

# Puzzle Pieces

Story Concept By Anonymous

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*'Left, left, slide down, swoop it right, it fits there...'*

Nick was on autopilot at this stage, and really, when you reached this high of level, over thinking is what would normally kill you.

*'Next piece, over to the right, down and in. Straight piece, in the middle.'*

The ninetails smiled as all the lower rows flashed briefly, and then disappeared. But the barrage continued, and after clearing so many rows, the game would mix it up.

*'3 rows to go. Cross, on the left side. 1 row to go. Zigzag, you go over here...'*

The game decided that this time it was going to rotate the square screen, and all the blocks would settle according to the new orientation. The young man watched as everything rotated left, and swore under his breath as a 7/L piece mucked up his layout. Now everything was too close to the top, and as the game proceeded to rain down it's random geometric onslaught, Nick knew he was done for.

*'Not there. No. No! ...shit'*

There was a sound like a small eight bit bomb being detonated, and the words "GAME OVER" flashed on his screen. Nick leaned back, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. Normally this game helped to clear his head and calm his nerves, but then again, he normally wasn't sitting outside his professor's office, waiting to get lectured about how he was a lousy student, and that if he didn't get his scores up that his scholarship would be in jeopardy.

But, deep inside, the ninetails knew that he wasn't a bad student. He was actually a pretty gifted programmer. Possibly the best at their school, if he allowed himself a moment of pride in all the awards and achievements he'd won while at the university. Give him a computer and some code, and he could produce some amazing games in just a short weekend. The Tetris knockoff he had just finish playing was designed by him in one afternoon while he was bored and hanging around the campus library. It was hard to improve upon the classic game, he felt, but found that adding a few random effects, like screen rotation and shuffling of the piece, gave the game an enjoyable twist. If his classmates were any indicator, this game would sell very well on the App Store.

The game had decided it was done gloating, and cycled from the "GAME OVER" message to the main menu, where a soothing digital serenade played on until the gamer chose an option. Nick turned off his hand-held without looking, and let the atmosphere wash over him.

"Nick? Professor Grey will see you now."

The ninetails was startled enough that he almost dropped his hand-held. He'd completely zoned out that there was someone else in the waiting room with him. "Um...yes Ma'am." He stammered out,

while he quickly stowed his things into his backpack. "Sorry. Just trying to gather my thoughts, you know?" He fumbled with the zipper on his pack, but eventually managed to close the small compartment he reserved for his gaming devices. "I've never really been in trouble before."

The lioness genuinely laughed at this, bringing a slightly curled hand up to her mouth as she closed her eyes. It was a pleasant laugh, and not malicious in any way. It somehow helped to put Nick at ease, at least a little. "Oh dear. You can't possibly be that nervous about your meeting with Professor Grey?" She instinctively looked back at the closed door, and giggled a bit more. Then, turning back to the ninetails, she added in a conspiratorial tone, "He's a big softy."

As he walked towards the office, all he could do was nod in agreement, knowing she was absolutely right.

"Don't worry," the lioness gently grabbed Nick's upper arm, a gesture of encouragement, "he doesn't bite."

The mental image that went through Nick's head after she said that got him on edge again. He flicked one of his nine fluffy tails, the one that was reserved for personal fantasies that he knew were taboo. His mouth suddenly dry, he knocked lightly on the door.

"Come in" Came the familiar voice of Professor Grey.

Nick gathered up his nerve and opened the office door. He stared down at the floor, which was a soothing dark red, as he closed the door. Then, taking a deep breath, he dared to look up, and instantly wished he hadn't. He surveyed the room with his mouth somewhat agape. Nick had never been into Professor Grey's office before, but that didn't mean he'd never thought about it. Or perhaps a better term was fantasize about it.

In his fantasies he always imagined the jolly professor as having a posh office, filled with dark, hardwood shelves, packed with books and curious nick-knacks one normally associates with well-traveled gentlemen. Now that he was seeing it firsthand, he was definitely not disappointed. There was a globe made out of marble situated off to his right, nestled appropriately in its redwood stained stand. Off to the left was a bust of an old badger Nick recognized as Socrates. He wouldn't have expected anything less in Professor Grey's office. Then, as he looked straight ahead, there was the large hardwood desk, complete with...he couldn't believe it...a honest to goodness pipe rack. His taboo tail gave another flick.

"Please, sit down my boy!"

The ninetails swallowed hard, he'd been intentionally avoiding looking at the figure seated behind the desk. Given the atmosphere of the room, he knew seeing his professor in this environment would just add to his nervousness. But, he couldn't just stand there avoiding eye contact the whole time, that definitely wouldn't help him save his scholarship. Steeling his nerves, the ninetails straightened up and looked his professor in the eyes. "He...hello....sir."

