

The Adventure Zone Royale: Episode 16

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Griffin: Previously, on TAZ Royale...

Scorpo: I've seen what you'll do with the powers of the Octave.

Hellgrammite: Yes.

Scorpo: I will not allow you to control us.

Griffin: Klaxon is pulled under the elevated water level. You see a look on Rhyme's unmasked face of pure panic, as they are pulled under.

Lorovith: How badly do you want Doober to survive?

Randolph: It is of the utmost importance to me.

Justin: And then I'll throw—I throw him in.

Set: It is time now for you victorious Aspirants to receive your... your just reward.

Griffin: The tower rises upward, like a rocket, high above the Octave Ziggurat.

[The Adventure Zone Royale theme music plays]

Griffin: Hello, and welcome back to TAZ Royale, our battle royale winner take all season of The Adventure Zone. When last you joined us, it was like a month ago, and our heroes, if we can still call them that, finished up and survived, and claimed victory in the Trial of Transmutation. Four Aspirants fell in your group of 12, and that's very sad. I had big plans for Randolph, and he's dead—he's dead now. And he's in hell, too.

Travis: Oh, man!

Griffin: So, that's—

Travis: Well, he probably deserved it then, right? Because people don't get punished unless they deserve it. So I'm—

Griffin: He's not in—he's not in hell. He's not in hell. Nobody's in hell.

Travis: Nobody?

Griffin: Yeah. And that's an important story beat. We're gonna come back to that.

Travis: Oh, sure, okay.

Justin: Wow.

Clint: Because everybody is so good.

Griffin: Yes. No. After surviving the trial, the golden tower that was submerged inside of the lake of the Octave Ziggurat Island turned into a bit of a rocket and blasted off into the sky. And that is where you all are right now. Through the porthole windows of this ascending golden tower, you all watch as the sky begins to grow dark.

As you get higher, the atmosphere grows thin. You struggle to stay on your feet, as this building launches upward into the sky. You see Set, the Octave who sort of administered this trial, the golden scarab, appears to be unperturbed by this motion. He's just hovering with his scarab wings beside one of these windows, watching the flight intently. And he says:

Set: You are about to breathe rarefied air. No one living, save for the eight Octaves, have ever witnessed the world beyond the Fold's foggy border. And now that you have survived half of the Conclave's trials, it is prudent that you understand the extent of our responsibilities.

Griffin: And then in an instant, the tower stops rising. Its momentum and your momentum are brought to sort of an immediate, impossible halt. And the walls of the tower begin to shift, twisting and lowering like blossoming

flower petals, until they lay flat, forming these eight round observation decks branching off of the tower floor.

You all are thousands of feet off the ground, higher significantly than the Ziggurat Island that floats in the sky below. Looking down from your position, you all can see the Fold, the sort of crowded, circular expanse that comprises the entire world that you all have lived in your whole lives. You see the Southern Hive Lands of your origin, Hellgrammite.

You see the Titan Range that you and your Goliath kin call home, Lorovith. Right smack dab at the center of the Fold, you see the Crossroads, Rictus, which is the Ravenwood family's sort of undead seat of power. All of these, you know, cities and structures and different sort of land features, they are all really tightly packed inside of this cylinder of fog that is swirling about it like the eye of a hurricane.

Beyond that wall of fog, you all see a world that is entirely unfamiliar. It is a world of frozen ash. There are oceans lying flat, running across a shoreline that you see peppered with a few cities that are nearly larger than the entire Fold itself. And these cities have these tall buildings of stone and glass that reach up toward the height of the floating Ziggurat.

You see a petrified forest, these massive conifer trees tall as those buildings stretching out beyond the horizon. You see mountains that dwarf those of the Titan Range that are silhouetted in the distance by the sun, which is shining down on just this barren, empty, lifeless world. And Set turns to face the group of survivors here and says:

Set: 32 generations ago, our world received the gift of magic in the wake of a great calamity. But it was mankind's empowerment that proved its greatest threat. Without control of that magic, chaos tore the world apart, but attempts to control that magic led to wars of inconceivable scale.

Wizards raised insectoid warriors from the land to fight their wars, until the first brood mother led those warriors in revolt. Thus were the Thrikeen born. Human soldiers were imbued with arcane physical enhancements, growing in size, becoming the first Goliaths. So much of the world we know now is a result of those wars.

But the world, unable to sustain its inhabitants any longer, this world, this planet of Earth, began to die. Blight spread across its surface, destroying all life in its path. It was only by the intervention of the original Octave, the eight greatest magical minds of their or any time, that anything survived. They raised the fog wall forming the Fold, where they continued to serve as shepherds and wardens.

Travis: Rictus raises his hand.

Set: Yes, Rictus?

Rictus: Just, sorry, two questions of clarification. One, so there was a calamity, then magic came, and then there was a war after that?

Set: Yes, that is correct.

Rictus: Okay. And then you said "of Earth," is that with a capital E? Just for like, I don't know, if we ever record this for posterity and people want to know, you know, is this like—

Set: Yeah, is a prop—it is a proper noun. So, yes, I suppose capitalization would be prudent.

Rictus: Okay, so that's the name of the planet that we're on, is Earth?

Set: Yes.

Rictus: Oh, okay. Cool, I just, I guess I'd never learned that in school or whatever. I was homeschooled.

