

If the opening segments were anything to go by, this episode would be as many air raid sirens as fart sound effects. Eli wrote down the time stamp. He'd need to check if the audio clipped, maybe compress and normalize, before posting clips to the socials.

He sensed an ad read and tapped a few keys, triggering the queued promotional overlay.

“Real quick, bros, I gotta give a shoutout to our newest sponsor, Gameset AI. Gameset is the revolutionary sports-prediction engine you need to take your winnings to the next level. Trained on *every game* since 2000, Gameset lets you bet like the pros!”

“I’ve been using it and, let me tell you, it’s scary good. Plug-in your match-up and Gameset will provide you Degenerates with their patent pending insights.”

“Use our exclusive, VIP code, #BetBallers, and get *your first month free!*”

“It’s like having *us* giving you personalized advice - for only the price of a couple pizzas.”

“Do it right and you’ll cover those pizzas in no time.”

“No doubt! No doubt. Use our code - #BetBallers - on registration and start winning today!”

Eli sat off stage in the converted garage studio and a battered folding chair that had seen better days. On his lap was his old laptop, called into service to run the livestream’s admin account. It was balanced as precariously as his finances, if he was being honest.

It had been a few episodes since Eli got the Bet Ballers “producer” job. Sports, let alone sports betting, wasn’t his scene and these weren’t his people. He could list least a half-dozen area middle schools with bad reputations he’d rather sub at. However, the money had surprisingly good for what was a pretty straight forward job; running the board at some local churches had been more challenging, by comparison. And it had been steady - something that his bluegrass band, at the moment - was not.

His Outback, and its growing list of worrisome noises, wasn’t going to fix itself. Subbing wasn’t steady enough to repairing his credit deficiency disorder. So every Tuesday and Thursday

afternoon he was here, in the “Bet Baller Media Worldwide Headquarters, LLC”, policing diatribes between such chat room luminaries such as *JockstrapJestor* and *BallerBoy06*. And pretend he understood what hosts Ty and Lance were talking about.

“Look, they aren’t paying me to say this,” Ty said, looking directly into the camera, “but last week their model was dead on. When the public was heavy on Seattle, as the favorite, the sharp money saw Gameset +7. Sharp players faded the square action, and basically were printing value.”

“It’s simple math,” Lance riffed, confidently. “You can either normalize momentum, adjust for weather, and regress touchdown variance, or let Gameset do it for you. You don’t even need to watch the game!”

“For real, for real. But what we do want to watch? J-E-T-S! Jets! Jets! Jets!”

“Dude, you are so right.”

Eli guessed Ty was in his 30’s. He had that aging college jock look. At least once an episode, Ty would name-check the nearby division II school where he played linebacker (“*Go fightin’ Cards!*”) Sometimes it was to justify his take, other times it was to establish pecking order. Eli just assumed Ty’s current real estate gig must be pretty boring by comparison if he kept going to the 15-year-old well.

“OH YEAH. Can you say *Quarterback drama!*? ”

His co-host, Lance Nowak, punctuated his question with a practiced swig of the sponsor’s energy drink, label out. While Tyler could still pull off a quarter zip, Lance’s fit was more athletic cosplay. And watches so bulky their primary purpose was to be seen more by others than looked at by the wearer. Lance was adamant he was the “numbers guy”. As Eli observed in the ensuing weeks, this meant defending your own stats to the death, while deriding anyone else’s as “nerd shit”.

“Did you see Sunday night’s game!?” Ty was now addressing Lance, “My man, Ali

Dettmer *once again* had a *killer* game in his third week in relief of franchise hero, Joe Jonson.”

“Two-hundred twenty four yards with two touchdowns through the air,” Lance read off his phone, “and another 86 yards and a walk-in touchdown with his feet.”

The chat was starting to come to life.

“It’s embarrassing. I’m embarrassed for them. The Jets have an embarrassment of riches.”

“Nobody had backup journeyman Dettmer odds on favorite for their comeback player-of-the-year, that’s for sure. But with Jonson set to come back from turf toe, and the trade deadline nearing, you think the Jets should continue to ride the hot hand?”

“Are you kidding? The Jets are sitting on a gold mine.” Ty spammed several party air horn honks in a row to emphasize his point. “You think the Jets front office isn’t already fielding offers?”

“Better question,” Lance countered, “Is what happens to the line?”

Lines. Spreads. Overs. It felt like running the sound board in church where everyone was speaking in tongues. Eli was trying to keep up with the chat, which was a challenge. It was always a froth of unfamiliar terms and locker room innuendo. But when they sensed a incoming prediction, it was like chum in the water.

“Spill it! Gonna play or gonna lay!”

“what’s the move???”

“got a hundo for a line grap. Gimmie gimmie.”

A more polished presentation would have a picture of the player overlayed on screen. Eli opened up a new browser tab window and searched for “Ali Dettmer” to find something to insert.

“With Ali’s mobility,” Ty continued, “he could come in and be productive for a new team on *day one*. Forget learning the playbook. He’s a scrambler. Run some simple option plays that’ll set up the play action and you’re in business.”

“Instant offense wherever he goes.”

There were a few offseason stories speculating about Dettmer joining the Raiders. Eli liked the hero image on one story. The site had clearly mocked-up a different picture so that it looked like Dettmer was wearing a Raider's jersey. The player, eyes wide, was hurdling over the head of a defender who missed low. It was all dynamic motion and would look great.

Like he had done several times previously, Eli flipped the laptop around and pointed to the screen. Eli would catch Ty's eye, he'd subtly indicate to whether to include the image or find something else, and then Eli would act on it.

Except, today Ty wasn't so subtle.

“BRO. BRO! RAIDERS ARE MAKING A PLAY.”

Eli shook his head. “No, that's not-“

“That's huge! Degenerates, that's HUGE. That's going to move.”

Ty triggered the air raid siren. “EXCLUSIVE BREAKING NEWS ON THE BET
BALLERS PODCAST - Ali Dettmer is going to the Raiders!”

“LOCK! IT! IN!”

Eli looked studied the screen in shock. Checking twice, he confirmed that this was, indeed, an article from pre-season.

