to you and your lord.

Travis: [laughs]

Griffin: Yeah, it could be. Maybe, if you want?

Justin: Sometimes people draw the things that we say with our mouths.

Griffin: That's the other thing.

Justin: I'd rather this not be something that we—

Clint: Okay, not naked. Not naked. Pants. Pants.

Griffin: Pants only. All right, that's fine. And so, you make it to the end of this year and you are called to the Abbess's quarters once again. And when you get there, the rest of the crew is there also, waiting for you. And this is sort of your graduation, Merle.

And in order to get the Light, you will need to use the power of parlay right now to make peace with your rival. And thinking about it and sort of— I think you get some pressure from Davenport and Lup and Barry. They see this as an opportunity to talk to the Hunger.

To find something in there that you can converse with, with parlay. And try and find peace. Because you haven't been able to outrun it or escape it or

kill it. And so, maybe this is— maybe this is the option. And so, that is the request that is put before you.

Clint: This feels like Michael Jackson's Bad video.

Griffin: In what way does it possibly feel like that?

Travis: Wait, what?

Justin: Is it— Do you mean Remember the Time?

Clint: Is that it? Is that—

Travis: Or Smooth Criminal?

Justin: It's the worst video ever made.

Clint: Oh, with the— When they're in Egypt and the Sphinx—

Justin: Yeah, that's his Bad video.

Clint: Yeah, that's what I was thinking of. The one where they're dressed up like pharaohs.

Travis: No, that also doesn't track. Hold on. None of this tracks.

Griffin: No, none of this really makes sense. This doesn't—

Travis: Maybe it's like Thriller?

Clint: Hey! Hey, whose adventure is this?

Griffin: I mean, right now, it's Merle's.

Clint: All right, I'll... Let me prepare myself for parlay.

Griffin: Keep in mind, I wanna make sure the rules of this are clear. You do this and this power allows you to basically pull in somebody who you want to make peace with in this extradimensional space.

And in this space, you can talk to them and make peace with them. But at any moment, they could kill you and you can't touch them. That act of humility is what is sort of the crux of that peacemaking process. So, every time you use this, you are rolling the dice, so to speak. No pun intended.

Clint: Oh God. Wait, really, there's— Now, come on. There's dice rolling? Come on, Ditto.

Griffin: There doesn't need to be.

Clint: [relieved sigh]

Griffin: Yeah, what do you say to this proposal?

Merle: What do you guys— Who do you think I ought to talk to? You know, I had that beef with that guy...

Travis: Greg Grimaldis.

Merle: You remember the guy that sold me those bad wheels? That's— I really hate that guy. I got beef with him.

Travis: Wow. Really? Did you study at UCB, dad? You're amazing!

Justin: To be fair... to be fair, you probably should've known the bad wheels were unlicensed Hot Wheels that were going to fall apart immediately.

Clint: Bad Wheels, get the track!

Justin: It said 'bad wheels' right there on the package.

Clint: Yeah, that's true. All right, who do you—

Merle: Who do you guys think? Who do I—

Griffin: Lup chimes in and says:

Lup: I wouldn't hate if you did Greg Gremaldis, but I feel like that might be a wasted opportunity.

Merle: Yeah... yeah.

Lup: I mean, it's the Hunger, Merle. We have an opportunity to learn something about the Hunger that we could maybe use. If you pull them into this space and talk to them for a while... and just ask them questions about themselves? Anything we learn about the Hunger is a potential tool we can use to stop it someday.

Magnus: Not only that, but even if you die, we just get on the ship and we fly away. And you'll be back.

Lup: Yeah, exactly.

Magnus: So like, it's a win— Well, not really win-win. More like win-neutral.

Merle: You know it hurts. You remember that it hurts to die?

Magnus: No, yeah, I've done it a lot. But don't be a—

Merle: Yeah, I know.

Magnus: Don't be a you know, coward. Come on.

Taako: I left the room!

Griffin: [laughs]

Merle: Where the hell did Taako— Taako!

Magnus: Taako's gone.

Taako: I left the room! Boring, it got boring.

Magnus: It got boring. Apparently, it got boring. So, you know what? Here's... I say you do it. 'Cause if you don't, we won't get the Light. And also, it would make for bad podcasting.

Merle: Alright... Alright, I peel off my shirt.

Magnus: Woah—

Griffin: [chuckles]

Merle: And my socks and my shoes.

Taako: I left the room again! I double left. I double left the room.

Griffin: Taako's two rooms away.

Travis: Taako's two rooms away.

Griffin: Yeah.

Clint: We're livestreaming this, so they can see it.

Griffin: As you're prepping, Barry walks over to you and he's like:

Barry: Merle, I... This is really brave of you and I'm really— I'm very— I'm proud of you, I guess. I just... Remember, any piece of information you get is something we can use. Find out what the Hunger... Find out what it is.

Find out where it came from. Find out its weaknesses. Find out why it's— What's its motivation? Why is it doing what it does? Find out the source. If you can find that stuff out, Merle, then we might be able to find out what we need to do to kill that thing once and for all.

Magnus: And this might be tough for you, but maybe try not insulting it?

Merle: [exasperated sigh]

Magnus: Maybe try not being incredibly irreverent.