Set: [chuckles] Sure. I had heard that that's how things worked in the Crossroads, very insular. You must understand that this is what all makes the brutality of this Conclave so necessary. In bringing you all here and making you all compete in this way, 63 wizards will die, 63 spells will be purged from the face of the world, ensuring that the unchecked magical annihilation that claimed the Earth does not repeat itself within the borders of the Fold.

And for the one wizard who will be granted limitless power, their worthiness must be guaranteed through hardship and sacrifice. We will be returning to the Ziggurat momentarily. Take a moment to enjoy this view, you will likely never see it again. And celebrate your victory in the Trial of Transmutation. The eight of you have earned it.

Griffin: And he turns back to face the world below.

Travis: Rictus points at his house.

Rictus: That's my house. In case anyone was wondering, I can see my house. It's right there.

Griffin: What does it look like? What do the Crossroads sort of look—I imagine, sort of... what is the name of the WoW—the Undercity, like that sort of dead vibe. But it may be something completely different.

Travis: No, it's not far off. So, the Breathless Fields, one, like there's, you know, some scraggly trees or whatever, with some—no, you know what? It's a field full of dead bodies. There's good soil there.

Griffin: Jesus.

Travis: No, I mean, it is! It's a huge graveyard.

Griffin: Dang, dude! Okay, cool.

Travis: It's like the graveyard of the Fold. So, there's lots of fertilizer in there. So, the trees are—

Griffin: Sure.

Travis: They're like a really dark green. But they've grown—

Griffin: Lush.

Travis: Yeah, quite lush. But there's no wind—

Griffin: That's beautiful.

Travis: That blows through there. So they're like completely still. And you can see like the literal two like wide crossed roads.

Griffin: Yeah.

Travis: That are coming from kingdoms all around, where people bring their dead. And you can see like the sections a little bit, because it's a huge structure, you know, of graveyard.

Griffin: Yeah.

Travis: So you can see where they're like sectioned off by kingdom.

Griffin: Cool.

Travis: And in the center of that crossroads, you can see a very, this might surprise you, Gothic-looking like—

Griffin: Yeah, that's not surprising at all.

Travis: Keep, castle, that is surrounded in its own ring within like family crypts and specialty crypts, within the ring.

Griffin: Awesome.

Travis: Yeah.

Griffin: You are looking down at this and you hear a voice right beside your ear, and it says:

Voice: I've never seen it—

Rictus: Ah!

Voice: This high up.

Rictus: Oh, god!

Voice: Oh? I'm sorry.

Rictus: Sorry, I was staring at my house.

Griffin: You look over and you see the tiny, tiny ghost of your great-great-great-great-grandfather, I think is how many "greats" we put on that?

Travis: Yes, it's a lot. Rictus Ravenwood I.

Griffin: Yeah, I guess he wouldn't be that far removed from you. He would be your great-grandfather, I suppose.

Travis: No, no, great, great—wait. My father—

Griffin: If he's the first, there's—

Travis: My grandfather, my great-grandfather, my great-great-grandfather.

Griffin: Okay, so, yeah, sure. He looks down, sort of wistfully, down at the Crossroads, and he says:

Rictus Ravenwood I: We built an amazing thing, didn't we? The Ravenwoods. Such incredible work happens there. You must be so proud to see it from on high.

Rictus: Well, I mean, also, it just keeps getting bigger, I think is—you know, as we expand out the graveyards.

Rictus Ravenwood I: Oh?

Rictus: Yeah.

Rictus Ravenwood I: It's a booming business, death, I suppose.

Rictus: Yeah, it's unavoidable, like death in Texas, you know?

Justin: [in a strained voice] Wait, excuse me.

Rictus: Yeah?

Justin: [in a strained voice] I know I'm not here... but people are dying to get into it!

Rictus: That's my great-grandfather.

Griffin: [chuckles]

Rictus: That's Rictus Ravenwood II.

Griffin: He appears on your shoulder. He's a little bit bigger, because again, as ghosts get older, they get smaller, and so he's like a tiny bit bigger.

Rictus Ravenwood II: Sorry, sorry—

Rictus: No, you are always the jokester, yeah.

Griffin: They both look down for a moment, and then poof back into the ethereal sort of—

Rictus Ravenwood II: Wait, do—why am I considered racist now?

Griffin: [chuckles] *Shoof*, he's gone before you can answer that question.

Travis: Well, wait, can I talk to my great-great-grandfather one more time?

Griffin: The small one?

Travis: Yeah.

Griffin: Yeah, sure.

Rictus Ravenwood II: I only have five seconds left.

Rictus: Not you... He's the racist one. It just seems like such a waste with what we can do. You know what I mean? The death, it would just—it just happens... and then that's done. And it just... what if we—like, there's so much we could do with—the stuff we could do to... I don't know, utilize the afterlife better?

Rictus Ravenwood I: You are—you are so young and you are—you are so far from death, Rictus, is it is hard for you to have perspective on this. But we are already doing so much. Look at me.

Griffin: He says, and gestures to himself.

Rictus Ravenwood I: I am a phantasm—

Rictus: Yeah, you're totally ripped.

Rictus Ravenwood I: Well, no—I mean, yes, I've been hitting—I've been hitting the little gym. The little spectral gym. And I'm pretty proud of my gains. But I persist well beyond death, as shall you, as shall all the Ravenwoods. This is our birthright. This is the... this is the power we have claimed, and it is an extraordinary thing. So, we may continue to live on ad infinitum, becoming ever smaller, yes, which is, we're still trying to figure out why that keeps happening. But this is—this is what we are doing with that power, and it is an amazing thing.