“HAMMER RAIDERS +7”

“OMG OMG OMG”

“LINE MOVING!!”

“PUT 1000 ON IT LFG”

“I've been saying this for WEEKS. Weeks, people.” Ty pumped his fists.

This was the first time since starting a month ago Eli had heard about this.

“A chance to take the house like this is once in a blue moon opportunity. Smash those lines and then tell your friends you heard it here first!”

Ty pointed at the camera, “We are plugged in and here for you! When you get your jackpot, make sure you like, subscribe, and draw an unsportsman-like conduct penalty on that alert button!”

“And don’t forget to join our exclusive Discord! For subscribers only, we go even harder with the kinds of advice and insight *those Vegas insiders* won’t let us say on stream.”

“You know we’re going deep on this Dettmer news. Subscribe now so you don’t miss out!”

The hosts were on wind-down auto-pilot.

“And be back Thursday, when we break it wide open.”

That was Eli’s cue. He cut the mikes and cut over to play the final sponsor clip.

Ty and Lance hopped up and chest-bumped.

“Dude,” Ty said, turning to Eli, “That was amazing! That was the shot in the arm this show needed.”

Eli was thoroughly confused. “But it’s not actually happening. That was an old article.”

“But it’s too good not to be right, right?” Ty navigated the narrow space around the desk. “I mean, if it makes sense to enough people, it becomes real. It’s like wisdom of the crowds, like that book, *The Secret*—“

“-that’s not-“

“DUDE!” Lance furiously flipped between apps on his phone. “We seriously just moved a line. Totally. We’re gonna see it.”

Ty high-fived Lance.

“But-“ Eli was still missing something, “-but it’s not real.”

“Ya know,” Lance said, still scrolling, “when the universe makes a connection like that, you just go for it, you know? Trust your gut.”

“Engagement makes it real. And if doesn’t happen,” Ty squinted, trying to read over Lance’s shoulder, “We just say we got some bad information or whatever.”

“Nobody remembers when you’re wrong. But call your shot and have it work out? That’s what legends are made of.”

“That was an *insane* connection, but so obvious. What are the degenerates saying?”

Eli refreshed the chat window. The messages were flying by so quickly, they were hard to read.

“just put \$200 on the Raiders”

“Free money boyz”

“rent inda bag”

Ty watched the comments scroll. “This. Is. Awesome.”

“We got a runner.”

The message about the rent caught Eli’s eye and he chuckled nervously. “Are they... talking real money?”

Ty and Lance looked at each other, and then exploded into a fit of laughter.

#

Eli put the extra mic cables and his laptop bag in the passenger seat of his Outback. He was parked on the curb outside the cookie-cutter split level where they recorded the show. The lackluster effort at clearing the recent snow left the sidewalk icy and treacherous. Eli gingerly circled around the front of the wagon, the crunch of his steps reverberating across the cul-de-sac. He exhaled, as though he had been holding his breath this entire time, and took in the suburb. Yesterday’s pristine, white blanket had become today’s rutted, frozen mess.

Eli climbed in and turned the ignition. The check-engine light was still on.

#

This Monday, Eli was subbing for Mr. Hendrickson, the middle school’s history teacher.

Huey, Dee, and Louis sat toward the back of the room during their home base hour. Supposedly, they were to catch up on their overdue assignments.

But that was easier said than done.

“I see you’re currently covering World War 2 - the German invasion of the Soviet Union? Operation Barbarossa?”

The trio looked at each other, doing some kind of telepathic risk assessment between themselves.

“I guess so?” Louis ventured.

“OK! So where do we start?”

“Well,” Louis said, “Germany decided to attack the Soviets.”

“Sure.” Eli looked expectantly at the others. “What else?”

Huey had given up any pretense of participating in the conversation and had retreated to his phone almost immediately.

“What happened next?”

When Dee shrugged, Eli went to where the draw strings for a variety of maps mounted to the ceiling. Finding one for WW2’s European theater, he tugged.

“Until 1941, if I remember, Germany had looked unstoppable.” Eli picked up the pointer and circled areas as he spoke, “They had easily steamrolled Poland, France, and much of the Scandinavian Peninsula.”

A phone chirped.

Eli recognized the chime.

All three boys perked up instantly, like squirrels at the first screech of a red tail hawk.

Eli sighed. “Guys, come on-“

Huey groaned.

“My four-leg just busted!”

He showed his screen to the others.

“Dude, you still falling for those?” Dee said, slumping back in his chair.

“The free bonuses are free for a reason!” Louis said. “For real, when have those ever paid?”

Eli felt a chill. He sat in on Ty and Lance’s show enough to recognize this song. To date, whenever he monitored the live stream chat, Eli had always pictured college-aged or twenty-something men with more time and disposable income than sense. It hadn’t occurred to him that *Chuckles27* and *PHATRICHARD* might actually be the same kids he sees in the classroom.

When Ty talked strategy, he’d always joke about “broadening the demo[graphics],” but this was ridiculous.

Eli put down the pointer.

“Your history lesson; let’s try this again.”

The three boys looked at him, skeptically.

“OK, Operation Barbarossa. Imagine World War II Germany is about to place one massive *bet*.”

“Bet?” Louis looked skeptical.

“Yeah, a bet. Nazi Germany’s success, to this point in the war, was largely about overwhelming their slower, less mobile opponents.”

“Blitzkrieg.”

Eli pointed at Dee.

“That’s right!”

Dee looked embarrassed as the other two regarded him with surprise.

“What? I play video games.”

“OK, so Germany knows that’s there’s tons of useful resources in we now call eastern Europe. They also had gotten a taste of winning; they wanted to chase it while they had a hot hand.”

“You said there was a bet?”

“A big one. To conquer Europe and have a chance at the world,” Eli paused, making sure he was getting the terminology right, “Germany was, essentially, betting they would win a multi-leg parlay.”

Huey looked up from ruminating on his phone, suspicious.

“*What kind of parlay?*”

Eli hesitated. “A... big one?”

He uncapped a marker.