Taako: Don't be yourself.

Merle: You're taking away my strongest cards.

Magnus: Well...

Merle: All right, what do you— The only one I haven't heard from, Lucinda. What do you think?

Griffin: Nope.

Travis: That's not her name. You know it, come on...

Merle: Lucretia!

Travis: Yeah.

Justin: There it is.

Merle: Lucretia!

Griffin: She walks over and says— She kind of kneels down and she says:

Lucretia: Merle, I know that memory is a problem for you sometimes. I make you that gingko tea from time to time to help out. But it's imperative that whatever you learn you bring back to me so I can write it down.

Griffin: She says:

Lucretia: I'm... Good luck.

Griffin: And stands up. What does this look like? Like, what does it— what does it... When you use this ability, when you use parlay, what does it look like to everybody else in the room? As you are sort of spirited away to this extra-dimensional place?

Clint: I am... You can still see my outline, but it's like there's no color at all. It looks like an outline of a dwarf made of smoke.

Griffin: Interesting.

Justin: I was hoping he would just sort of go glassy and fall on his face, is what I was kind of praying for. Oh well...

Clint: There's that. That could happen too.

Justin: Oh well. I like Dad's.

Griffin: You see Merle, I guess, take his shirt off and sit down on a comfortable pillow, sort of in the center of the room. And you watch as like, in the blink of an eye, you just— You kind of see his outline. And you kind of see just this smoke, this fog that is just sort of floating there, where Merle was.

And it's more or less like static, and it's kind of weird. It's not drifting away in any way. It's just in the shape of Merle. A Merle-shaped cloud of fog. Merle, what you see is, also like in the blink of an eye, you are looking at this room, the abbess's quarters. And you blink. And you're in a completely different place.

You are sitting in a very comfortable, very— what we would think of as modern sort of office chair, in front of a long table. And you are sitting in a boardroom. You're sitting in a boardroom and it's a really fancy boardroom. You look out the— One of the walls, the exterior wall of this room is just one huge window and you can tell you're really high up. You're like 80 stories up in this board room of this massive skyscraper.

And it's pretty dim in this room. But the sunset outside is casting a calming orange light into this room, drawing long shadows across this conference table. And you're seated at one end of this table. And when you projected this space, when you used parlay, you were just focusing on the Hunger. And what is sitting in this chair, at the other end of the room, with his back to that big window, is a man, a human man.

And he's got a fairly slim build. He looks to be in his early 50s or so. His salt and pepper hair is extremely well manicured and his face is smooth. He's wearing a sharp gray suit with a really stylish narrow black tie and the most expensive pair of shoes you've probably ever seen. He looks really slick. And most of all, he looks surprised.

Travis: It's Sterling Cooper!

Griffin: And he clears his throat and he tries to speak, but no sound comes out at all. He just kind of croaks. And he tries that a few times and kind of looks exasperated. And then all of a sudden, there's a pitcher of water on the table. And he pours himself a glass and he takes a drink, and he clears his throat again. And he says... I gotta think of what this guy's voice is gonna be, 'cause I'm gonna be using it a bit.

Travis: I'm really embarrassed because I didn't realize Sterling Cooper was the name of the agency. I was trying to think of—

Griffin: And not the— Yeah.

Clint: [laughs]

Travis: Roger Sterling— Anyways, I'm gonna stick with Sterling Cooper though.

Griffin: This very well put together guy says:

John: Okay. Okay, this is... This is new. Were you the one that brought me here? Where... Where are we right now?

Merle: This, um, is the parlay room.

John: The parlor room?

Merle: Yeah, let's go with that. The parlay parlor. This is the parlay parlor.

Justin: I jump into the vision.

Taako: Merle, why do you sound so weird?

Merle: It's the parlay parlor.

Travis: There we go.

Merle: And this is my character voice. I would like to introduce myself.

John: Yeah, what's your— What's your name?

Merle: Highchurch. Merle Highchurch.

John: Your name's Highchurch Merle? Oh, you were doing— Okay.

Merle: And I have to ask. Do you mind telling me your name? We have labels... And I assign labels, just for people's actions. It's kind of a thing I do. So, what actually is your name?

John: I don't know that I feel comfortable telling you my name just yet. We've only met and... Sorry, this is really weird. I haven't actually... been anywhere in a while. So...

Merle: Sure.

John: How did you find me? How did you pull me out, I guess?

Merle: I have been kind of following your career. Following by leading—[chuckles] I guess. And I am, well... I don't always agree with everything. But I'm kind of a fan. I've been kind of observing. And it's just, I really want to... I really wanna get to know you.

I think, in all walks of life, it's important to know the people that you're dealing with. And so, I wanted to get to know you a little bit better. I wanna get to know the guy behind the suit, behind the tie and the really nice footwear.

Griffin: He kind of chuckles. And as he chuckles, he kind of catches himself. And he's like:

John: Oh... sorry... I just realized, I haven't laughed in a while. I guess I haven't done anything in a while for that matter. You're not the first fan I've had or the first one to approach me. Although, again, it's been a while. Just to check, can I go whenever I want? I think I'm gonna head out.

Merle: Oh...

John: This has been novel, but I can't risk getting caught in some sort of weird pocket dimension.