Rictus: But we could do it for so many more people?

Rictus Ravenwood I: Hm... There are some questions of sustainability there. But I have always admired your altruistic sort of nature, Rictus. It will—it will serve you well as Warden of the Dead Lands, once it is your turn to take that seat. Assuming, of course, you survive these trials—which you've done so spectacularly well at so far! I'm so proud.

Griffin: He goes to pinch your cheek, but doesn't because he's intangible.

Rictus Ravenwood I: So incredible, your canniness, your cutthroat nature. You're really coming into your own, great-great-grandson. I'm very proud.

Rictus: Yeah. But you know...

Griffin: And he stretches, and he puts on a headband, and he says:

Rictus Ravenwood I: Well, I've got... I got to hit the elliptical. It's my turn on the machine. Your great-grandpa is... kind of a hog, kind of a lunkhead at the gym, so...

Rictus: If you get a chance, will you kind of pop in to the, you know, the keep and... let 'em know how I'm doing and check on—

Rictus Ravenwood I: Oh, I've kept them abreast of your progress, and they are all—

Rictus Ravenwood II: Sorry! Sorry! What did you say? [laughs] A breast?

Rictus: No. God...

Rictus Ravenwood I: I'm gonna—

Rictus Ravenwood II: Wait! Hold on!

Griffin: He grabs your great-grandpa—

Rictus Ravenwood II: Give me a second! I'll have something!

Griffin: He grabs your great-grandpa, just tugs him into a little cloud.

Rictus Ravenwood I: All right, come on, come on.

Clint: [in a strained voice] Who's talking about breast?

Griffin: Oh, no. [chuckles]

Rictus: I don't know him.

Rictus Ravenwood I: No way! You don't wanna know—

Griffin: This tiny, inch-high ghost, old as shit, like floats in front of you. He grabs—

Rictus Ravenwood I: Oh, that's... I mean, that's Rictus Zero. We gotta get out of here, this is too much.

Griffin: They all disappear—

Rictus Zero: Son, is that you?

Justin: He's older than the Sun. [chuckles]

Griffin: [chuckles] He doesn't understand what the—

Justin: What is it? [chuckles] So—

Rictus Zero: Hello, Moon!

Griffin: Lorovith, you feel a tug on your tunic that you're wearing, and look down and see the tear-stained face of Doober Sweetleaf. He is looking up at you. He looks confused. He looks obviously like very, very heartbroken. And he says:

Doober Sweetleaf: Excuse me, sir, Lorovith, would you... may I—may I speak to you for a moment?

Lorovith: Of course, Doober. How can I help you?

Doober Sweetleaf: I was... I was incapacitated during the trial. When I fell, I landed—it knocked the wind out of me, and it hit—I hit my head, and it was hard to follow what happened. But what... what happened to Master Randolph? I saw him fall, and I saw him vanish, and I... I just didn't—I didn't—did you see, did someone push him? Did someone attack him?

Lorovith: Much like the rest of us, Doobe—like all in the room, I was blinded by your friends' light. Which was a very kind act that I think he did to spare you the visual memory of him being eaten to death by eels. And Doober, if that's not love, I don't know what is.

Doober Sweetleaf: I... I suppose that is a kindness. I definitely would have been pretty messed up had I seen that. But he was this... he was the greatest wizard I've ever known. I don't understand how anyone could have gotten the better of him. Did you see who killed him?

Lorovith: Doober... it's natural to be asking a lot of questions right now. Grief comes in many forms. I think the important thing here is to realize that your friend perished so that you, Doober Sweetleaf, could live on. And Doober, I'm not... I couldn't ascertain the nature of your greatness before your pal had his unfortunate slip, but I am committed to finding out why you do, Doober Sweetleaf, are the most important boy alive!

Griffin: I want to roll here, and it's not to like... I don't—I don't know if it's deception, right? Because it's—I don't think he suspects you, at all. He did not see what was happening, he was a full level lower than you all. All he saw was Randolph falling into the water. But to like, you know, put this issue to bed, I think—

Justin: Performance, maybe?

Griffin: A performance check would be great, right? You're feigning—

Justin: I have zero in all this stuff, so let me just—

Griffin: Right, yeah.

Justin: Take a—take a roll.

[sound of dice thrown]

Justin: It's a 13.

Griffin: I mean, let me roll an insight for him to contest that, and we'll see... we'll see how it goes. I'll roll it on the table.

Travis: Ooh-hoo-hoo.

Griffin: All right, that's just an 11. Yeah, he looks up at you, his cheeks glistening with tears, he says:

Doober Sweetleaf: I suppose you're right, Master Lorovith. We should focus on the gift he gave us in... in sort of ensuring that we moved on and—

Lorovith: Thank you.

Travis: [laughs]

Lorovith: Doober. Thank you, Doober, for believing in me, your faith in me. If it means anything to you, I would have fully burned an inspiration point if you hadn't.

Griffin: [chuckles]

Doober Sweetleaf: I... I'm not sure what that means, sir, but I—

Lorovith: Me neither, Doober.

Doober Sweetleaf: He was...

Lorovith: But I think someday we will, Doober. You are all questions and enigma, but I will—I will root you out, Doober!