“It doesn’t matter.” He started making bullet points on the white-board. “What does matter are the different events, or *legs*, of their bet that all needed to break in their favor.

“Leg one, Germany needed to advance *fast*, to outrun any sizable counter-attack.”

He started a second point. “They needed undisrupted supply lines, despite stretching further and further into enemy territory.

“They needed a late, or mild, winter - weather that wouldn’t ding either of the first two points.

“Finally, Germany needed demoralize the Soviets so much that reinforcements would never arrive.”

Eli underlined the points. “Germany needed ALL those legs to hit to win their parlay.”

Huey tilted his head. “So if one misses-”

“You lose the eastern front,” Dee answered.

“Cool.”

“Not cool,” Eli corrected. “Cold. Lots of Operation Barbarossa soldiers *literally* froze to death. The early, harsh winter rallied the Soviets. They stopped Germany before they could take Moscow. It was a huge move of the line, and the Soviets would later join the Allied Powers.”

The boys sat silently for a moment, processing.

“OK, but... if the Soviets were the underdogs, what were the odds?”

Eli smiled, relieved. “At the time? Massive. Nobody thought they’d cover. But they did.”

Dee was scribbling in his notebook. “Can we use that? Like, the odds and stuff?”

Eli was surprised by the question and it took him a second to respond.

“I... I don’t know if Mr. Hendrickson knows what a parlay is,” Eli laughed, “Just remember the bigger point: *don’t bet against the Russian winter.*”

They laughed - *laughed!* - and wrote it down.

Eli had gotten through. But why, *in God’s green earth*, were middle-schoolers betting? Let alone during school hours?

“Guys, let me ask you a question. You’ve got that app - but don’t you have to be 18 or something? Like to have an account?”

“I just use my Dad’s account,” Dee said, “I see him on it all the time, and he uses the same password for everything. I don’t think he even notices.”

Huey shrugged. “My older brother doesn’t have time while he’s at work, so I play during the day. If we hit, I get a cut.”

“Yeah, and when was the last time *that* happened?” Louis teased.

“Hey, I was THIS CLOSE to doubling my mowing money. Stupid steam move.”

Eli had heard Ty rant about that - jumping on a popular bet right as it was turning sour.

Dee and Louis exploded into laughter.

“No hedge,” Louis shook his head, “and you chased it.”

Eli sensed a line had been crossed. Huey grew angry.

“Well, at least *my Mom* didn’t *take my phone away because she had to cover my losses - again!*”

“Whoa,” Eli stepped forward, “Guys, guys, guys - *easy*. Relax.”

He took a breath and released it theatrically, palms up, making eye contact with each and encouraging them to do the same.

“It sounds like you all have a lot of experience, and not a lot of good. So why do you keep doing it?”

They exchanged glances.

“Because,” Louis said, “it’s - fun?”

Eli looked at him in disbelief.

“You can’t win if you don’t play?”

“Even if that were true, it sounds like there isn’t much winning happening, anyway.”

An idea occurred to Eli. He went back to the white board and began erasing it.

“Have you done probability in math yet?”

“Math?” Huey was confused. “This is history home base.”

“We were talking parlays, right? That’s probability. We still have ten minutes. Go with me on this.”

Eli drew four boxes.

“Say we have a four leg parlay. We want to see if we can get four heads on a coin flip in a row.” Eli pointed at the first box. “What are the odds of getting a heads on the first flip?”

“50%?” Dee said.

“Assuming its a fair flip, yes, you have a 50% chance. What are the odds of getting a heads on the 2nd flip?”

Louis squinted, thinking. “It would still be 50%, right?”

“Yes!” Eli said, getting excited, “and it would be 50% for the third and the fourth flip, too. So what are the odds of us winning the parlay?”

“If everything else is 50%, then this would be 50%, right?” Huey guessed.

“You might think that,” Eli said, returning to the board, “but we actually need to *multiply* the percentage of each event happening *with every other event’s percentage*. Taking the first two values, 50% times 50% is 0.25, or 25%. *It goes down*. If we continue to multiply all legs, we get—”

Dee read from his phone’s calculator, “Zero-point-zero-six-two-five, or 6.25%.”

Eli capped the marker.

“So we could expect that four-leg parlay in this example to pay out a little more than 6% of the time, or only 1 out of 16 times. And just because you might have lost the previous fifteen times *does not* mean you’re due on the 16th play. You still have—“

“-a 6.25% chance of winning the next parlay,” Louis finished. “Huh.”

It was time to bring this home.

“And that is only a four-leg parlay with each leg having a 50% chance of happening. I bet - I mean, I *suspect* - that if we looked, the odds for the events happening in these offers is far, far below 50%. I mean, we pretty quickly get into ‘struck by lightning’ probability without trying too hard. *Think about that* - how many people do you know that have been struck by lightning?”

The trio again looked at each other. There seemed to be a dawning realization. Maybe he taught them something valuable today.

“So you’re saying boosted odds are always bad?”

“Like the Nazi’s chances of taking Moscow in November.”

#

Marci came home with groceries as Eli was scrolling through the show’s email.

“Hey, can you help me with these?”

Eli popped up off the counter barstool and took both of the paper bags. Marci hung her winter coat on a peg near the door, next to her school para badge.

“No band practice tonight?”

“Rupert had sick kids, so we postponed.” Eli took the frozen items out of the bag and began making room for them in the fridge’s freezer. “For the best, probably. Gives me a chance to figure out what to say to them about the TEDx gig.”

Marci rolled up her sweater sleeves to help. “You heard back?”

“Yep.” Eli pushed aside a bag of peas. “The usual, ’Thank you for your submission. We received several outstanding applications. Unfortunately, we could only select a handful, blah, blah blah.’”

“I’m sorry.” Marci tenderly put her arms around Eli’s neck and hugged. “I know you guys worked hard on your pitch.”

“Thank you.” They kissed briefly and then Eli turned back to the remaining items in the bag. “Oh well. The conference’s loss, really. I had a really killer mandolin solo prepared.”

Marci smiled.

“I’m sure you did. Any news on the bluegrass cruise?”

