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Apocalypse Tamer ii

by Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Chapter 1: Man vs Funeral

They held the funeral in the rain.

The Bohens and House Garden parties were gathered for it, with the notable exception of Vasi and Orcine. Basil presided over the ceremony before the smoking crater of his house, hands joined in prayer.

He glanced at his audience, at the mourning faces of his companions. His dear cat Plato, who had known the deceased the longest, held his tiny hat against his chest with his eyes closed. Bugsy, ever the bleeding heart, could hardly suppress the lava tears in his centimagma eyes. Rosemarine stood in quiet dignity, her immense shadow looming over the clearing. Her vegetable minions carried the tombstone. Even Shellgirl had joined her hands in quiet mourning right next to Kuikui.

Basil observed each of them and then gathered his breath. It was never easy to say farewell... especially to a dear friend.

"Today," Basil said, "we are gathered to honor the memory of René's house one last time."

He waved a hand at House Garden's members, inviting them to do their duty. The vegetables carried the granite tombstone and set it in front of the crater. Basil had carved the words on its surface himself.

René's House

19XX-2022

She was too comfy for this sinful world.

Basil had never asked René for the date of his house's completion and would forever regret it.

"It seems to me like only yesterday that René welcomed me into her loving embrace," Basil began the eulogy. He had titled it *Requiem for a House*, and would preserve its text for generations to come. "From the first day on, his house became like a second mother to me; when humans would offer words of condemnation, she offered warmth and air conditioning. She was more than a shelter to me; she was a trusted confidant. She saw me at my best and at my worst, never complaining, always protecting, always loving."

Bugsy collapsed in tears. Basil stopped his speech; he knew how much he had worked on the house before her cruel demise.

"Please don't cry," Rosemarine said, trying to comfort the centimagma. "It's alright. She is in a better place."

"She was too young," the centimagma whispered as Shellgirl patted him on the back. "The fence... I had finished painting the fence... and the TV..."

Bugsy screamed his despair to the heavens. "I will never know how *Major Chicken* ends now!"

"One day, we will find a new TV and *Major Chicken* DVDs," Basil promised. It was a long shot; finding the full season of *Major Chicken* was already difficult before the apocalypse. "Never forget the episode on which we stopped, Buggy. Never forget."

"I won't..." Buggy wiped away his tears with his tiny arms. "I won't, Boss."

Basil nodded sadly. "Do any of you have words to honor our departed friend?"

Plato raised his paw. "I would like to honor the sofa with a minute of silence," he said. "This unsung hero who shouldered my weight and warmed me up in the night. It is he and his cushions that I mourn the most."

Basil assented to the request and silence stretched on for a full minute. The rain stopped and the skies threatened to clear up.

"Kuikui, make it rain again," Basil ordered as the minute of silence came to an end.

"Kui at it!" Kuikui started twirling in place. His Rain Dance Perk activated, renewing the downpour.

Basil couldn't let a sunny autumn day stand in the way of his mournful funeral. "Does anybody else have words to say? Buggy?"

"I... I can't, Boss," Buggy replied sadly. "It's... it's too much for me."

Shellgirl took the next turn. The clam mimic cleared her throat like a professional marketer preparing to make an announcement.

"I mourn our HQ too, and all the wares we lost with her," she said. "But most of all, I mourn what she represented: peaceful, profitable days long gone. The loss of a business is never an easy one. I know we will bounce back soon and rebuild our company even better than before... but we must never forget. Only by learning from our failures can we hope not to repeat them."

Kuikui then said his own piece. His speech was most eloquent by velociraptor standards.

"Kui bred. Kui best lover, Kui lasted for hours." The velociraptor sighed in defeat. "But Kui's hen wives ran. Kui will never see eggs grow. Kui never eat his children. Now Kui single again. Kui very sad."

"It's alright, Kuikui," Buggy sympathized with him. "You will find a new girlfriend, I'm sure of it."

"Kui hope so." Kuikui glanced at the centimagma with an addict's eyes. "Kui has *needs*."

Only one party member had yet to deliver her eulogy.

"Rosemarine?" Basil asked. "Any words?"

"My eulogy will be written with blood, Mister," Rosemarine replied cheerfully. "Very soon."