Merle: Oh, well... Listen. I'm not gonna hold you here against your will. I don't want anybody to hang around. But I am offering, you know, kind of a quid pro quo exchange of information. I mean, you must be extremely interested in me and my friends? Since, well... You've been hunting us for years and years and years.

John: I've been hunting you?

Griffin: He says. And he—

Merle: Mm-hm, yeah. Yeah.

Griffin: I think he stands up from the office chair he's sitting in when he says that.

John: What are you— What are you talking about?

Merle: Well, the thing is, you've... you've kind of been, well, chasing me and my friends, my family, my team. As we've kind of hopped, skipped and jumped around to different planes. And so yeah, I just thought maybe you'd like to get to know the guy you're tracking down and actually have killed a buttload of times. [chuckles]

Griffin: He says:

John: Doesn't seem like it's taken, if I've been killing you all these times? But...

Merle: Well, I got better.

John: Well... If I've been hunting you, I don't think I need information. It kind of seems like I've got you right here.

Griffin: And he extends his hand, palm first. And you see this sort of black fire surround his hand. And you feel this incredible pain as black fire spreads throughout your body from your insides out, just killing you in a second. And that, Merle, is how your meeting ended. Your first conversation of many that you would have over the following dozens of cycles with the man who became the Hunger.

[theme music plays]

[ad break]

Griffin: Got a few Jumbotrons here. First one is for a new strategy board game called near and far. You can visit www.redravengames.com/nearandfar for all the details. It's a strategy board game with an RPG feel. You and up to four friends each choose to play as one of eight heroes as you adventure through an atlas of 11 different maps, in your search for the mythical last ruin.

Build your party, collect treasure and read through a book of quests, making decisions that will ultimately decide your fate. Again, you can check out that game, it sounds really cool, at www.redravengames.com/nearandfar.

Also, I have another Jumbotron here. This one's from Ray, the man. And it's for Eric, the man. I'm kind of confused who actually earns that honorific. Ray says to Eric, "Happy 21st birthday, Eric! I figured sending you a message via our fave podcast would beat last year's gift of accidentally buying myself OW." I think that's Overwatch?

"So, here it is, from Griffin himself. Thanks so much for welcoming me to this awesome university the two of us now attend. And here is to all of your future adventures and endeavors. Stay cool and have fun. Fist bump." I can't do that to you— I can't do that to you from across the web. But also

because my fist is just really sticky right now because of all this oatmeal I just ate.

[ad break]

[theme music plays]

Griffin: And you wake up in the next cycle and relay some of this information to everybody else. And Barry seems disappointed. He says:

Barry: Merle, I'm sorry, but can you try again? I know that sounds horrible. But it seems like we've got a direct line to this guy, whoever he is. And I think— I think maybe there's another tack you can take here and get some information. Can you please try again?

Merle: Yeah, let me change my pants and then I'm off. Pants changed.

Griffin: What's your... When you do this, do you wait for the end of the year to... the end of the cycle to have this meeting with the Hunger? Or do you wanna just get it out of the way, knowing that like—

Clint: No, let's get right back in it. Let's get right back in it.

Griffin: The very next cycle, you are in that space. You are in that high rise conference room. And this time, when this man sees you at the other end of the table, he stands up right away and he says:

John: Okay, okay. Interesting. It seems like you were telling the truth. Sorry about killing you before, I just... I needed to know that I could get out of here if I need to. Now I know the rules and now we can talk, I guess.

Merle: And now, maybe, you have a little bit of an inkling onto how serious I am? You've heard people say on my life? Well, that's just what I'm doing. This is on my life. So listen, you can kill me any time you want to. But it's obviously not lasting. And I would think that if you were working so hard to kill me, you would want it to last.

John: Yeah, that is a good point. Well, I think an exchange of information would be good. Merle, you said?

Merle: Actually, I said Highchurch, Merle Highchurch. But yeah, yeah. Merle.

Justin: [chuckles]

Griffin: He sits down and pours himself a glass of water and says:

John: Do you want— Are you thirsty? I don't know how this works. I don't know if you have thirst, wherever we are.

Merle: I'm good. I had one of those new blue Mountain Dew's, right before I came here. Now that we have this rapport going, now do you trust me enough to tell me your name?

Griffin: He says:

John: I believe it... I believe it was John. It's been... It's so long, Merle. You have to understand. I haven't been John for a bit, but probably— For the sake of—

Merle: Why is that exactly? What have you been doing all this time when you haven't been John?

Griffin: He says:

John: If I've been pursuing you, or I guess we've been pursuing you, I think you know what turned out. I... Hm. I'm in an uncomfortable position, Merle—

Merle: Sure.

John: ... Because there's something I want. There's something I'm trying to do. And I've been at it for a long time. But I would be lying if I said I wasn't... bored, I guess?

Griffin: And he kind of crosses his fingers and... Sort of taps his fingers against the table and he says:

John: It's kind of nice to talk to somebody. So, I think we should talk. And I'd like to learn more about your invincibility. And I don't mind sharing a little bit about myself, I suppose. But I need you to understand that there are things that I'm going to do.