“It might still happen,” Eli said, half-heartedly, “We still have a slot to perform. The deadline to let them know is coming up.” Eli sighed, looking at the handful of bills waiting for attention on the counter. “But I just don’t know if that’s the right call with everything else going on.”

“Well, we’re not solving anything on empty stomach. Let’s get some food on.”

Over supper, Eli recounted the most recent show. It had been quite the affair. Last Tuesday’s conjecture over Ali Dettmer had become *this* Tuesday’s reality - the Raiders had made the trade. Ty and Lance had spent the stream crowing.

It was after that production that Lance had given Eli access to the show’s email, “on a trial

period". Something about "a chance to hammer on his winner grindset". The thousand unread messages, many new since the previous taping, suggested a different reason.

"So, I know you just started working with these guys, but," Marci hesitated, forked hotdish suspended in the air, "is this like an act? Like, are these characters they do for the show? Or are they like this all the time?"

Eli had his suspicions, but his Mom always said if you don't have anything nice to say, *write a song, instead*. Maybe he'd do that later.

"I don't know," Eli concluded. "They're certainly... enthusiastic."

After helping finish the dishes, Eli poured a glass of wine for himself and Marci. He then turned on the TV. After some fumbling, he found the right combination of apps and logins for the Thursday Night football game.

Marci raised an eyebrow.

"Is this our life now?" she teased.

"Call it research."

Marci smirked, sat her glass down, and picked up her book off the end-table. She stretched her legs so that her woolen-socked feet could rest in Eli's lap.

Like a majority of Americans, Eli been to the occasional Super Bowl party or stumbled across a football game while flipping channels. But sitting there, *studying* what the game had become, was a different experience.

He thought he'd strum his guitar along with the commercial jingles, but quickly abandoned that plan. There wasn't much to play along with.

"ENTER THE PROMO CODE, AND GET \$200 IN BONUS BETS AFTER YOUR FIRST DEPOSIT."

"BOOSTED ODDS ON THE OPENING KICKOFF DISTANCE! SCAN THE QR CODE BEFORE THE KICKER LINES UP!"

Most had celebrities that Eli recognized. But there was the one that was little more than a mascot holding a “FREE MONEY” banner for a majority of the ad, before violently exploding into multi-colored confetti.

It was hard to harmonize off of explosions and shouting.

Eli had always thought of Ty and Lance as their own distinct thing. But he was surprised by how much the pregame patter could be mistaken for an episode of Bet Ballers. The chyron repeated the spread live.

And more ads. So discordant with the broadcast’s triumphant, orchestral fanfare bumpers.

“So *that’s* what a parlay is?” Marci’s book sat in her lap as she watched, confused. “My kids at school are always going on about it.”

“Not just your kids. I had to convert a lesson to gambling-eese at the middle school this week just to get it to click.” Eli turned the laptop around so that Marci could see the inbox’s unread count. “And then there’s all these, too.”

“Well, they certainly run enough ads. That’s got to cost a lot.”

It was a good point. Eli decided not to mention one of the companies in the ads also owned the stadium naming rights, which would cost even *more* money. A headache was forming behind his eyes; the kind he usually got during tax season.

The game, itself, wasn’t much of a distraction from his growing unease. While not being a “sports guy”, Eli could appreciate a good performance. This, however, was not one of those, with both teams seeming out of sorts on a short week.

“Tonight’s injury report brought to you by BETTER BEATDOWN, the social betting game where YOU CAN BEAT YOUR FRIENDS FOR FREE.”

Eli kept the game on in the background while he triaged the inbox.

There was a new item atop the queue, “Request for Sponsorship Details”. After a bit of Googling, it seemed legit - a national sports bar chain was looking to find non-traditional media

partners. They were interested in basic stats for the show, along with some sponsorship suggestions.

Lance had shared a doc with him for “advertising opportunities”.

Eli studied the rate card. It seemed low, especially for this company. This was a household name - unlike the ball-shavers and “low T” supplements that comprised a majority of the first month of his production. And the “clunk” his Outback’s drivetrain made when shifting at speed wasn’t going to fix itself.

He pasted the template into the response, first doubling the price. Then he remembered Huey, Dee, and Louis from school. Eli hesitated for a moment, backspaced, and then *tripled* what he had started with.

Would that be enough?

There was another ad.

“WINNERS NEVER WAIT! GO BIG OR GO HOME.”

The universe had decided then. Eli hit send.

The remaining triage was tough sledding. For every legitimate potential sponsor or cross-promotion opportunity, there were dozens of messages from the show’s “fans”. They asked for customized line-up advice. Complaints about bets gone bust. Even one full-on prayer request.

Then there was the one from someone claiming they lost their car payment because they took the wrong side when Lance shouted, “LOCK IT IN.”

Eli had to set the laptop aside after that last one. Marci had long ago left to ready herself for bed. Eli returned to the game, hoping for a distraction. But, in the slog, it was clear that even the broadcast team was struggling for angles to keep the audience engaged.

“This is a night both teams would rather forget. Then again, nobody cares about who wins - only who covers.”

Eli was about to turn the TV off when the color commentator mentioned the Ali Dettmer

trade, and threw to the sideline reporter for an “update”. Eli scrambled for the remote and, then, turned the volume up.

“-when asked what inspired the Dettmer trade, Raiders’ General Manager, Spencer Rourke remained vague, almost coy, alluding to the idea being ‘in the air’. Well, after some digging, we tracked the idea back to the source; a little online show streaming twice a week out of the midwest. And you won’t believe the name, guys.”

Eli's stomach dropped.

“That’s right, as best we can tell, Wednesday’s blockbuster trade was inspired by a podcast named *Bet Ballers*. ”

The guys in the booth both chuckled, ruefully, as if they both knew the punchline to a dirty joke that couldn't be said out loud.

“Of course it would be.”

“What a world, partner. Boys will be boys - am I right?”

This made no sense. The “story” had been made up, and now they were covering it on national television.

“Is that important?”

Eli blinked and looked up. Marci stood in the bedroom's door frame, holding her toothbrush. She pointed to his phone.