Doober Sweetleaf: I... I must ask, may I... may I continue working with you, Master Lorovith, moving forward? I am—I am a little guy, and I am very scared. All I want is to return home to the hills that bore me, to eat the honey sweet pies of Madame Sugarfoot's bakery and drink delicious, frosty pints of amber drafts at The Pincer and Pike, and smell the breeze through the Hive Hills when the nectar bills bloom. I wish to go back very badly to the the hills, Master Lorovith.

Lorovith: Doober, were it up to me, I would strap you to my back like a baby in a papoose.

Griffin: [chuckles]

Lorovith: Of course. I should warn you though, Doober, you're welcome to tag along, but we can never go back to the home in our memory, Doober. I will warn you—

Doober Sweetleaf: I can actually, it's right there. Look, Master Lorovith.

Griffin: And he points down—

Rictus: Oh, it's on fire! Oh, no, it's being attacked by dragons!

Griffin: No, it's not! You can't—you can't do that—

Rictus: Ah, no.

Griffin: To the—to the Temu Shire.

Lorovith: Are you—Doober, do you wish—Doober, do you wish to flee this contest?

Justin: [chuckles]

Doober Sweetleaf: Is that... is that possible? I came here because I was beckoned and... I was told that I had no option in the matter. That Master Randolph, when he was also summoned, he told me that he would—he would take care of me and ensure my survival. Now that he is gone, I... I appreciate your assurances, Master Lorovith, but I am terrified, and I do not wish to perish in a strange place. If leaving is possible, I would—I would do so in a heartbeat.

Lorovith: Hm... Doober, I think—hm... Doober, I need time to think. I am someone who does not like to lose, Doober. But I recently have begun to think that winning may look different than I anticipated.

Doober Sweetleaf: I'm not sure what you mean?

Griffin: All right. Hellgrammite, is there anything you want to do before—

Clint: Yeah.

Griffin: The rocket descends?

Clint: From the moment that they lifted off, Hellgrammite has just been staring out these portals. And he's staring down at the Thrikeen world. And when they hit the very... apogee? Is that the top?

Travis: Nadir?

Griffin: Nadir is the bottom.

Justin: Nadir is the bottom.

Travis: Oh.

Clint: The apex of their arc, or—going up, he just is like staring down intently. And he starts to shiver and kind of shake. And his arms, his sweet little four little spindly arms, kind of suck into his body. And his vestigial wings kind of wrap around him a little. And he falls to the ground, and he's—

Griffin: Oh, shit?

Clint: He's shaking, and he's—it's almost like he is... he almost looks like a—not a cocoon, but like a—yeah, like a cocoon.

Travis: Like a cicada!

Clint: Yeah, almost. And he keeps saying:

Hellgrammite: Snix krizz... snix krizz...

Clint: And he falls to the deck.

Griffin: Is that something that the other Thrikeen here, who I guess is Scorpo and Set, would—and Spider-Man? No Spider-Man is a human. This is the spider who is a human. The spider who is a spider is still down on the—

Justin: Just like Man-Bat Batman territory.

Griffin: Yes, sure. We still have three—we've killed off 40 at this point, Aspirants, as of this episode. There's still all three spiders—

Travis: The Spider Verse is still going strong!

Clint: We're kind of showing favoritism, yeah.

Griffin: Yeah. Would they recognize what you're—what you are saying? Or is this like a personal—are these—are these names or—I don't really know how to respond to this without knowing kind of what that means.

Clint: He just kept saying this over and over again. And eventually, he even stops saying it.

Hellgrammite: Snix krizz...

Griffin: I'm asking, is that something the—

Clint: I know!

Griffin: The other Thriken would—

Travis: Does it mean something? Yeah.

Clint: He's speaking in Thrikeen, yes.

Griffin: What is he saying in Thrikeen?

Clint: "So small."

Griffin: Hm...

Travis: Something about his wiener. [chuckles]

Griffin: [chuckles] I guess I have to ask, because Travis brought it up, is he talking about his wiener?

Justin: [chuckles]

Clint: He could be!

Griffin: Lorovith and Rictus, you all—you both see Hellgrammite having this sort of episode. Do you do anything?

Travis: I go... and check on him. I do have—I know like magic and medicine and stuff?

Justin: I pull—I pulled Doober closer so that one of Hellgrammite's talons doesn't accidentally graze him during this fit or whatever is going on.
[chuckles]

Griffin: Okay.

Travis: Yeah, I'm gonna do a medicine check to see—

Lorovith: Don't look, Doober! [chuckles] It's very upsetting, this bug man!

Griffin: Okay, give me a medicine check.

Lorovith: This may be some sort of dance!

[sound of dice thrown]

Travis: A 16 plus four, a gentlemen's 20.

Justin: Just when you need it the most.

Travis: Yeah.

Clint: [chuckles]

Travis: I definitely give him a stick or something to bite down on.

Griffin: Yeah, I mean, a 20 is a very, very high check. Is there—is there... is this a purely sort of psychosomatic kind of episode that Hellgrammite is having?

Clint: Yes.

Griffin: Or is it a—

Clint: Yeah.

Griffin: Okay.

Travis: I think that, in Rictus' experience, having like rebound souls to bodies and stuff—

Griffin: Sure.

Travis: Like a realization... I think that he's had experience seeing people suddenly like experience something greater than themselves, or a confusion of realization of like life after death, or things like this being brought back to their bodies—

Griffin: Right.