The older sheepdog smiled back at him from behind his desk, round spectacles resting halfway down the bridge of his large, shaggy muzzle. "Hello Nicholas!" The jolly sheepdog boomed. "Please, relax and take a seat." He half stood up from his own chair, just enough that he could gesture at the comfortable looking leather seat on the opposite side of his desk, which had the added bonus of allowing his ample belly to rest momentarily on the top of the desk.

Nick gazed at it with wonder, another of his tails flicking, this one associated with his appreciation for things such as fine art or fancy cheeses, or in this instance, an older gentleman's gut dressed nicely in a button-up tweed vest.

“Uh...yes. Thank you...sir.” He mumbled as he quickly took off his backpack and held it to his lap, where he knew for certain it would stay for the remainder of the meeting. He promptly sat down in the comfortable chair, now gazing up, just for a second, at Professor Grey. He was dressed in one of his many tweed suits, though the jacket with the leather elbow patches was hanging on a coat rack behind the older sheepdog, a long sleeve button up white shirt, his fine tan tweed vest, which matched the pants, and a navy blue bow tie.

*'Damn. Why does he always have to look so...professorial?'*

Nick inwardly wondered, cursing his weakness for such figures. He knew that this was a large part of why he was in this office now, meeting with Professor Grey about his lackluster performance in his class. He had a hard time focusing during the lectures, since his mind was often elsewhere, usually accompanied by his fantasy version of the sheepdog as they did various activities. And when he would try and write his philosophy papers, he always got this odd apprehension that what he was producing wasn't good enough for this particular professor, and so he would stop and start rewriting it again and again, until, at 3 AM the night before it was due, he'd be so exhausted that what he did put out was uncharacteristically poor in quality.

“Thank you for coming, Nicholas. I am pleased to see that you're taking this seriously.” The sheepdog smiled as he sat down, with a slight grunt, into his own leather chair.

Nick nodded quickly. “Of course, Professor! I really do like your class. Philosophy has always been something that fascinates me.”

Professor Grey looked genuinely surprised at this, and nodded. “Really? That's good to hear. I honestly thought that you were just taking my class to fulfill one of your elective slots.” The sheepdog turned to his computer, which was situated on the right side of his desk, and clicked a few things on the screen that Nick couldn't see. “You're majoring in Video Game Design, and from what I can see, you're quite good at it.” Professor Grey nodded and winked at the ninetails, causing the poor young man to clutch his backpack a little tighter. “And even in your other elective classes, which fall well outside your specialty, you have high marks.” Satisfied in what he had read on the screen, the chubby older dog leaned back in his chair, causing it to squeak lightly from the shifted weight. “Yet, for whatever reason, you're struggling in my class, despite you saying you enjoy the subject matter.”

The sheepdog paused and looked pleasantly at Nick, seemingly waiting for his response. The ninetails fumbled around mentally for something to say, since he was pretty sure that *'I'm hot for teacher'* wasn't going to be an acceptable answer. “Um, well, you see...” He was racking his brain for something. “...I suppose it's more that...you know...” The only thing running through his head at that moment was the stupid menu theme to his Tetris mod. “...I just keep thinking about...video games?” He offered weakly.

The professor simply sat there and let the silence speak for him. He sniffed, twitching his large, black nose, and eventually adjusted his glasses. All the while not saying a word. Eventually, he leaned forward in his seat and motioned to his pipe rack. “Do you mind?” It was more of a statement than a question, since he didn't wait for Nick to respond, as he picked up a large bent stem briar pipe and

settled it into his muzzle. Nick assumed that it was already prepacked with tobacco, because Professor Grey grabbed a book of matches and struck one, letting the flame settle down, before using it to light his pipe.

“Um...Sir...I don't think you're allowed...to...” The ninetails stopped his protest as the sweet vanilla smoke hit him, causing his fancy tail to twitch in response.

The older sheepdog puffed a few more generous clouds into the office, then leaned back into his chair, letting the pipe rest to the side of his muzzle as he settled into a slow puffing rhythm. “One of the benefits of being tenured.” He winked at Nick again, causing the ninetails to clutch his bag just a little bit tighter. The college student hoped he wasn't damaging his portable gaming system at this point. After the office had a pleasant haze, the professor dog continued. “So, you say that you have difficulty focusing on philosophy, because you're constantly thinking about gaming?”

Nick nodded dumbly. *'You're toast,'* he thought to himself.