Eli hadn't noticed it vibrating. He flipped it over. It was a group text with Ty and Lance.

The exact nuance was difficult to follow, but it was clear that Ty and Lance had seen the sideline report, too.

The laptop dinged. Eli pulled it back toward him.

It was a new email - from the potential sponsor.

“How soon can we sign?”

Eli was shocked.

But not as shocked as he was by the email that arrived the next day.

#

Eli parked his Outback - it should be noted - without any alarming clunks or shuddering protests. The check engine light also no longer shown. His cut of the sponsorship windfall had set all to rights. At least materially with the car.

He fed the meter and bent upwards to admire the downtown buildings before a cold blast snapped his revelry. Eli pulled his coat in tight and ducked into the restaurant.

The steakhouse had apparently been chosen for “vibes” rather than its acoustics, because the place was a cavernous drum of concrete, brushed steel, and wood paneling. Every echoed fork clank and chair scrape caused him to wince like a missed note during a solo. That is, when the discord could be heard over the televised games lining the walls.

Ty and Lance had insisted this was “where athletes go”, although a quick scan of the patrons on this particular busy Saturday night suggested clientele closer to golf, maybe pickleball than crossfit.

Eli checked his messages - still no update from the band. He shelved that concern as the host led him to a tall-backed booth in the back. Ty and Lance were already there, excitedly conspiring about something on their phones. Ty had on a relaxed fit sports coat. His power chic contrasted with Lance, who wore a jersey and yet another clunky, oversized watch. Eli felt suddenly self-conscious in his white button-up and stage jeans.

“ELIIII!” Lance shouted a bit too aggressively as he approached, as if the announcement was more a call for attention from those around them than an actual greeting for him, “Our rainmaker!”

“Are you pumped for tonight!” Ty pounded the table. “I am so pumped.”

“This is a *rocket to da moon!*” Lance said, high-fiving Ty. “And you got on board at just

the right moment. *How awesome is that?*”

Eli forced a chuckle.

“Yeah. It’s been a learning experience, for sure.”

It took some effort, but the trio was finally able to wave down the server for water. The place for athletes or not, it was certainly busy.

“We’re clear on the plan, right?” Eli ventured, delicately navigating what he assumed could be challenging, “This guy reached out because he’s *interested in the business side of the show*. Not the betting. Not lines. Just talking shop.”

Ty rolled his eyes. “Yeah, you already said that in the email. Relax, would you?” Ty waggled his thumb between Lance and himself, “We know how to talk to players.”

As if on cue, they saw their guest cutting through the crowd toward them.

“Fellas! How we doing?”

Brock Schlesinger was much more massive than Eli expected. Of course, Eli reminded himself, even a mountain of a blocking tight end probably appears on TV downright svelte next to the average offensive linemen.

Brock seemed to move with a slight stiffness, betraying a lifetime of hard knocks - something at odds with his young, twenty-something face. He wore nondescript, gray sweats and a battered ball cap - much less “celebrity sighting”, and more “guy grabbing ice melt before the hardware store closes”.

“These are the guys I recognize. Hello Ty! Hello Lance. So glad we could connect while I was in town.” Brock shook their hands before turning to Eli. “And you must be Eli, the one I’ve been emailing with.”

Eli felt his hand engulfed, and marveled at how easily his hand could be crushed, if Brock wanted to.

After some additional difficulty getting the staff’s attention, menus were exchanged. Brock

declined the drink cart. Opening pleasantries were exchanged, which - with Ty and Lance's eagerness leading the conversation like a dog chasing a rabbit - could have gone very badly. However, Eli was impressed by Brock's dexterity at turning awkward interludes into passable, even charming, moments. Countless meet 'n greets and press interviews must have been good practice.

Orders were taken, and then Ty and Lance recounted their latest feats: the Dettmer scoop, the line movement, and the other big moves they saw "just over the horizon". It was like they were conducting a rumorville Rorschach test - tossing out a vague notion or half-formed impression, gauging Brock's response, and then breathlessly cycling to the next with little segue or subtlety.

To his credit, Brock played along politely as he munched on the complimentary bread, at one point calling the server over for a refresh. But Eli sensed a growing exhaustion - shoulders slightly more rounded, smile a bit less authentic and more mechanical reflex as he, once again, deflected.

"Yeah guys, I can't say what the front office might be thinking there. Most weeks, I don't even know the full gameplan until the last minute."

"Totally hear that," Ty said, "Back when I was starting linebacker for State - *GO FIGHTING CARDS!* - we always tried to stay super fluid right up to the last second, then we'd *LOCK IT IN.*"

Lance was about to launch into another of his, increasingly, conspiratorial scenarios but Brock cut him off.

"Listen, talking about my work is fun and all," he said, leaning forward, "but I'm really interested in what you do."

"I'm coming up on the end of my rookie contract. Don't get me wrong, it has been a great four years. Getting drafted at all was a surprise--"

"-and haven't missed a start since!" Lance said.

“Well, yeah. I wouldn’t trade the experience for anything. I’ve worked hard and been incredibly lucky. But I’ve been thinking a lot about the future.”

Ty was confused. “Your next contract?”

“Well...” Brock’s voice trailed off as he studied the ceiling, avoiding eye contact. “No. I need to be realistic. Since turning pro, I’ve never been on a winning team, and we’re trending that way again this year. They’re probably going to clean house at the end of the season, if not before. My rookie deal is up, so I’m no longer the cheapest option for a rebuild. And there’s just not that much demand for a blocking tight end that can’t catch in a passing league.”

“I mean,” Brock said, reconnecting with the group, “the average career for an NFL player is 3.3 *years*. I’ve managed *four* as a fifth round pick - and I’ve done that without a major injury or concussion. What are the odds?”

“But it just seems like it’s time to move on to what’s next, before I press my luck.”

Lance fidgeted with his massive watch, seeming to turn over this confession with each twist of the elastic band. “Couldn’t you, I dunno, be a broadcaster?”

“Well, my degree *is* communications. But they only really want big names for something like that.” Brock sipped his water. “Besides, my agent keeps saying that I need a ‘platform’. Like what you guys do, with the show. That’s why I wanted to get together - learn more about it, how you got started, the time investment - that sort of thing.”