And there's not much that either of us can do about that to stop it. But as long as we're here, let's talk, sure. And I'll tell the truth. As long as you promise to as well. What do you say? This can be our little truth zone? What do you say, Merle?

Merle: Truth Zone... I like it!

Travis: [laughs] That the zone you've been looking for?

Justin: [laughs]

Merle: I like it! I have been hunting for just the right zone. Yeah, truth zone! Or we could call it the truthful zone. Or the zone of truthfulnessociety. Yeah, that's it. The zone of truthfulnessociety.

Griffin: He actually— As you keep going and going and going, he actually— The smile on his face kind of dissipates. And he says:

John: I do need you to understand though, that I'm not gonna stay here for very long. I don't know how this works. I don't know if this is some sort of trap. This isn't a trap, is it, Merle?

Merle: [chuckles] I don't think so. I think it's just a couple of guys getting to know each other.

Griffin: He says:

John: So, I'm gonna need to take off eventually. But there's no need to think about that now. Let's have a conversation.

Merle: Okay, get your shirt off.

Griffin: He laughs and says:

John: No.

Griffin: The way that I want this to work is we're gonna talk. But roll plus heart and—

Clint: You said there wasn't any rolling...

Griffin: [laughs] You're good at heart, though.

[sound of dice thrown]

Clint: 3 and 4, plus 2, is 9.

Griffin: Okay. With a 9, you can ask John a question. You can ask the Hunger a question. And he'll answer it truthfully. He is also going to ask you a question that you must answer truthfully. And both of you will have something at the end of that exchange.

Merle: What are you after?

John: Hm... That's a big—

Travis: Man, just going right for it, huh?

Justin: Yeah.

Griffin: He smiles and says—

Justin: No favorite movie? Cake or pie?

Clint: [chuckles]

Griffin: He says—

Merle: That's number two and number three, thank you.

Griffin: He says:

John: That's a big question, Merle. I'm after— hm... Well... Peace, I suppose? It's... Oh god, there are so many pieces to this question. I am a man, Merle, who knows the answer to the question of why we're all here. And to be frank, I didn't like it.

There are laws and limitations placed on every living thing that they are never made aware of. But once you know them, Merle, once you see them, they are too cruel to bear. And so, what I want, Merle, is to grow, I suppose. I take it that you've seen me absorb and expand in the wild.

I'm doing this, Merle, not out of spite or malice. I'm doing this to become larger than those limitations can contain. To overtake whatever capricious creator installed those limitations in the first place. That's a long-winded answer and probably more than you were looking for. I just— I want to grow, Merle.

Justin: Uh-oh, guys. He's after sick gains. I was afraid of this.

Travis: Oh no, not like this.

Justin: When a bro is after gains, sick gains, there's very little you can do to stop him. I'm pretty worried now.

Griffin: He says:

John: Merle, I wanna know how you keep coming back to life.

Merle: [chuckles] I honest to god don't know!

John: Merle...

Merle: All right, my turn. No, I don't know?

Griffin: He extends his hand and there's some fire there and says—

Merle: No, wait, wait, wait. Hang on. Hang on there, rusty.

John: This agreement won't work unless you tell me the truth also.

Merle: That is honest to god the truth. I die and poof, there's a flash of light and there I am again.

John: Where?

Justin: We've chosen the perfect person for this. It's like sending a mildly eloquent pinata in.

Merle: I don't—[laughs]

Justin: Best of luck trying to get information out of this guy.

Griffin: He says:

John: When you come back to life, where are you?

Merle: It's like this big room. And it's on a ship.

John: A ship?

Merle: Yes.

John: Oh, you're traveling between these worlds on a ship?

Merle: I think it's time for me to ask another question.

Griffin: He looks around. And now, he looks kind of nervous. And he says:

John: Yeah, I think that's gonna have to wait.

Griffin: And he kills you.

Clint: Ah...

Griffin: Do you come back?

Clint: Heck yeah, I come back!

Justin: What did I do that year?

Griffin: [laughs]

Travis: Yeah, what's Magnus up to? Just fuck'n—

Griffin: We're gonna—

Travis: Lifting? Crunches?

Griffin: You're back in that room. It's another cycle. Maybe not the very next one. I guess that's up to you. But again, we're kind of dealing in abstractions. And you're back in that room. And this time, he's kind of ready for you. He has two glasses of water poured. And he's there before you. And he's like:

John: Oh, Merle. Hi. Welcome back. I'm sorry about the sort of unpleasantness at the end of the last sort of meeting we had. But maybe we'll do better this time?

Merle: Listen, John. You got it. Okay!

Griffin: Roll plus heart.

[sound of dice thrown]

Clint: 7, plus 2. It's another 9.

Griffin: Okay. You know the deal. Ask him a question and he gets to ask you one.

Merle: So, you keep saying we? But then sometimes you say I. What's the deal with that, John?

Griffin: He says:

John: Oh, another tough one. But I did tell you I'd answer honestly... I am John. And I am me. I was a human. I still am, I suppose, somewhere in here. I'm a public speaker. I was one. A successful one too, if memory serves.

And people from around the world would come to hear my speeches and my message. And I would delight in their adulation. And I would preach understanding and the pursuit of enlightenment, and the broadening of personal horizons.