Professor Grey puffed a few more times, almost contemplatively, though Nick thought that it may just be the pipe added to the sheepdog's overall professorial air. “Is it that you're trying to find a way to incorporate the various schools of philosophies into your game designs?” He intertwined his fingers and rested them on top of his tweed-clad belly, as he puffed and waited for Nick to respond.

Dear lord, this was a lifeline, and Nick grasped at it with everything he could muster. “YES!” He practically shouted, until he made himself settle down, so as not to show his hand. “I mean, yes, Professor. That's exactly my problem. I...keep trying to find a way to utilize everything you're teaching me, I mean, everything you're trying to teach to our class.” The words were pouring out now, a horrible stream of consciousness brought on by his immense relief at have a plausible excuse for his poor standing in the class, and he was sure the vanilla scented aroma of the pipe wasn't helping matters either. “I didn't mean to imply you'd personally teach me. I mean, wow, you have so many students, and who am I? I mean, yeah, a private session would be nice...” *'Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!!'* His brain was screaming. “But, really, yeah, you're so smart and handsome...I, uh, I mean...you have a handsome mind.” His mouth continued talking, ignoring his brain. “Er, beautiful mind! That, yeah, I'd kill for some time alone with you...I mean...uhh..”

It was the sheepdog's hearty laugh that eventually stopped the ninetails from spilling out any and all secrets he had accumulated since his birth. “Oh dear me, I'm sorry.” He took the pipe out of his muzzle as he continued to laugh, wiping a tear from his eye. “I am truly sorry if I have made you so nervous.” He settled down to a chuckle, and placed the pipe back into his muzzle. “I usually find that people are quite at ease around me!” He leaned forward and grabbed a pen from his drawer, as well as a piece of note paper. “But you are absolutely right! I think a private tutoring session is exactly what you need.” He began scribbling something on the paper.

Nick sat there a moment, trying to recover from his horrible embarrassment, when his brain finally parsed what his professor had just said. “A private what now?”

Professor Grey rose up from his desk, and walked around to Nick, who rather inelegantly got up from his own chair, quickly stowing his backpack on the now empty seat so that he could take grasp the offered note with both trembling hands so as not to drop it. “Quite right, my boy. A special tutoring session, tonight at my home.” The elder dog placed his hand gently on the back of the ninetails neck and started to guide him out the office door. “That's my address, as well as my personal number, please

call if you have any problems. Dinner will be at eight-o'clock sharp.” And with that, Professor Grey closed the door to his office.

Nick wasn't sure if everything that had just happened had actually just happened. He stood there, gazing down dumbfoundedly at the yellow note with his professors address written on it, still not believing he had a dinner date with the man of his fantasies. He heard the office door open up behind him, and for whatever reason hid the note behind his back, as if expecting Professor Grey to suddenly think better of this offer.

“Oh good, Nicholas, you're still here!” The sheepdog puffed as he smiled. He waited a moment with the door just slightly open, and it seemed to Nick that he was being surveyed. A wide smile graced the dog's muzzle, and he held out the ninetail's backpack. “You forgot this, my boy.”

He wasn't sure why he did it, but he quickly looked down to where he thought his professor was looking a second earlier, which just happened to be his pants, and confirmed that, yes, he did in fact still need his backpack to not just carry his items. Blushing horribly, he snatched the bag and placed it where he needed it most, at waist height, and met Professor Grey's twinkling eyes.

“Well then, see you tonight, son.” The door closed again.

Nick squeaked out a delayed, and nearly inaudible “Thank you.”

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As Nick rang the doorbell, his heart was pumping a mile a minute. To say he had been stressed and preoccupied all evening would be an understatement. About every other minute he considered pulling out his phone and calling Professor Grey to let him know he had suddenly become ill, and that he was pretty sure he'd become quite allergic to philosophy and that he would just take the failing grade. But, he always talked himself down by remembering that his scholarship could be on the line, and that his education was more important than his lustful fantasies. And, in being someone who always learns his lesson, he came prepared tonight with loose fitting slacks, and rather cozy form fitting underwear. It was bad manners to keep your backpack in your lap while at the dinner table, after all.

Professor Grey opened the door, still wearing the same clothes from earlier in the day, with the notable exception of a bright yellow apron that had “Kiss the Cook” written in bold red letter on the front. “Ah, right on time, Nicholas! Excellent, come in, come in!” The sheepdog stepped off to the side and gestured the young college student through.