Clint: Yeah. You're right—yeah! That's—

Travis: Yeah.

Clint: You're coming right up on it. I mean, safe to say, this has never happened. I mean, it's only happened to the eight of us and whoever else has been in these previous trials. But they're seeing their home from outer space, basically.

Justin: Yeah.

Clint: And I think that that would have, at least for Hellgrammite, who had these illusions of grandeur and was all convinced that he was going to be a

king of a powerful kingdom, sees just how small not only the kingdom is, but the world. And I think it has really rocked him to his core.

Rictus: I'm going to diagnose him with a strong case of perspective.

Griffin: Scorpo is watching you, Hellgrammite, as you sort of have this episode. You see him, Rictus, sort of approach. And he looks down, kind of conflicted. And he kneels over you, Hellgrammite. And he begins to speak in Thrikeen, which I'm going to just do in our English, if that's okay?

Travis: For the people at home! Griffin could do it.

Griffin: The people at home!

Clint: Yeah.

Griffin: You hear Scorpo say, in this sort of, you know, guttural clicking language, says:

Scorpo: Hellgrammite?

Hellgrammite: [mumbling incoherently]

Scorpo: Why did you escape from your hive?

Hellgrammite: [stammering]

Scorpo: Hellgrammite, listen to me. Listen to me, Hellgrammite. Why did you—

Lorovith: Hellgrammite.

Scorpo: Why did you escape from your hive?

Hellgrammite: To... to dominate. To... advance. To... rule? Seeking... power... but... Scorpus, look... look how... small it is. Look how... how small we are! We...

Griffin: He grabs you by your, I guess, the shoulders between your pairs of arms, and pulls you very, very close. And says extremely intently:

Scorpo: We used to be so much smaller.

[pause]

Griffin: He stands, as you start to calm down, and walks away from you. As the tower begins to descend back down towards the Octave Ziggurat Island, you see something—Rictus, give me actually a perception check.

Travis: Okay.

[sound of dice thrown]

Travis: 15 total.

Griffin: You see, just sort of like looking around, getting one last look at the—you know, this vision of the world beyond the fog wall, it occurs to you that there is one too many people standing around here on this observation platform. And as you realize this, your eyes lock onto one of these figures, who—everyone else is either facing outward or, you know, Hellgrammite is sort of doing his thing on the floor.

This figure is facing inward, and in fact, staring you down. And the Sun is sort of silhouetting them, making them hard to see at first. But as the tower begins to descend and the Sun raises up, it shines down on... the specter of Death itself. It is wearing a cloak of some indiscernible material, black as coal. Its skull is barely visible through its hood, but it is... it's so white that it appears to have like a kind of luminous blue quality to it.

And there something just strange about this figure. It seems like he is moving at like a different frame rate than everything else here. And he looks at you, and you have seen, obviously, this statue of Death that you've had dealings with down on the Ziggurat before, but this is—this is a real manifest version of that figure.

Travis: Without even knowing why, Rictus kneels.

Griffin: You hear a voice in your mind that no one else seems to clock, no one else seems to be looking at this figure. It seems to be just entirely happening only to you. You suddenly hear a voice say:

Voice: Oh, please. I'm in your debt, technically, Rictus. Rise, we have but a short time to speak.

[theme music plays]

[ad read]

Griffin: Hey, folks! It's Griffin McElroy, your dungeon master, best friend, and your herald of good tidings! Because the McElroy Family Clubhouse is coming back next Tuesday, January 27th, at noon, Eastern Time. And from now on, it's going to be a monthly show, streaming the last Tuesday of each month from now on. If you haven't gotten into the McElroy Entertainment System, our new sort of gaming branch on YouTube, you should! Because we're streaming on there almost every day.

Super McElroy Brothers debuted this Tuesday, at noon, and is going to stream the other non last Tuesdays each month. It'll be all of us playing games, and then we're doing our own little individual streams. I was playing some Animal Crossing when the new stuff came out, and we got a bunch of big ideas for stuff we're going to be doing.

So, that's all over at the McElroy family YouTube channel. And be sure to follow McElroy Entertainment System on Instagram to be aware when we do any of our gaming content stuff. We got some merch also over at the McElroy Merch Store, mcelroymerch.com. There's a TAZ: Balance bundle!

It includes a TAZ dice tray, a set of Bureau of Balance dice and a Zonecast car decal, all part of one beautiful, little package. So, go check that out over at mcelroymerch.com. And 10% of all merch proceeds this month will be donated to the Immigrant Defenders Law Center. We have a couple books coming out here in the next half a year or so.

I wrote a Choose Your Own Adventure book called The Stowaway. It comes out March 10th, and you can pre-order that at bit.ly/griffinstowaway. And of course, the last TAZ: Balance graphic novel, Story and Song, is going to come out in July. And you can pre-order that at [adventurezone comic.com](http://adventurezonecomic.com).

Pre-orders really help us out in the grand scheme of things, so if you're planning on checking out either of those books, and we hope that you do, because we're real proud of them, then go ahead and grab those pre-orders, please and thank you. And please enjoy the rest of this episode. We'll be back in two weeks with a new episode of TAZ: Royale, so we'll see you then.

[break]

John: Sleep is important, but it's difficult sometimes. I'm John Moe. On Sleeping With Celebrities, famous people help conk you out by talking in soothing voices about unimportant things. Maria Bamford on parking.