I'm kind of a big picture guy, Merle. And I suppose when I say we, I'm talking about everyone in here. Everyone... It's weird, Merle. I've never talked to anybody about this, outside. Usually, my transactions with other people are, you know, adding them to my being. So, I don't—

Merle: Yeah, it feels good, doesn't it? It feels good, doesn't it?

Griffin: He says:

John: I've been apparently pursuing you for a while. What do you call me?

Merle: Ah! Is that your question?

John: I don't need to know it. I just suppose I was looking for a way to make this conversation more convenient.

Merle: Sure.

John: For my question, Merle, I would ask... hm... What does your ship look like?

Merle: Hm! I should know that...

Clint: [laughs]

Griffin: You can just say, "I answer him." We don't— Obviously, everybody listening at home has heard this before. And so, we don't have to necessarily

play out your side. If you just wanna say, "I tell him what the ship looks like," that's fine.

Clint: [laughs]

Travis: You, Clint, don't know. But Merle's been in and next to it many times.

Griffin: Merle definitely knows. He been on it for like a long time.

Clint: I go into great detail. I grab a cocktail napkin and I draw a fuck'n sketch for him.

Griffin: Okay?

Clint: And he's wowed by it. How's that?

Griffin: He takes that sketch and he says:

John: Wow, this is great, thanks. I don't think I can bring this out of here with me. But...

Merle: Oh, sorry. Well, it's a visual aid. It's like you know, when you teach at school.

Griffin: He says:

John: This is really helpful. I'm going to...

Griffin: He looks at his watch and he says:

John: I'm gonna to check in on this And I guess I'll talk to you in a year, hopefully.

Griffin: And he kills you.

Clint: [exclaims]

Justin: [laughs]

Travis: Can we check in with Merle before his next meeting with John?

Griffin: Sure, yeah. You... I mean, after every cycle, whenever you all pop back up on the ship, I think Lup and Barry, and really everybody, wants to hear, did you learn anything valuable? And you relay to them what you've learned.

Magnus: Hey. Hey, Merle. Just as like, a tactician, I guess... Am I the tactical officer, I guess?

Merle: You're proficient in that, yeah.

Magnus: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Maybe stop giving him so much tactical information about you know, our ship and how we escape him every time? Just a... suggestion. We're learning a lot about him, esoterically. But not like weakness, strengths, fighting...

Merle: Okay, I'll just say, "How do I kill you, John?" I'll just ask that next time, smart guy.

Magnus: That's what he's asking you!

Merle: No, he's not! He's asking me how I come back to life.

Magnus: His first question was how do you come back to life!? That's, "How do I kill you for good?" Merle!

Merle: I don't know!

Griffin: Let's get into another one.

Clint: Oh, god.

Justin: All right, the door opens.

Taako: Hey guys, I've been gone a whole year. What did I miss? I can't believe I spent an entire year weightlifting. That's two years back-to-back. I'm getting pretty diesel, I guess.

Griffin: [laughs]

Clint: [laughs]

Taako: Whoof!

Magnus: I've been studying magic! I'm super good at conjuration now.

Taako: And I'm good at fighting and we're best friends.

Griffin: You're back in that space, Merle. And—

Merle: Hey, listen, John. In the spirit of cooperation, why don't you ask me first? It's always me asking first. That seems a little rude. I'm your host. You're my guest.

John: Okay.

Merle: You ask first.

Griffin: He says:

John: Alright. That's only fair, I guess.

Griffin: Roll plus heart for me.

[sound of dice thrown]

Clint: 7 plus 2— I have rolled three 7s in a row! 7, plus 2, is 9.

Travis: It's the most common number, you see.

Griffin: It's statistically the most likely number, yeah. He says:

John: Okay, I'll go first. You're the ones who have been collecting the Light of Creation and getting it away from me, aren't you?

Merle: Yes.

John: Hm. I have to say, Merle, that's pretty vexing. I would appreciate it if you wouldn't do that anymore. I suppose that this is not a plea that you're going to take seriously... But it's very inconvenient for me.

Merle: Okay. Why?

John: Is that your question?

Merle: Yeah.

Griffin: He says:

John: What I am... What do you— Just tell me what you call me?

Merle: No, no, no—

John: It's gonna make this so much easier.

Merle: No, no, no. Nuh-uh.

John: Okay...

Merle: I asked the question.

John: How should I explain this... No two things can occupy the same space, Merle. But that is exactly what I am. I am a bunch of places in the same place, on top of and within, and without one another. When I consume a plane, I tie it on, so to speak.

Its bonds become my bonds. And that alone is enough to sustain me. Everything about that process betrays the laws of physics and mathematics, and arcane interactions. And the Light of Creation is what makes that process possible.

Griffin: And he smiles and he says:

John: I don't mean to be vain, but I must look beautiful from your perspective. All those countless worlds' bonds, just streaming off of me? It must be a sight to behold. I need that light to accomplish my goals. And when you keep it from me, it is... Well, Merle, it's... I can't let it keep happening for much longer.

Griffin: And he kills you. Taako and Lup and I think— Taako, I think you're the one who does it that year, that cycle. After Merle goes and turns all smoky. And I think every time that Merle dies in this place, the smoke just evaporates, and you know.