Nick blushed and nodded as he entered the home. “Thank you Sir. Thank you for taking time out of your evening to help me.” The ninetails could feel his nerves getting the better of him, so it was a relief when his professor took over the conversation. “Nonsense, my boy. It's my job, after all, helping mold young, impressionable minds, as it were.” He winked and gestured for Nick to follow him. “Besides, I'd say you could use a home cooked meal. You need to get a little meat on those bones, Nicholas!” He chuckled as he patted his own gut beneath the apron.

“Uh, Sir, you can actually just call me Nick, if you'd like?”

“Hmm? Oh really? Not a fan of your full name? Such a shame, it's a rather handsome name, if I do say so!” They had entered into a nice dining room that led directly into the kitchen, and as the older

dog went back to the oven, Nick blushed inwardly.

“Oh, well...you can keep calling me Nicholas. It's okay...” He trailed off, and the professor turned his head to smile and nod his approval, as though a correct answer had just been given.

“There's a good lad. Now then, Nicholas, have a seat at the table, and we shall begin our first lesson. Tomato basil bisque, with a light side salad!”

The meal was simply marvelous. Nick never realized just how bland the cafeteria food was, since it's all he had available to eat in the dorms. He leaned back in his chair and groaned with contentment; he could get used to eating like this.

Professor Grey, also leaning back, to allow his belly a few more inches of clearance from the table, chuckled and wagged a finger at his student. “Now now, young man, we still have to get to the bottom of this video game block you seem to have, in regards to my philosophy class.” With what appeared to be a great effort, the plump dog pushed himself up from the table, and motioned for Nick to do the same. “I think I have a process which will help you to marry the seemingly separate fields, and we'll see just how much you've learned from my class, so far.”

Nick nodded, and found that he was actually intrigued by what his professor had planned. “Sound good, Sir. What do we do first?”

“Well, first...” Professor Grey started to unbutton his vest, seemingly unworried that he was undressing in front of his pupil, “...I need to get changed into something more comfortable. I'm sure you understand, eh?” He chortled as he pulled on one of the ends of his bow tie, undoing it so that it hung draped around his neck.

Nick swallowed hard, and inwardly praised his underpants for doing their job of wrangling certain activities.

“But while I'm at it, you go on and head down to my dungeon.” The Professor said, as though he were asking the ninetails to run to the corner store for a carton of milk. He turned to walk up his stairs, but pointed to a door just off to the left of Nick. “It's right through there. There's a light switch at the base of the stairs. Do be careful going down.” The dog made his way up the stairs.

Nick's brain seemed to finally kick in. “I'm sorry, your what?”

The Professor's voice came down from upstairs. “Down into the dungeon. It's okay, I'll break you in slowly.”

He wasn't sure what to do at this point, but apparently Nick's feet really fancied seeing this dungeon of Professor Grey's. Before he could really parse all of it, he found himself halfway down the stairs. It was indeed dark, and Nick fumbled around for light switch, hoping that while he prodded the wall in the dark, that he didn't accidentally knock over a paddle or cat-o-nine-tails, or whatever one normally keeps down in a dungeon.

Finally, there was a satisfying click, and a low hum could be heard at the back of the room, with various mechanical sounds whirring to life all around him. The only thought that came through his head was *'Oh dear. He likes electric toys.'* And his brain wasn't far off.

The overhead lights finally illuminated, and there before Nick was the most impressive gaming room he had ever seen in a person's home. Dozens of classic arcade machines lined the walls, with an air hockey table, table top arcade table, and a few pinball machines mixed in for good measure.

Full of wonder, Nick slowly walked around the room, watching and listening as each of the machines sprang to life. In a deep alcove to the right, the ninetails noted that his professor also had a sweet set up for movies and console games. At this moment he wished that he had done worse in his philosophy class earlier on in the semester.

“Ah, good, you found the switch!” Professor Grey smiled as he joined Nick in the game room. “And I must say, you're made of sterner stuff than most folk, my boy!” He clapped his student on the back, indicating his approval. “Most will just stay at the top of the stairs after they hear the word 'dungeon,' until I go down first. And I actually had one colleague leave right out the front door once I had gone to change. Oh well, his loss!” The sheepdog laughed to himself.

Nick noted that Professor Grey's relaxed clothing was khaki shorts, a blue polo t-shirt, and an argyle sweater vest. Not to mention the beautiful straight billiard jutting out from his muzzle. It was definitely a good look for a teacher, Nick decided.

“Okay, let's get down to business.” The dog clapped and rubbed his hands together, while puffing out small wisps of cherry scented smoke as he spoke. “What I want you to do, is head over to Star Zapper, and start playing.”

Nick looked over at the arcade machine, and then back at his professor. “Alright. Then what?”

Professor Grey shook his head, and puffed another cloud of smoke. “Nope! You just start playing, and we'll go from there.”