Maria: I parked in a bus stop. That's just not right. I am not a bus.

John: Roxane Gay on airports.

Roxane: My favorite airport is Indianapolis. It has a really smart layout.

John: Alan Tudyk on yardsticks.

Alan: You hand somebody a yardstick, yardsticks become part of the family.

John: Granted, it's a weird idea, but it's lots of fun and it works. Listen wherever you get podcasts.

[break]

Manolo: Hey, it's Sue, the subway train.

[piano notes play]

Manolo: Hey, guess what, Sue? I just inherited a game show. And I have to continue it, because there are people out there who like to curl up into a ball and listen to it.

[piano notes play]

Manolo: Yeah, it's a podcast where listeners submit game show ideas for others to play on air.

[piano notes play]

Manolo: Well, it is. In fact, the dumber the better.

[piano notes play]

Manolo: Right, right, it's called Dr. Gameshow. Some curled up balls consider it a tradition, while others call it a train wreck.

[piano notes play]

Manolo: No, not you Sue, it's Dr. Gameshow. If you're the sort that likes to listen to people competing for refrigerator magnets, then curl up into a ball and listen to Dr. Gameshow, every other Wednesday on maximumfun.org.

[piano notes play]

[theme music plays]

Griffin: As the tower continues to descend down towards the Ziggurat, you see Death in front of you, Rictus. And for the first time, you are hearing his voice. All your communications with Death have been this like, you know, almost intangible, abstract prayer-like thing. You have never heard a voice speaking to you like this. Not this clearly, not this distinctly. And this specter of Death floats towards you and says:

Death: Our time is limited. We... we will be unable to speak once you return to the Fold. I have no influence there, no power there. So, we must make the most of this conversation. Do you understand?

Rictus: Yes, I do.

[pause]

Rictus: Oh, I thought you would have more after that.

Griffin: Yeah, he vanishes. No—

Justin: [laughs]

Clint: [chuckles]

Death: I am revealing myself to you, Rictus, because I believe that you have a certain understanding that your family and those assembled here at the Conclave lack an appreciation, an understanding, a respect for... me, I suppose.

Rictus: I mean, I'd like to think so. I think that, you know, life and death exist in concert with each other.

Death: I understand that you think that, and you think that should be true, but you must understand that that is not true within the Fold, and it has not been true since the Fold's creation. You need to understand that I have no control whatsoever in the world of the Fold. It is not my domain whatsoever. I am being... kept out, by... that.

Griffin: And he gestures towards the fog wall that the tower is sort of rapidly descending back down towards. He says:

Death: People are dying in there. I don't know what's happening to their spirits. I am not shepherding them to the Great Hereafter. The natural order of things, of entropy and decay, those are not being maintained or respected. There is something terribly, terribly wrong happening in the Fold. And I am speaking to you now, Rictus, because I believe that you know there's something wrong with the dynasty that bore you, and the world that you live in. I believe that there is a satisfaction with the state of things that you have never received. Let me know if I'm speaking out of turn here—

Rictus: No, no, you nailed it. No, yeah, nailed it. Got it in one. So, what do I do?

Griffin: As the tower continues to descend, he starts to grow sort of more transparent. The threads binding his cloak appear to be like wilting off of him and floating away, like small like feathers. He says:

Death: I don't know. I can't... I can't do much for you from beyond the fog wall. Passing you my boon took most of my power. I noticed you haven't gotten a ton of use out of it, hopefully it will be of some utility to you. But as long as that remains—

Griffin: And he points towards the fog wall. He says:

Death: Things in the Fold, this contest, everything, it... it will be wrong, it will be unnatural. Spirits will... spirits will gather and decay, and when that happens, terrible, terrible things come as a result. You are one man, Rictus, and I don't begrudge you a mission to save the world. But you must understand that the truth of this world, you will never understand it until you have rid yourself of its influence.

Rictus: Okay. So, I'll work on that... and do what I can to get, I guess, the fog wall down. Do you know any way to like resist time magic? Because that would help me like a ton in that mission.

Griffin: He... give me an insight check.

[sound of dice thrown]

Travis: 13.

Griffin: He is trying to speak, trying to answer you. It is—it is no longer like audible, the things that he is saying. You can tell just from his body language, which is, again, tough to read, because he's a skull and a cloak floating in the air—

Travis: So I probably can't read his lips, I guess?

Griffin: Can't read his lips, no. You can read his chattering teeth.

Travis: Ar-ar-ar-ar. He's saying, "Ar-ar-ar-ar-ar!"

Griffin: Jesus, "Ah-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka!" He seems confused by what you have said. And then, as suddenly as he appeared, he vanishes. The walls of the golden tower begin to rise, cutting off your view as you guys lower back down through the atmosphere and come down to a landing back on the island of the Octave Ziggurat. The day continues after your return to—

Justin: Thank god! [chuckles]

Griffin: The Octave Ziggurat. Time does not stop. And you know, during your rest and recovery from the demands of the Trial of Transmutation, you all are sort of vaguely aware of the fact that two more groups are going into the lake to do this trial.

You hear the, you know, the rocket tower taking off and returning two more times. And you know, with sunset, you get a night's rest. And the next morning, you and all the other Aspirants are summoned to the main hall of the Ziggurat.

You all enter the building, and with the others, file in between these floating silver disc fountains and holographic busts of your fallen competitors. And you see, you know, each other craning necks, trying to work out who all died from the three groups that faced the Trial of Transmutation the previous day.