Justin: We just sweep him up. Just falls into a dust pile.

Clint: [laughs]

Griffin: No, it's not like ash. It's just like he— the smoke blows away and he's gone. That year, Taako, you're just like doing your thing, I guess weightlifting. And Lup wants to practice some magic, just to make sure that you guys are staying sharp. And you cast blink.

And when you cast blink— and you've done this a few times now... This is the first time that you see these figures. They are these little white shapes, about knee high. And they are just quietly watching you, like they are scouting you. And they've never been there before. You can't seem to interact with them in any way.

When they see you see them, they disappear. But after Merle's first few visits with the Hunger, these scouts start keeping tabs on you. Let's actually fast forward a bit, 'cause this is how Merle dies more than everybody else. Is because he keeps diving into this parlay with John to try and learn more.

Clint: [chuckles]

Griffin: And it's tough! I think you actually texted me a while ago, saying you wanted Merle to have this heroic death. You have like 50-some odd ones, at John's hand alone.

Clint: [laughs]

Griffin: And so, this is... this forward a lot. This is like a lot of cycles forward. And obviously, we're gonna hop back into the place that we were when we start playing the rest of this game.

Clint: Okay.

Griffin: But you're back in this space and you see—

Merle: Johnny!

Griffin: Yeah, it's been—

Merle: Johnny boy!

Griffin: It's been a couple dozen times. He has a chessboard set up. It seems like he can kind of make things in this space, to make himself sort of more comfortable. And so, you talk to him. And you're like... Obviously, there's animosity between the two of you, right, because he's been killing you all these times and he is this supernatural force that is pursuing you. But he sort of lets on that this is also the only time that he ever talks to anybody or exists as John. And so, he kind of looks forward to it a little bit. He tells you that.

Clint: Yeah!

Griffin: And so, this is a conversation that you have. And roll plus heart.

Clint: Come on, baby. Come on, baby.

[sound of dice thrown]

Clint: [laughs] Look... There's gotta be some reward for throwing four 7s in a row.

Justin: Mm... Yeah, there is. You get a 7. That's what you get.

Griffin: You get out of jail free. He says:

John: Can I...

Griffin: You guys are playing and— Actually, roll, plus mind real quick.

Clint: 8.

Griffin: Plus anything?

Clint: Plus 1 is 9.

Griffin: Wow, unbelievable.

Clint: [chuckles]

Griffin: You guys get each other in stalemate. Or no, just... He puts you in stalemate and says:

John: Oh, shoot. I thought I had you that time. All right—

Merle: Damn... Ah, I thought you had me too, you rascal!

Griffin: He says:

John: Do you mind if I go first?

Merle: No, no, no. Go ahead.

Griffin: He takes a big drink of water.

John: The curiosity's killing me and I know this isn't gonna be very helpful in sort of my means. But what do you call me, Merle? What do you all call me?

Merle: Oh, we call you a lot of things you probably don't wanna be repeated. Taako says you're gauche. I don't even know what gauche means. He says you're gauche.

John: What do you—

Merle: And I call you something completely differently now than I did before.

Griffin: He says:

John: Well, that's nice to hear. But before, was there a name for what I am? It would be—

Merle: You mean before I got to know you?

John: Yeah, it would be good just for.. I guess for me to know what I am. What do you call me?

Merle: Well, I used to call you the Hunger.

Griffin: He kind of laughs.

John: The Hunger?

Merle: Yeah.

Griffin: He says:

John: I kind of like that.

Merle: Yeah, I thought you might.

John: Maybe a little inaccurate. What— Is there something you wanna know, Merle?

Merle: Yeah, there is something I'd like to know. Are you my friend?

Griffin: Hm...

Travis: Not what I was expecting.

Griffin: But very fucking good. Give me a minute, I'm reeling a little bit. The smile drops from his face and he stands up. And I think he reaches out his hand with the fire. But he pulls it back down and... He kind of shakes his head and he says:

John: What am I doing?

Griffin: And he looks out the window for like a minute without talking. And he turns back to you and says:

John: To have friendship, Merle, it requires you to... love someone and be invested in your shared happiness. And these things, Merle, friendship and love and happiness, they're... they're all so small.

In the grand scheme of things, Merle, they last a second. And I just don't... [sighs] What brings you happiness, Merle? I know that the game is over but what... What brings you joy, Merle? Please, I... Give me this freebie, I'm... Just tell me.

Merle: What brings me joy is... life. I think you can find joy anywhere in life. I think it's a conscious choice. I think you... You choose joy in life. And no matter how bad things are, no matter how crummy, no matter how dark, no matter how many times some guy named John kills your ass—

Griffin: He chuckles.

Merle: ... You find joy. I've found joy, honest to god, getting to know you. I've found joy playing chess with you. I have enjoyed— I haven't enjoyed you know, getting my ass killed. But I find joy whatever I do. I don't always

do things right and I don't always do things smart. And I don't always do a character voice.

Griffin: [chuckles]

Merle: But whatever I do, I find joy in it. Because at the end of the day, that's all you got. Is looking back on the joy you had and the joy you found, and the joy you gave other people.