"Indeed," Basil rasped. "For we must not forget that our dear departed house died prematurely. She was never given the chance to grow old and dreary. No, her life was cut short!"

He pumped his fist to the skies.

"Our house was brutalized!" Basil shouted with a warrior angel's fury. "Martyrized! Murdered by the Apocalypse Force! Now her slayers still live, delighting at their own crime as we speak! Shall we leave their sin unpunished? Or shall we avenge our departed home with steel and fire?!"

"VENGEANCE!" His pets and allies shouted in response, his zeal inspired in them a rush of righteous fury. "VENGEANCE FOR THE HOUSE!"

"I hear you!" Basil declared as the clouds cleared once again. "Then follow my lead! For the time of reckoning has come!"

The light of dawn shone through the clouds and miraculously illuminated the instrument of their vengeance.

As befitting of a giant snail dragon's refuge, Steamslime's shell was a ten meters tall behemoth of metal plates, pipes, and steam engines. The team had spent three days customizing it. They scavenged vehicles from Dax to fully mount it on large tires at the front and tracked wheels at the back. The exhaust port Buggy blew up during the battle with Steamslime had been repaired, at least as well as a group with no experience with steam machinery could, alongside the holes in its shielding.

Basil's group had also added a few windows here and there, to serve as sniper nests, emergency exits, or light sources for a future greenhouse. A rudimentary steel bar door protected the main entrance, and a harness of chains would allow Rosemarine to pull the vehicle like a carriage across all terrains.

In short, it was a mobile fortress large enough to house everyone inside, with the noticeable exception of Rosemarine—who preferred to stay outside anyway. This vehicle, this enormous caravan, would carry Basil's team all the way to Bordeaux in due time.

But they had a dungeon to ravage first.

"Everyone, board the Steamobile!" Basil encouraged his teammates. "We shall drive to battle!"

"The Steamobile?" Plato complained with a groan. "Couldn't you find a better name?"

"This is a democracy," Basil reminded him. "Which means I'm willing to pretend to listen and then explain to you why I was right all along."

Nobody dared to challenge him in a public debate and both parties boarded the caravan in short order. Basil himself stayed behind to help Rosemarine put on the harness.

"Mister, I have grown new food," Rosemarine said before shaking. Half a dozen red fruit pustules fell off her leaf-scales, ripe for consumption. "They taste of blood!"

Aww, she cared!

"Thank you, sweetie," Basil said as he stored the fruits in his inventory and patted her behind her petals. Rosemarine wriggled in pleasure, her forked tongue dripping with saliva. "Who's going to eat many bugs today? That's you, yes, that is you!"

Rosemarine's Harvest Perk had been invaluable over the last few days, since it allowed her to grow tasty fruits in the sunlight. It didn't fully make up for the lack of supplies, but it helped sustain the party in combination with whatever canned meat they salvaged from the house's wreckage.

They couldn't rely on it forever though. With winter around the corner, even plant dragons would come up short on the harvest department. Basil's party would have to fall back on the tried and true method of raiding the enemy for food.

It was only fair. The Apocalypse Force burned their pantry first.

"Mister, can we find a new gun after we have eaten all the bugs?" Rosemarine asked as Basil finished attaching the harness. "A big gun, large enough for me? The others are too small now."

"Mmm..." Basil examined his dear tropidrake. Her rootlike fingers were no longer adapted to wielding firearms anymore, but she could easily carry a howitzer on her back. "We'll try to find a big ass cannon in Bordeaux. I'm sure they'll have one to spare."

"I cannot wait," Rosemarine chirped with enthusiasm. "The meat tastes so much better when sweetened with tears and gunpowder."

After patting his tropidrake's back and glancing one last time at his home's ruins, Basil stepped inside the Steamobile. Rosemarine roared loud enough to shake the earth and then began pulling the carriage across the forest.

The inside of the Steamobile made Basil regret losing his house all the more. Where his home had been a tastefully decorated, comfy place, Steamslime's old shell was a lifeless series of metal rooms with no doors to separate them. Steel ladders led to upper levels offering a little more privacy, but nothing filtered the loud noise of steam traveling through the pipes. Accommodations were rudimentary.