Trying not to focus too much on his professor's presence, Nick nodded and moved over to the machine. It appeared to be on free play, because the “Player Start” message was flashing at the bottom of the screen. Nick had never played this game before, but he often found that the vertical scrolling space shooter games always helped him clear his mind. And right now, that's exactly what he needed. He hit the start button, and began to play.

The first few lives came and went quickly, as he got used to the odd combination of joystick and dial controls. One moved the ship around the screen while the other was used to aim the laser canons. Nick felt that he would have gotten used to it faster, if only Professor Grey wasn't standing off behind him, watching him, while puffing that wonderfully smelling pipe smoke into the air. But, he got to where he was controlling the ship with ease, and was racking up a decent score.

“Who is the author of the *Tao te Ching*?” Professor Grey suddenly barked out.

“Uh...the what?” Nick glanced back, and a second later lost a ship to a flying alien bunny mutant.

The Professor shook his head, and nodded to the game. “Go again.”

Like with most games, the ninetails learned the rules quickly, and this time he was ready for the next question.

“Who said 'Knowledge is to know both what one knows, and what one does not know?'”

Nick smiled. "That would be Confucius, Sir."

"Excellent. Next one..." And at this, the Professor stepped closer to Nick, and puffed a cherry cloud towards him. "Tell me one of Buddha's Four Noble Truths."

His mind racing, unable to focus because of the proximity to this handsome dog, the ninetails simultaneously lost another ship, and couldn't come up with the answer. "I...uh..." His brain was frozen again, lost in fantasies that kept him from really focusing.

Professor Grey chuckled, and spoke softly. "I think I see the problem." Then, he moved behind Nick, and placed his hands over the student's, helping him to steer the ship in the game, while at the same time he moved his gut so it was pressed against Nick's back, his muzzle hovering close to the ninetail's ear, little puffs of the cherry smoke coming out as he spoke. "You can't seem to focus on either gaming or philosophy while I'm around, can you?"

Nick didn't know what to say. He was only dimly aware that the Professor was moving his hands expertly, having no problems playing the game while diagnosing his pupil's issue.

"Have you heard of immersion therapy, my boy?" The dog moved in closer still, so that it was very obvious what he meant to do. "It's not really my area of expertise, mind you, but I believe the gist of it is that you can overcome your issues by being exposed to them more directly. And so," Professor Grey murmured gently to his obviously nervous student, "We'll keep doing this, until you can tell me the Four Noble Truths."

At first, Nick was expecting his professor to laugh and back off, telling him it was some sort of test or something. But it became perfectly clear that the older dog was going to do exactly what he said. Several of his tails swishing and flicking, Nick tried to focus and not think about what was happening. About how nice the smoke smelled. About how warm his teacher was. About how gentle his hands felt on his own. About the comfortable press of his belly against his back.

The ninetails closed his eyes, and took a deep breath, and allowed himself this moment. To surrender and fully appreciate what it was to give into a deep fantasy such as this. And soon, he began to control the game himself. He slowly opened his eyes and piloted the spacecraft around all the flying obstacles coming at him, while shooting down the more aggressive threats with the laser canon.

He wasn't sure how long they stayed like that, their bodies right next to each other, as they silently played the game together, but eventually the answer appeared in his mind. "The Four Noble Truths are One: Suffering is the condition of all existence. Two: Suffering comes from possessiveness, greed, and self-centeredness. Three: These traits can be understood and overcome. And four: this overcoming can be accomplished by following and Eightfold Path."

Professor Grey chuckled and took his hands off of Nick's, then back away a few steps. "Very good."

Nick had stopped playing the game now, and turned to face his teacher, blushing as he spoke. "I...kinda wish I hadn't remembered them."

Winking at his pupil, the sheepdog took the pipe from his muzzle. "Oh, don't worry, there's still lots of subject matter to cover. Next time we'll focus on the Eightfold Path and Bubble Bop!" He snuffed out the pipe and stowed it into his pocket. "But, I think that's enough for tonight. We both need

some sleep for class tomorrow.”

The sheepdog quietly walked Nick outside, and smiling, nodded to his student and closed the door. As he turned to leave, feeling very relaxed and sure of himself Professor Grey opened the door and said coyly, “You know, you can go ahead and call me Barnaby, if you'd like.”

Nick smiled and nodded back. “Yes, Sir.”

The walk home was a pleasant one, full of stars and suddenly not so distant fantasies. It was about half way home that the ninetail noticed one of his tails was twitching, only this one was more concerned with hope and his dreams of the future. Nick looked forward to seeing how that tail reacted in the very near future.