Griffin: I think his back is turned to you for most of this, since he just kind of looks out the window. And he says:

John: I think there was probably a time where I... had joy. Where I experienced fleeting happiness or anger, or fear. But god, it's just been so long, Merle, I... I used to spend my days... considering the nature of time and existence. Maybe that brought me joy once.

But... unlike everybody else who ever thought about those questions, who ever pondered the meaning of it all, I— and you may find this hard to believe, but... I solved it, Merle. I saw the fullness of time. I pondered eternity and... was the first person and only person to successfully visualize its treacherous arc.

Griffin: He sits back down across the chessboard from you and he says:

John: You're a man of the cloth, Merle. Certainly, you've wondered too about what awaits our consciousness after death or—

Griffin: And he laughs and he says:

John: What am I saying? I've given you a firsthand experience a few times in this very room.

Griffin: And he says:

John: Perhaps for some people who think about it, there's nothing but infinite oblivion. The eternal erasure of your consciousness. Or for some, it's

eternal life in their god's glorious kingdom, or eternal cycling through all the inhabitants of their world. Any of these options, Merle, any of them are just...

Erasure or contentment, or revival, any of them are fine as abstract concepts. But eternally, Merle, eternally? You can't possibly conceive of the length of eternity, Merle. I have. It's maddening and hopeless. But it's this burden we're all saddled with from the moment of our creation.

It's a finish line that, by its definition, will never arrive. It stretches forever and ever, it's too ambivalent to even taunt those trapped behind it. It is the cruel price of existence, Merle. And it is too horrible to bear, once you've seen it. Existence, Merle... life, Merle, is horrible. To exist, to live, is horrible!

Griffin: And he kind of chuckles and realizes he got a little carried away there.

Merle: I don't think I wanna hang out with you anymore, John. I think I'm gonna take off. And you can continue wallowing in your sadness and your oblivion, and seeing nothing but the negative. And I'm gonna go on my way. And I'll tell you what, if we ever meet each other, somewhere in infinity, you can apologize to me and tell me you were wrong.

Griffin: He chuckles a little bit. And he turns towards you and he says:

John: I'm sorry you feel that way. You're the first person who I've sort of talked about this to, who hasn't listened. There were... Everyone listened, Merle. I'm not being hyperbolic. Every person in the world was swayed. I don't know why you're different. But everyone else listened.

Everything, everyone across our whole plane of existence. Our shared vexation with life covered the world like a blanket. And soon, every bird in the sky and every tree in every forest and every blade of grass, and grain of sand shared our fury. And it wasn't long before... it changed us.

Griffin: And I think as he's talking Merle, you see this scene outside, this constant orange sunset, start to turn inky and black. With these colorful ribbons of light that you've seen inside the Hunger so many times. And he says:

John: We changed our entire plane into something new altogether. A single being, fueled by... discontentment. Searching for something bigger than this existence, regardless of the cost.

Griffin: He turns towards you and he says:

John: You call us the Hunger. That's not entirely inaccurate. 'Cause we are... hungry. But it would be more accurate to simply call us, Dissatisfaction. But soon...

Griffin: And he holds up his hand and says:

John: ... You will call us Ascendant.

Merle: Well... we'll see. John, thanks for the chess game. And kiss my ass, you sanctimonious bastard.

Griffin: He frowns. And says:

John: Huh... I feel sad.

Griffin: And he kills you.

Justin: So, we hear about this from Merle and he tells us the whole thing.

Taako: Well, I got bad news for everybody. Our arch nemesis is Morrissey.

Clint: [laughs]

Taako: So... We have that to deal with now, apparently. John Morrissey is our arch nemesis. Perfect.

Griffin: I'm gonna set up the next cycle, just so that the ending isn't quite as pitch black. And also because I'm very excited about the next cycle. So, let's just set it up and then we'll resolve it next time. So, the seven of you have been at this for like half of a century now. This is Cycle 47. And as bizarre as your journey has been, certain things about it are formulaic.

Namely, your entry into a new reality has been the same every time. You pass through the barrier of realities, your physical forms are sort of stitched back together on your specific places aboard the Starblaster. You approach the 12 planes that make up this reality's planar system. You lower down into the Prime Material Plane and then you wait for the light to fall.

Your entry into cycle 47 though, is immediately different. As soon as you cross the threshold— During that crossing, in fact, you are assailed by this just deafening, incomprehensible noise. It is harsh and cacophonous. And after a few minutes, you kind of pick it apart. And you realize that what you heard wasn't just one noise. It was a ton of noises all sort of playing on top of each other.

And after talking about it for a while, you sort of pick apart that you heard like dozens of songs and symphonies, and poems, and folk tales being told. For some reason, as soon as you entered this plane, something projected all of these like compositions into your mind at once. And after a while, they all settle. And your team is a bit shaken.

Was there anything in the noise that you picked out, that kind of stood out to you? Again, it can be anything. It was songs and stories, and poems. What did you hear that stuck out in your mind?

Travis: Well, as I think everybody knows, Magnus's love of animals and you know, his heroic start, defending a dog. So, he hears a haunting melody about dogs that have escaped. And the cry that went up from across the town of who let all these dogs escape? Where have these dogs gone? Who did this? Who? Who? Who? Who?