Basil found Vasi and Orcine in the steam engine room. The former worked on Steamslime's training holomachine and the latter fueled the machine with coal. A bag full of bugspray cans sat in a corner to Basil's delight. He had sent Orcine to scavenge them from the city so he could use them to make bombs.

"You should keep those away from the fire," Basil warned Orcine. "They're flammable."

"Great, we can use them as fuel," Orcine replied, wiping sweat off her forehead. "You're sure these tiny gizmos can kill the bugs? Most of them are bigger than us, ya know."

"Certain, and you're more likely to blow up our new house like the old one if you use them as fuel." It saddened Basil that his own reserve of bombs ended up finishing off his burning home after the swarm detonated it. "We'll use them in battle soon enough."

"Good, I'm sick of waiting." Orcine grinned savagely. Basil had lost a home in the swarm's attack, but the young orc had lost *people*. "Let's bash some skulls."

"Are we truly going to attack in broad daylight?" Vasi asked after turning away from the holomachine. She had reservations about a straight-up offensive plan from the beginning. "They will see us coming from a mile away, Basil. I know Samhain is tomorrow, but it would be safer to infiltrate the dungeon tonight with darkness as our cover."

"Infiltration is useless," Basil replied. "They'll be expecting retaliation after their raid. Besides, Rosemarine's best abilities only work in daylight and she's our heaviest hitter."

"We will walk into battle without a plan."

"I have a plan, Vasi, just not a subtle one," Basil countered. "What about the elves?"

From Vasi's contrite expression, they shouldn't count on reinforcements.

"I surveyed the dinosaur forest as you asked," the witch replied. "I found what remains of their encampment and found it empty with no trace of battle. From the tracks left, I suspect they bypassed the dungeon to flee in the northeast."

"Pointy ears," Orcine snickered with contempt. "All bark and no bite."

It didn't surprise Basil much. Estrid Firekiss warned him that her elves would leave the region before the Apocalypse Force could locate them. The raid on the Barthes had served as a pretty dire warning.

Basil never expected to count on their help to take down the Seignosse dungeon, but he would miss the loss in manpower.

"We'll make do without them," Basil said with a shrug, before focusing on the truly important matter. "You missed the funeral, Vasi."

Basil could forgive Orcine's absence since she had never lived in it, but Vasi had crashed the place before. The house deserved her respect.

"Basil, I'm not holding a funeral for a house," Vasi replied with a remorseless chuckle. "Even a comfy one."

"Yeah, I threw my parents' ashes to the wind and you don't hear me whining about it," Orcine said with a shrug. "Don't you eat your dead anyway?"

How could it be that Basil was the only sensible, caring soul here? These two were heartless barbarians.

"Please don't hold a grudge," Vasi pleaded with a coy smile. "I'll throw fireballs in your house's honor, I swear—"

"Good," Basil said.

"—after you assign your levels," Vasi added, ever the sweet-talker. "Now that I am part of your party, I can't assign mine until you do. A logistical weakness if you ask me."

"That's why I left as soon as I got my hidden Perk," Orcine said with a shrug. "It's a pretty nifty one though. I'll never say no to more power."

Out of all of Basil's allies, Orcine was the most straightforward in terms of special abilities. As in, she had none: she hit hard and her multiple passives simply made her better at it.

She wouldn't outshine Basil anytime soon in that department though. He immediately assigned his two levels to the Berserker class, relishing the thought of ripping Apollyon's limbs from his body.

Berserker Level 4 & 5 Stat Gains: +4 STR; +2 AGI; +1 VIT; +2 MAG; +1 CHA; +2 LCK. You earned 70 HP and 25 SP.

[Runic I]: You can now learn and cast [Runic] Spells up to Tier I. If you gain the ability to cast [Runic] Spells from other classes or Perks, the Tiers stack together.

As you already possess [Runic I] from another Class, your Perk has been upgraded to Runic II. You can now learn and cast [Runic] Spells up to Tier II.

"Runic II?" It surprised Basil that the Berserker class allowed him to cast spells at all. Then he remembered that the Norse god of berserkers, Odin, used runes. Maybe that was the reason why the class could do the same? "I suppose that explains the B in Magic."

"Interesting." Vasi put a finger on her cheek, her expression thoughtful. "What's your growth in Intelligence?"