This was about what Eli had expected after their email exchange. What was *unexpected* was watching the extra point sail wide past Ty’s head.

“Totally. *Totally*. We’d love to talk about your platform. Your timing is perfect. I’ve been thinking I really need to put together an online course. One of those self-paced ones? There’s so much I could coach people on about developing winner’s mindset, or starting controversies to get views.”

“That’s not “

“If I may,” Eli cut Brock off, apologetically, “I think what Brock is trying to say is that he’s looking for something *stable*. Something that he controls. You want something on your own terms. Did I get that right?”

Brock snapped his fingers and pointed at Eli.

“Bingo. My man.”

Ty and Lance regarded Eli, confused.

Before Eli could further elaborate, Brock’s phone chirped. He flipped it over, quickly skimming whatever snippet was shown on the lock screen.

“Hang on team. I need to answer this. I’ll be back in a minute.”

He ventured back toward the hostess, seeking somewhere sheltered from the din.

The minute Brock was out of earshot, Lance hissed. “What was that? We have *nothing* for the next show. No overs. No inside dirt. No *nothing*.”

“We will,” Ty said, his body language betraying his words, “We didn’t come this close to stop now. We just need to ask the right way. Like... guy-to-guy.”

Eli put his napkin on the table. “Guys, Brock really just wants some basics. I’m sure you guys have some stories about starting out? Like how you found your first audience? What things you learned to avoid?”

“Well sure, I love reminiscing over beers as much as the next guy.” Lance said. “But we *need* a scoop. If we don’t have the next big thing, our fans will move on. It’s sink or swim, whether we like it or not.”

“You have to be an alpha shark if you’re going to survive being a new media entrepreneur,” Ty added.

“You keep moving,” Lance tapped the table for emphasis, “or you die.”

Eli, who had refrained from the bread feeding frenzy, felt a pit in the bottom of his stomach. He was pretty sure it wasn’t because he was hungry.

Suddenly, there was a commotion; dishes for multiple tables arrived simultaneously. Brock's absence caused a momentary confusion, then four plates hit the table at once. The server was off again in a hurry, without so much as a water check.

"Speaking of fish, you see that?" Lance gestured to Brock's setting. "He ordered seafood at a steak house. *Baller* alpha move."

Eli blinked. "What!? That is not a thing."

"It's totally a thing," Lance insisted. "Showing out with shrimp pasta instead of ribeye? It means he's alpha, like us. We'll talk guy-to-guy. We'll get that content."

"Shrimp just means... shellfish," Eli said.

He felt like he was on stage, and suddenly had to play around a broken string.

Brock returned, serpentine between the tables and quickly sitting down.

"Sorry about that. Team curfew check."

Seeing the others digging in, Brock grabbed his fork and scooped his entree with gusto. He bit down and his face froze.

Eli watched, puzzled.

Brock dropped his fork, grabbed his napkin, and spat out the bite.

"Was there shellfish in that?" He began turning pale and his eyes started to water.

"Well, yeah," Ty said, stunned, "You ordered the shrimp pasta."

Brock braced himself again the table. "I ordered," Brock said, grimacing, "the chicken Alfredo."

"Oh no," Eli said, scooting across the bench. "Oh no. Do you have an EpiPen?"

"In the... rental," Brock managed. "Outside."

"Come on."

Eli helped Brock stand up and was fully, unfortunately, aware of just how big Brock was.

They moved, weaving ungracefully back out through the tables in their haste, like trying to lug an upright bass through a tight stairwell.

But they made it through the doors. The cold now barely noticeable over the concern. Brock's wheeze could now be seen, the shivering breath instantly turning to vapor. He weakly gestured to a sedan up the street.

When they reached it, Brock fumbled with the handle and the car unlocked. He dropped into the seat and pulled a bag from the passenger seat. Clawing at a side pocket, he pulling out an EpiPen. Brock tore it from the packaging, regarded it for a moment, and then jabbed it in his thigh.

Within a few minutes, the color started returning to his face.

Eli shivered slightly, arms crossed, standing beside the open door.

“You good?” Eli asked.

“Yeah,” Brock managed, “Thanks. Haven’t had a close call like that in awhile. I’m not sure what happened.”

“There must have been a mix up with the other table. Do you want me to go back inside, see if I can straighten it out? Get the Alfredo to go?”

“I appreciate that but,” Brock shook his head, “I already owe you one. You’ve done enough. I think I’m going to bail, find the team doc at the hotel.”

Eli stayed with him for a few more minutes, making sure he was good to drive, and then watched him pull away. A sudden shiver reminded him this was no weather to be caught outside without a coat. With a sigh, he returned to the restaurant.

Returning to the booth, Eli found Ty and Lance on their phones. They both looked up at him, expectantly.

“So,” Ty started, “Is he gonna be OK?”

“Yeah,” Eli said, sitting down. “I think he’s out of the woods.”

“But,” Lance asked, phone held up at the ready, “Is he good to start *tomorrow*?”

Eli stumbled. “I... I don’t know.”

“Bro. If he misses the start... that’s actually crazy. Do you know what that will do to the props?” Ty punched Lance’s shoulder. “The subs are going to eat this up.”

“This is it! *This is our next exclusive.*”

“We gotta get on our Discord. This is huge.”

Ty reached out and shook Eli’s shoulder.

“DUDE. Do you realize what this means?”

The pit inside Eli’s stomach was suddenly unavoidable. He looked down at his untouched plate of food. In the ensuing chaos, it had grown cold.

#

Marci stood during intermission, and stretched.

“You need anything?”

Eli looked up at her from where he slumped in the theater seat.

“A decision on whether we do this cruise would be great.”

“I meant from the concession stand, dummy.” She bent down and kissed his forehead. “I think I see my friends. I’m going to say hi, and see what they have.”

Marci walked out of the balcony aisle and back toward the stairwell exit, leaving Eli alone with his thoughts.