And that process is made much easier when a bell chimes in the distance and the holograms update with the new casualties. Obviously, from your group, there's the giant teddy, Snug Jaw, the autonomous alarm system, Klaxon, the icy elemental gladiator, Rhyme, who had it out for you, Lorovith, but met their end. And he kind of—

Lorovith: If you come for the king, you had best not miss!

Griffin: [chuckles] You also see the kindly old wizard Randolph, who Doober Sweetleaf is sort of standing in front of, tears beginning to stream down his face again. You realize with some relief that the other eight Aspirants who died in the other two groups are mostly unfamiliar to you. The icy regent, Baroness Elsie; stage magician, Fabulous Pharaoh; Corrigan, the blade conjurer, who I think you actually fought in the first trial. There's the truly loathsome pickup artist, Enigma; the orb-headed illusionist, Orbert.

Justin: I know these aren't these peoples' full legal names, but that is how I'm hearing it in my head, like, "Oh, my name? I'm the hateful illusionist, Dilbert." [chuckles]

Griffin: "I'm the pick-up artist, Enigma."

Justin: [laughs]

Clint: [chuckles]

Justin: "I'm the resilient pervert, Darryl. That's what everybody knows me as." [chuckles]

Griffin: There's a world—

Clint: [laughs]

Griffin: There's a world in which you guys rolled a different number when you were like picking your final teammate in the Trial of Evocation, and you could—Enigma, who was basically Mystery, the pickup artist, could have been a major NPC in this season. There is the ghostly Penumbra, and acclaimed physicist Izzy Newton. These are the fallen you don't quite recognize.

Justin: Just imagining you balling up notebook paper and throwing it into a campfire. [laughs]

Clint: [chuckles]

Griffin: I've got a shredder sort of right next to my PC that I'm feeding—

Justin: You thought these were good enough to write down, and we just like, "Nah. No, thanks." [chuckles]

Griffin: I'll be honest, these were, I would say, below like spot 50 on the list of 64. This is when I started to... this is like scorching Ray Romano level sort of—

Justin: You've been in the game long enough to know that if you—if you dangle a Doober Sweetleaf in front of me, you know that I'm gonna follow.

Clint: [laughs]

Justin: Fuckin' float on those visible stink lines like Garfield, you know.

Griffin: Yeah.

Clint: [chuckles]

Griffin: The only familiar face with these new holograms of the—of the 12 Aspirants who fell in this trial, Lorevith, you recognize the Dwarven excavator, Dusty Undersight, your neighbor in the tents on the outskirts of the Octave Island. That is pretty much the only person here that you all had any association with. Looking around the room, it dawns on—

Justin: Oh, and Doober's dad.

Griffin: What's that?

Justin: Doober's dad.

Griffin: Doober's dad, I mean, yeah, Randolph, obviously, you had—

Justin: So, he was his dad?

Travis: No, grandfather.

Griffin: No, not his dad.

Justin: [chuckles]

Griffin: Looking around the room, it dawns on you all how much emptier it is in here with 40 fewer opponents. And with just a few exceptions, you're mostly familiar with the remaining lot. But as you are sort of running an inventory of who remains, there is a flash from one of the fountains, from which emerge these flying multi-colored sparks that begin sort of flitting around the room erratically.

And from the still waters of this silver fountain, you see a gleaming bald head begin to emerge, followed by a long, lean torso clad in a stylish checkered jacket, with just an outrageous number of nested lapels. And these two long legs wearing curly boots. The most fashionable man any of you have ever seen emerges from this floating fountain and begins to hover a good two feet above its surface, surrounded by these colorful will-o'-wisps. And this man looks around at the 24 Aspirants gathered here and says:

Man: Hello!

Rictus: Hi.

Hellgrammite: Hello.

Coxy: Hello! My name is Coxy! And I will be administering the Trial of Conjunction. Don't freak out, you guys, you still have your day off, your day of leisure and study and rest. But I must impose, I'm afraid, one order of business before our trial is conducted tomorrow at dawn. The format of this forthcoming trial will be a duel!

You and your single opponent will square off in a no holds barred combat, in an arena randomly assigned to you. You will have until dawn tomorrow to choose your opponent. Now, to keep things interesting, two Aspirants must accept each other's challenge. It must be consensual. And they will seal their placement by shaking the hands to which they have affixed their Grimoire.

And after that, the arrangement will be locked in. It may not be changed. If you are able to find a willing opponent who agrees to your challenge, if you

win your duel with them, you will receive a golden award. But if you are unable to find a willing opponent by dawn tomorrow, one will be randomly assigned to you. And the winner of this duel will receive only a copper reward. So, find your opponent, choose wisely, and enjoy your day off!

Lorovith: Excuse me, Coxy!

Coxy: Oh, yes?

Lorovith: If I may ask, what will the loser the duels receive?

Coxy: Death.

Clint: [laughs]

Coxy: Anyway, enjoy your day off, you guys! Maybe go down to the Lily and get a signature massage, and prepare for tomorrow's duel to the death. And I wish you best of luck, and I... may the odds be... may the odds be ever in your favorite.

Lorovith: Wait! Coxy!

Coxy: Yes?

Lorovith: Will there be any rules to this engagement that you can tell us of now?