Basil winced. Intelligence was his one weakness. "E."

"If this System is anything like mine, an E rating means that the stat never increases," Vasi explained with a scoff. "A B in Magic and an E in Intelligence means that your few spells will hit hard, but you'll struggle to learn any. Fitting for a Fighter class."

"Who cares?" Orcine asked. "You don't need fancy powers, big man. Just buff up and rack up four digit damage."

When she put it this way...

Since they had a few hours to kill on the way to Seignosse's dungeon, Basil joined Vasi in a session of *Wyrde's Grimoire*. The holomachine program included Runic spells up to Tier VI, so it could teach him a few tricks.

"The Unity figured it out, by the way," Vasi said.

"Figured out what?" Basil asked as the Runic Tier II spell list appeared on the holomachine's mirror. Three of them were Corrosion, Metal, and Wood elemental variants of his Fire Rune spell, alongside two more unique options.

"The formula that determines your chances of learning a new spell. According to *Wyrde's Grimoire*, it is the sum of your Magic, Intelligence and Level, multiplied by the average elemental affinity factor and then divided by the spell's tier. The result is then rounded down."

Basil kept it in mind as he read the new spells' information.

Spell: Venomous Rune.

School: Runic.

Affinity: Ailment.

Tier: II.

Cost: 20 SP.

Empowers one of your weapons with venomous power, giving it 20% chance of inflicting the [Poison] ailment on a successful damaging hit for 5 minutes; perfect to deal with pesky political opponents. Multiple applications of [Venomous Rune] do not stack and the weapon loses its properties if you no longer wield it.

Chance of learning this spell: 75%.

Learn spell?

Basil made calculations in his head. With 26 in Magic, 24 in Intelligence, a level of 25, and a strong Ailment affinity multiplying his chances by two... the formula checked.

Spell: Savage Rune.

School: Runic.

Affinity: Support.

Tier: II.

Cost: 20 SP.

Empowers one of your weapons with savage power, increasing its chances of inflicting a critical hit by 20% for five minutes; the Berserker's favorite tool. Multiple applications of [Savage Rune] do not stack and the weapon loses its properties if you no longer wield it.

Chance of learning this spell: 37%.

Learn spell?

Basil's lack of strong affinity for Support cut his chances in half. Oh well. He tried to register both of them in his spellbook.

Two sounds echoed in his mind: a gentle notification and the screeching noise of failure.

Congratulations, you learned [Venomous Rune]!

Oh no, you failed to learn [Savage Rune]! You can try to learn it again once 24 Earth hours have passed.

You have enough Intelligence to register 1 additional spell in your Spellbook.

"From your sorry face, guess things didn't work out well," Orcine said. The orc teen had no interest in magic and instead polished a two-meters tall shield near the steam boiler. If memory served, her late father wore it the one time Basil encountered him; she must have kept it as a memento.

"It's alright," Basil replied with a shrug. Instead of waiting for tomorrow, which might never come if the battle didn't end well, he decided to learn the Corrosion elemental variant of his Fire Rune spell. The more elemental attacks available to him, the better. Thankfully his strong Corrosion affinity made it easy to register the spell. "Would you like your mace crispy, frosty, or corrosive?"

Orcine grinned ear to ear as she lent him her spiked mace. "Caustic corrosive."

"A true critic," Basil deadpanned as he touched the weapon's shaft. "Magitek: Corrosion Rune."

His Refinement attempt infused the mace with the Corrosion element. The iron's color changed to a sick shade of purple, its pointed barbs fuming with poisonous fumes.

"Cool," Orcine whispered as she grabbed her mace, swinging it near the boiler. "You can do that with any weapon?"

"Yes, so long as they're forged." Basil's eyes widened as a brilliant idea crossed his mind. "The guns!"

"You've got firearms? Grea—"

Basil had already bolted out of the engine room before Orcine could finish. He rummaged through the belongings his party managed to save from the house fire and finally found what he was looking for.

One of Rosemarine's handguns. Now that the plant had grown too big to wield it, the weapon had been left to gather dust.

"Magitek: Venomous Rune," Basil said, his magic infusing the firearm. "Magitek: Ice Rune."