The local TEDx event seemed like a success, nearly filling the old venue. After being rejected, he’d briefly considered not coming out of spite. But events like this were probably good for building community. Showing up seemed like the bare minimum being asked of him to make that happen, so he was here.

The lights dimmed, signaling people to return to their seats.

“All right, all right, *all right!*” the MC declared over people returning to their seats. “We’re

just about to get started again, here. While people take their seats, I wanted to, again, give a few shout-outs to tonight's sponsors—“

Marci apologetically slid past couples at the end of the row to retake her seat next to Eli. She offered her box of popcorn, eyebrows raised questioningly.

Eli took a handful.

There was polite applause after the final sponsor mention.

“-OK! It looks like we’re about all back, and have I got a surprise for you!” The lights in the rest of the theater dimmed fully, leaving the MC in the spotlight. “Our next speaker is a local entrepreneur who recently broke out nationally in a big way. We couldn’t help but make room last minute for his timely talk, *How Betting Builds Community*. Please welcome to the stage… Tyler ‘Ty’ Hertzel!”

Eli choked on his popcorn, resulting in a coughing fit.

Marci looked up from Eli, confused. “Is that…?”

Ty jogged from the wings, wearing a tight, black t-shirt, skinny jeans, and pristine white sneakers. The wireless microphone was almost invisible over his left ear.

He stopped center stage, looked down at his mark, and adjusted slightly as the applause faded. Ty took a deep breath, held it, and let the silence stretch… and stretch… and-

Ty spread his hands wide, referencing the entire room.

“Loneliness.”

He let the word hang.

Behind him, a screen came to life. The slide was entirely black, except for a single word written in white, blocky letters: “#loneliness”.

“It’s a pandemic. Not one measured in germs or masks, but a silent one. Dudes sitting in basements. Dudes driving trucks and working their side hustles. Dudes… alone.”

The slide advanced, and the screen lit up with what seemed to be an AI-generated picture

of a man looking forlornly out a rainy window.

“I used to be alone,” Ty said, beginning a premeditated movement stage right. “As some of you might know, I played linebacker at State - *Go Fighting Cards!* - and when you’re on the field, *you’re part of a team*. You know the role you’re expected to play. You do it well - you hit someone, you make a play, and the crowd goes wild. That’s instant feedback. That’s reality.”

The screen switched to drone footage performing a flyby of an empty stadium.

Ty hit his mark and steepled his hands.

“But then the game ends. You graduate. Maybe you’re like me and you got a job... in real estate.” Eli heard a couple of people in the audience chuckle, nervously. “And suddenly, the volume goes to zero. You’re just a guy. No team. No tribe. Just one of the millions of nobodies adrift.”

The screen changed. The Bet Ballers logo filled the entire screen, scaled out of proportion to such a degree that it appeared pixelated.

“I was adrift, until I found my *community*.”

Eli slumped lower in his seat. Marci set down her popcorn and put her hand on his arm.

“People tell you gambling is a vice,” Ty said, his voice rising. “They say it’s ‘risky’. They even say, ‘Ty, why are you still up at 3am watching Chinese amateur ping-pong?’”

Ty held for laughter for a second. When it didn’t come, he plowed ahead.

“I tell them: I’m not buying a bet - I’m buying a brotherhood.”

A new slide appeared. It was bisected horizontally. Above the line were the words SKIN IN THE GAME. Below that were the words FEEL SOMETHING REAL.

“Think about it. Watching a game on TV? Two team you don’t care about? Boring. Next thing you know you’re doom scrolling social media and shopping online just to feel something. It’s passive. It’s weak. *It’s total spectator mindset* when what you need is a *grind-set*.”

Ty stalked to the edge of the stage.

“But... you put fifty bucks on the over, and guess what? Suddenly, you’re in the arena. You’re sweating. Your heart rate matches the quarterback’s. You’re participating in history.”

“And when you lose?” Ty began pointing to people in the front row, “Or you, or even you - when you lose, and you will, *they* will call it ‘failure’. *They* call it ‘reckless’. But you know what I call it? **Shared sacrifice.**”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” Eli muttered under his breath. Marci squeezed his arm both in support and as a warning. Eli rubbed his temple with his free hand.

The slide advanced to a photo of a wolf pack advancing through the snow toward the camera.

“When I’m in my exclusive Discord - shout out to those that put the big ‘D’ in Degenerates - and we all miss? That’s *real*. We *bleed* together. We feel that pain together. And in a world that wants you numb, sometimes the quickest way to feeling alive again is losing a thousand dollars.”

There was a drunken whoop from someone in the back on the lower level.

“Yeah - my man knows what I’m talking about!”

Ty returned to center stage amidst scattered laughter.

“Last week, on my show, I *predicted* the Ali Dettmer to the Raiders trade. The experts? The suites? They said no. *They* said, ‘Ty, where’s you’re data?’ But I didn’t use data. I used instinct. I used the collective energy of a thousand randos screaming into a chat room. And you know what?”

He paused for effect.

“We manifested it. We willed it into existence. The universe bends to the bold. We moved the line, and reality followed.”

The slide changed to a collage of recent news story screen shots.

“And we’re just getting started. Sports betting was just the beginning. Prediction markets take the best parts of betting, and apply it to *world events*. In a noisy, confusing world, anyone can

put up or shut up. Got a hot tip on who will be the next president? Think you know when the war with Russia will end? Well, why not make cold hard cash with what you know.”

Ty shrugged, palms up.

“Play your cards right, and it’s like profiting from the news before its even news.”

Eli leaned over to Marci and whispered, “I think we should go.”

“If I leave you with one thing from tonight, is that we can make the future. Community isn’t potlucks. It isn’t who you happen to live by.” He pointed with both fingers at the TEDx red carpet he was standing on. “Real community is knowing that when you’re down to your last chip, when your back is against the wall, you have the courage to look at the odds, fact check the spread with your brothers, and say-“

Ty raised a fist.

“LOCK. IT. IN.”

The slide advanced one more time to present a QR code the size of the entire screen.

“My name is Ty Hertzel. Use the code BETBALLERS for a deposit match up to two hundred dollars. Let’s build something together!”

There was momentary hesitation, and then a slow, scattered wave of polite applause.