Griffin: All right. I'm sorry I asked.

Travis: It's haunting. It's terrifying. Just the sheer panic in the peoples' voices as they call for who the— who's the culprit? Who's done this terrible deed?

Justin: Hm.

Clint: Yeah...

Griffin: All right.

Clint: I heard Cheeseburger in Paradise.

Griffin: Excellent.

Clint: The live version.

Griffin: Mm-hm.

Clint: The live one. Not the album.

Justin: I saw Paul Blart 3. That's right, it's coming, folks.

Travis: [laughs]

Griffin: Okay. Yeah, I'll accept all those answers. So, you lower down into this plane and you find a world. And it is scarcely populated. There are these huge, barren patches of land that are just uninhabitable. But as you pursue the falling Light of Creation, you find a small continent that is lush and inhabited by several sort of moderately-sized kingdoms.

And you follow the Light to one of these kingdoms and it is the kingdom of Legato. And you lower down and you find the— you are taken before the chancellor of Legato, who is a woman named Marlow. And she goes into some of the politics of this world and they are largely uninteresting. But you learn a few things about this world—

Justin: Which we remark on, we comment on that specifically.

Griffin: [chuckles] What you learn about this world is that each of the major kingdoms in this world have conservatories, where artists come to hone their craft. And these conservatories are extremely competitive. This is another world where there's not much military conflict to speak of. Everyone's just on their grind to be the best in their artistic field and create these great works for their kingdom.

And the kingdoms and their conservatories are all sort of encircling this gigantic mountain at the center of this land mass. And the other thing you learn when you're talking to chancellor Marlow, you bring up the Light of Creation and ask where it is. And she says:

Marlow: Oh, yeah. Sure! Wait, how do you all know about the Light of Creation?

Magnus: How do you know?

Marlow: How do *you* know about the light of creation?

Magnus: How do *you* know?

Griffin: And she... You're like in her office and she stands up from behind her desk and she says:

Marlow: Maybe it'd be easier if I just show you.

Magnus: Yeah.

Griffin: And she checks her calendar and says:

Marlow: Well... oh! There's a submission scheduled for today. If we hurry, we can catch the tail end of it.

Griffin: And so, Chancellor Marlow takes you to the Legato conservatory. And it's just this big, circular compound with dormitories and stacks of studios, and performance halls, and open-air museum spaces. And it's actually way more sophisticated and better kept than the rest of the Legato kingdom. It's like the jewel in their crown.

But nobody's here and nobody's on this whole campus And so, Marlow leads you down this winding road, down into a valley about a half mile from the campus, towards this mountain. And as you approach this clearing at the end of the path, right next to the mountain, you hear a piano.

And as you turn the corner on the path, you see into this clearing and there's a crowd of people all sitting in these white, wooden chairs, wearing their Sunday best. And a young, nervous man is playing this remarkable piece on a large, black, piano that you're not really sure how they got down here.

And standing behind him is an older woman, his— And Chancellor Marlow explains that's his professor and she's turning his sheet music for him. And you all just stand there and take in this music and it's incredible. And behind this stage where he's playing this music is the mouth of an enormous cave.

And the music's just reverberating down this opening and all around the grooves of this valley. And when the song is over, the audience roars in applause. And Chancellor Marlow does as well. Are any of you particularly affected by like, hearing a pretty song?

Travis: Magnus is. Don't even... Don't even get started. Magnus loves music. He's crying his face off. But behind his cool guy shades, so you can't see it.

Griffin: Excellent. And the student up on the stage and the professor behind him hug. And she gives him an affirming pat on the shoulder. And then takes up all the sheet music off the piano and rolls it up and seals it. And the man playing the piano takes this composition and bows one last time for the audience.

And then, very nervously walks towards the mouth of the cave and places the sheet music on a pedestal at the mouth of the cave. And there's just a silence over this crowd right now. Everyone looks really, really nervous. Chancellor Marlow, right next to you, you can hear her saying under her breath, she's saying:

Marlow: Come on... Come on, come on... It was good enough. Come on!

Griffin: And there is a light from the cavern. A flash of light that just consumes this pedestal with the sheet music on it and there's a dull roar. And when the light clears, the sheet music's gone. And so is the song. You just— You can't remember it at all.

You just heard it and it was beautiful. And you heard it like a minute ago, but it's just gone from your mind. And the audience is just kind of standing and they're looking expectantly in the mouth of the cave, and everyone's waiting. And this student, next to his professor, looks like he's about to have a breakdown.

He's hyperventilating. She puts a hand on his shoulder to calm him. And after about a minute or so of silence, there's another flash from the cave. And the song instantly returns to you. It hits you, almost like with physical force.

And we see everyone, in all the kingdoms and conservatories in this whole world, even the beings living in the other planes of reality, they all hear this song too now. And the audience just like loses its mind cheering. And Marlow cheers too. And she shouts:

Marlow: Yeah, that'll show those Forte fucks!

Griffin: And everyone's just like throwing their caps in the air. The student is like crying, just weeping with happiness as this song is immediately implanted in everyone's minds, in this whole world. And Marlow turns to you and says:

Marlow: Well! That's the Light of Creation! Any questions?

[theme music plays]

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