Two symbols appeared on each side of the barrel: a windy snowflake irradiating cold on the left, and a sinister green skull on the right.

Frosty Poisonous Handgun

Family: Weapon (Firearm)

Quality: C

Power: +9 SKI

Crit: + 0 %

Accuracy: 80 %

Effect 1: [Venomous Rune]: +20% chance of inflicting the [Poison] ailment.

Effect 2: [Ice Rune]: Inflicts +20% additional [Frost] damage.

Man's best friend, and it will shoot anyone who denies it.

As Basil suspected, he could apply multiple runes to a piece of equipment so long as they differed. An elemental damage enhancement didn't conflict with an ailment one.

Basil cursed his lack of foresight. Why didn't he think of upgrading everyone's equipment before? He had focused too much on utilities and crafting flashy alchemical bombs over the practicality of refining his weapons.

Basil wouldn't inflict as much damage with this gun as with his halberd, but the extra Frost damage and Poison ailment should make up for it somewhat. He finally had a good ranged option.

"Well, better late than never," Basil said as he stored the gun in his inventory. "Time to upgrade our war effort."

Basil spent the next few hours empowering what weapons he could find, crafting bombs out of bugspray cans, and checking the Steamobile's inner shielding one last time. He sensed his body tense up in anticipation as time passed.

When Buggy called him from the upper floors to inform him that they were approaching the dungeon, it came as a relief.

"Boss!" Buggy shouted. "I can see it from here!"

Basil climbed up a ladder to the upper floor, walked by the centimagma, and peeked through an open glass window.

Located near the empty town of Seignosse, the Etang Noir natural reserve, or *black pond*, owed its name to the dark silt in its depths. Before the apocalypse, a large corridor of earth separated it from its neighborhood, the lake of l'Etang Blanc. The end of the world had joined them into a singular body of blackened water.

The region's dungeon loomed in the middle of the lake, perched on an isle of rock under a red-green aurora borealis. It was an imposing and foreboding gothic castle of black walls and terrible towers; Basil estimated that the central one reached as high as fifty meters. A precarious bridge of granite wove a path through the lake from the fortified gates to the shore.

The remains of monsters, from giant wolves to dinosaurs, were staked on the outer walls as a warning to intruders. Some were still fresh, but most had long turned to bones. Half a dozen Apollyon drones feasted on them, while two more were surveying the area by running circles in the skies.

There it was. The Apocalypse Force's local stronghold, where they plotted to destroy Basil's peaceful life beyond repair.

Dungeon: *Château Muloup.*

Level: *25.*

Faction: *Apocalypse Force.*

Field Type: *Cursed Castle.*

[Metal], [Soul], [Darkness] and [Mythic] elements are empowered.

[Wood] and [Light] elements are weakened.

[Cursed Place]: Players and Monsters within the field's limit will suffer from the [Curse] ailment unless they are immune to it; their chances of receiving critical hits are doubled and they cannot magically recover HP/SP.

Basil's teeth gritted as he read the text. No wonder Apollyon was willing to waste so many forces on the Barthes raid; the dungeon's defensive effect was formidable. The impossibility to

heal within the castle's confines complicated matters and Basil would have to adapt his strategy accordingly. On the plus side, that defense would serve the party well once they claimed the dungeon.

However, Basil noticed an oddity. The field effect included all Players and Monsters not immune to the Curse ailment.

Did it affect the *defenders* as well?

"How do we get in, Boss?" Buggy asked, his voice brimming with anticipation.

"The quickest way." Basil summoned his halberd to his hand. "Through the front door."

By nightfall, the lake would run red with blood.

Chapter 2: Man vs Castle

They blew up the entrance as the opening salvo.

By the time the patrolling Apollyon drones noticed Rosemarine rushing across their bridge, she was already halfway through charging her Sunbeam attack. A ray of light poured out of her maw, crossed the causeway in the blink of an eye, and blasted a hole in the castle's iron gates. Smoke rose into the skies and a horn sounded the alarm.

There was no subtlety in the Bohens' assault, no declaration of war, no call to honorable combat by champions. They showed the bugs no more courtesy than they did during their own surprise raid.

Apollyon's soldiers could only expect relentless fury today.