“He really thinks he crushed that, doesn’t he?” Marci whispered.

“Thank you!” Ty yelled, grinning before walking backstage.

Eli scanned the crowd, spotting a handful of phones trying to capture the QR code still on the screen.

“It was certainly... something.”

#

A week later, Eli was trying to navigate the garage studio. There were boxes stacked haphazardly.

“Just who we wanted to see!” Ty called out while unboxing one of the boxes on the set.

“Check it out! We have merch!”

He wrestled for a moment with a smaller package before pulling a cartoon copy of the very set.

“It looks just like us!” Lance exclaimed, leaning over to examine himself in miniature.

“If you think that is great-“ Ty paused dramatically before suddenly flicking his caricature.

“LOCK. IT. IN.” The bobble-head screeched, the original audio file barely comprehensible beneath its heavily processed optimization and cheap reproduction.

“Dude! I love my mini-me so much!” Lance turned to Eli. “Isn’t this awesome!”

Eli looked at the stacks upon stacks of other boxes in slight disbelief. “Is that what all these boxes are?”

“Some,” Ty said, stepping off the stage and reaching into a previously opened box. “We also got logo tees - large, extra-large, and so on.”

“That’s actually what we wanted to talk to you about.”

Eli moved a box off the chair that he usually used for producing, and set his stuff down.

“You joined the show at a critical inflection point. Whether it was adding the graphics, improving the audio, or jumping in to answer email you’ve taken everything like a champ.”

“And now we’re taking things to the next level,” Ty said, “Merch is where the real money is at. And we’re going to need someone to handle things - watch the store, handle the orders, ship things out, that kind of thing.”

Lance leaned against the stage set. “We know that’s a lot. That’s why Ty and I have talked it over and we’re willing to offer you a percentage of sales through our online store, after expenses and our cut, of course.”

“Dude! We’re dealing you in! This is big!”

Eli looked at the both of them, eagerly waiting for his answer.

“I am glad we’re having this talk now,” Eli started, “but I’m not going to be around for a couple of months. I wanted to tell you that I’m not going to do the show. And I’m definitely not going to be able to handle merch sales.”

Ty broke the stunned silence first.

“You’re not going to be around? What do you mean?”

“My band has been offered a slot to perform on a bluegrass cruise. I’ve decided that will be what I’m doing most of this winter.”

“A cruise?” Lance asked, “Like rocking out with spring breakers?”

“No, more like playing bluegrass music for retirees after dinner.”

“But it pays good, right?”

“It pays-” Eli paused, eventually plucking the right word from several options, “enough. It’s a mid-tier boat. It is unglamorous, low-tech, and pays a fraction of what I’d probably make here. But I’ll be playing music I like with people I enjoy, and that means a lot.”

His explanation only seemed to confuse them.

“So,” Lance drew the word out, “What’s the angle?”

“No angle, just music.” Eli mimicked playing air guitar. “When we play, I’m making something *with* people. We’re in the same room as the audience. If we do our job right, there’s a shared experience there, something greater than what we had individually. It’s real.”

Ty frowned. “Well, OK. But how do you leverage that? You sell your own merch then? Is there much of a market for blue...? Blue-“

“Bluegrass. And not really.”

Lance’s eyebrows shot up. “You’re walking away from *this* for that?”

“Yes. I guess that’s what I’m saying.”

Ty snapped his fingers.

“Oh. Ohhh.” He grinned. “I get it.”

Lance tilted his head. “Huh?”

Ty shook his finger. “You’re going offline. Creating scarcity.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Disappear for the season. Come back authentic. Analog. Double-down on the salt-of-the-earth vibe. Creating an ‘Eli Mystique’ before you launch your own channel.”

Lance looked impressed. “That’s very 4D chess. Integrity is so hot right now.”

Eli opened his mouth to object, then reconsidered.

“I don’t know about that,” he said, finally. “Let’s just say I’m betting on myself.”

“Respect,” Lance said. “Huge long play.”

“Can’t say this ain’t an unexpected kick to the balls,” Ty said, ruefully, “I’ll have to make some calls to get some help in the short term. But look us up when you get back. There’s always room for one more in our Discord.”

Ty awkwardly offered to dab.

Lance gave the most platonic of hugs.

And that was it.

They were already turning back to their phones as Eli picked up his things and left out of the side door.

The make-shift garage studio had been stuffy, but outside the air was fresh and invigorating. It had snowed recently, and the lawns surrounding the suburban cul-de-sac glittered in the afternoon sun. The world was a clean stage.

#

The windowless interior cabin was small enough that, if he laid out crosswise on the narrow bed, Eli could touch both walls if he stretched. And there was the constant, low-frequency

vibration of the ship's engines. The air was humid, and smelled faintly of salt and industrial floor wax.

Eli was smiling.

He sat on the edge of his bed, cradling his mandolin. After briefly retuning his high string, he resumed a steady chuck in time with the rhythmic beat. The notes rang out and echoed in the small space; a warm reverb not dissimilar from what one might hear in a nicely proportioned bathroom.

The song he had been working on was coming along. It was probably time to work out the parts with the rest of the band during sound check.

On the wall, opposite the bed, the flat screen television was on, volume muted. Idly, Eli picked up the remote and began cycling through the channels.

He continued clicking until something caught his eye. He backtracked to the previous channel - one of the myriad of sports channels that didn't even have their own names, just a brand appended with "04" or "99" - the ones that aired stuff like cheese rolling or chess boxing.

Here, among the dregs, were Ty and Lance, trapped in a split-screen, their faces contorted into the same masks of performative enthusiasm. Ty pointed aggressively at the camera, likely shouting, "LOCK. IT. IN."

Eli thought Ty looked tired. Lance dutifully swigged from some new energy drink. It looked like he had gained weight.

They were small and one-dimensional, swamped by the visual noise in the set behind them. They were peddling some rumor as the next big thing, trying to predict the next line and keep the hamster wheel rolling.

There was a knock on the door, and then Rupert stuck his head in.

"You about ready?"

Eli turned the TV off.

“Absolutely.”

#