Coxy: I said the snow holds barred, yes? I am not interested in testing your specific knowledge of conjuration magics, I find that to be far too limiting. Any tools at your disposal will be available to you in this battle, but there will be a few twists thrown in, a few just a little twists. But—

Lorovith: Much like your accent.

Coxy: Yes, it's im-placable, isn't it?

Justin: [chuckles]

Lorovith: The word is implacable.

Coxy: Well, you can't place—

Justin: [laughs]

Coxy: Where I'm from, it's place, im-placable, because you don't—you can't place it.

Rictus: I mean, it makes sense.

Coxy: But anyway, choose your opponent in the fight—you will fight to the death. And try to find someone and, you know, strike an accord. Because if you can't, we'll just decide for you—

Lorovith: I've never heard it out loud. [chuckles]

Coxy: You'll still have to do the duel to the death, you just won't get as good of a prize.

Lorovith: Im-placable?

Coxy: Yes... all right. Bye, you guys!

Griffin: And he—

Rictus: Bye!

Griffin: Sinks down into the silver fountain from which he appeared. And suddenly, you all hear like pounding footsteps. And Lorovith, you look over and you see Grakhan just barreling at you. And he skids to a halt and holds out his hand. And he says:

Grakhan: This is it, yes? It should—it should be here, yes? Our strength finally measured once and for all. This should be it, yes? At this place, at this time.

Lorovith: Right... yes—

Grakhan: Think of it—

Lorovith: I can see the appeal.

Grakhan: We have waited so long for an opportunity like this—

Lorovith: Yes, no, listen. I love it, of course...

Grakhan: How glorious it would be—

Lorovith: I see the glory. You think I can't see the glory?! Here's my problem. I have this little boy. He's my son, basically. And if I am not the one to challenge him to a duel, someone else will, and he will be killed.

Grakhan: I don't... are you...

Lorovith: I don't know! I don't have an answer.

Grakhan: Are you suggesting that you... you would challenge this... this little one to a duel and lose on purpose?

Justin: [chuckles]

Lorovith: I wouldn't lose on purpose. Enough people have died to keep this boy alive! You see, I barely know him. I'm not going to lay down my life for one Doober Sweatleef, certainly. But I did make a vow to protect him, so I'm trying to think of how to do that.

Grakhan: You would either lose on purpose or you would be defeated by... this little guy?

Lorovith: Hm...

Grakhan: Lorovith, we—

Lorovith: Wait! One moment. Give me—give me 30 seconds to think.

[pause]

Griffin: You see Doober Sweetleaf approach you and say:

Doober Sweetleaf: Sir, you don't... I wish you wouldn't do that. You don't need to... I can—I can hold off my own. I do possess some magic. I know I may not look like much, but—

Lorovith: Oh, you're magical Doober. Everyone who sees you sees your magic! Every twinkle of your eye, every time that dimple pops out, everyone sees the magic of Doober!

Rictus: Pops out?! That's not what dimples do?

Lorovith: Pops in I—no, it's like—

Doober Sweetleaf: Actually, mine do, sir.

Griffin: And he puts his thumb in his mouth and blows.

Rictus: Whoa.

Lorovith: Oh, god! Good lord.

Justin: [chuckles]

Rictus: Why is that cute?!

Doober Sweetleaf: It's a feature of my people.

Lorovith: Rictus... will you duel this boy?

Rictus: Lorovith, I don't want to kill a boy?

Rictus: I know.

Doober Sweetleaf: I'm not a boy, I am—I am 65 years old.

Lorovith: Look at him.

Justin: [chuckles]

Travis: He holds up his hands. "Sixty—six—ah..."

Doober Sweetleaf: I'm this many.

Travis: "I'm this many."

[group laugh]

Lorovith: You know, it's—ah, Grakhan... yes, I'll find another way to protect the boy. But no, I can't deny that no—there's no more worthy foe here, and it will be quite glorious. Yes! Glory.

Grakhan: In this contest, in this final battle between us, we will—

Lorovith: In this glorious, hallowed place! Let the battle wage on!

Grakhan: Let the battle of hallowed glory and honor begin!

Lorovith: Two vicious foes!

Rictus: Big, meaty men, slapping meat!

Lorovith: Slapping meat!

Griffin: [laughs]

Lorovith: Former lovers turned friends!

Clint: [chuckles]

Lorovith: Only one can live.

Grakhan: Only one will carry the torch. [chuckles] I can hardly wait, Lorovith.

Griffin: And he sticks out his hand with the Grimoire on it.

Justin: And I do the same! And clasp wrists.

Griffin: Hell yes. It's fuckin'... it's fuckin' Arnold and the other guy.

Justin: Sucker punch, right then, pow!

Griffin: Sucker punch him in the face? Shit yeah—

Justin: Sucker punch so hard his head pop off!

Griffin: Give me an attack roll!

Justin: No, I'm not gonna do that, Griffin. It's against the rules of the Conclave.

Griffin: Oh, okay. You don't sucker punch him, then.

Justin: [chuckles] Nice try.

Griffin: As you clasp hands with Grakhan, you see a silvery, sort of viney pattern begin to spread across the back of your Grimoire, that reaches down across the back of your hand and meets a similar pattern with his. Meeting in a silver bramble between the two of your hands, there is a faint light that emits from the two of you. And as you release your hands, you can see that you are marked. Tomorrow morning, you will compete in a duel to the death with your greatest rival.

[The Adventure Zone Royale theme music plays]

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