Riding on Rosemarine's back with Kuikui and Orcine, Basil surveyed his troops' positions. Buggy followed Rosemarine on foot as she charged across the bridge with the Steamobile at her back. The causeway trembled under their weight, but held strong. Vasi flew high in the skies on her broomstick with Plato desperately hanging on to her back; the cat looked quite afraid of falling. As for Shellgirl and House Garden's vegetables, they occupied the Steamobile's sniper nests with a treasure trove of bombs to throw.

The Apollyon drones immediately moved to intercept the invaders with stingers and wind blasts. On the walls, dozens of bipedal wolf humanoids showed up with bows, crossbows, and even a few rifles.

Lycan Warrior

Level 14 [Beast/Humanoid]

Faction: Apocalypse Force.

Raising his halberd with his right hand and his gun with his left, Basil shouted a war cry.

"WRECK THEM!"

He opened the hostilities by shooting down a drone in the head with an icy bullet.

Shellgirl followed suit with a bombardment of her own and House Garden's vegetables assisted her by throwing bug spray bombs. Clouds of poisonous fumes choked the Apollyon drones to death, their corpses falling into the lake. As for Vasi, she attacked the defenders on the walls with a fireball.

Still, Rosemarine soon entered the archers' range. They immediately let loose a volley of arrows and quarrels at her from the walls.

"Behind me!" Orcine shouted, raising her father's tower shield to protect Basil and Kuikui. Most projectiles bounced off it, but Basil sensed a bullet graze his shoulder enough to draw blood. Buggy avoided the projectiles by burrowing into the ground.

"Brave Howl!" Kuikui buffed all his allies one after the other. "Brave Howl!"

Your Strength and Magic have been buffed for five minutes.

Rosemarine winced as a few bullets hit her precious scales, enraging Basil further.

"Vasi, Plato!" he shouted as loud as he could. "Take down the gunners!"

Vasi hovered above the walls, just low enough for Plato to jump off her back. The cat skewered a wolfman's face with his rapier before he even landed. Soon he massacred the archers in a whirlwind of claws and slashes.

The bombardment abated, allowing Rosemarine to heal herself.

"Sunbath!" Rosemarine's leaf scales glowed brightly, her light bathing Basil and all their allies. He immediately felt his shoulder wound closing on its own.

You have recovered all your HP.

So the Cursed field effect didn't extend outside the walls. Excellent.

Rosemarine finally reached the open gates, with a squad of wolfmen with spears and swords at the ready. The tropidrake stomped them to death without even noticing their presence. However, Rosemarine was clearly too large to enter the dungeon, especially with the Steamobile at her back.

"Mister, do I go inside?" she asked, her voice barely covering the noise of Shellgirl's artillery barrage. A new group of Apollyon drones emerged from the castle's central tower to relieve the defenders.

"No, you would bring down the dungeon on yourself," Basil replied. He, Orcine, and Kuikui climbed down from Rosemarine's back, with Buggy emerging from the ground. "Stay outside, tear down the walls, and heal our allies when needed."

"Hang them by their guts, Mister!" Rosemarine advised cheerfully. She used the walls to support her forearms, her head rising to face the defenders. "Fire Seed!"

Rosemarine spat dog-sized seeds at the walls one after another. They immediately grew root legs and a crown of flame burst out of their tips. The newly born creatures screeched as they sowed flames across the fortifications. Their mother watched on with delight as she gathered energy for another Sunbeam attack.

Fire Seed

Level 2 [Plant]

Not as useful as a clone, but those don't fade away at least, Basil thought as he walked through the gates, trusting his team to clean up the trash outside and rejoin them inside the dungeon afterward. *Not so funny when you're the ones being raided, uh?*

"Okay guys, ignore all the treasures you might find," Basil said. "We must make a beeline to the Boss before they can teleport in reinforcements."

"You got it, Boss," Buggy said with determination. Kuikui leaped on his back and shrieked his support. "It's our house now."

"I'll clear the scarlet path," Orcine added, her heavy shield in one hand and her corrosive mace in the other. "Just cover my ass and we'll be fine."

Basil nodded at his team and took the first step into Château Muloup.

An invisible pressure fell upon his shoulders the moment he crossed the threshold. A ghostly dark cloud swirled around Basil's body and chilled him to the bone. All his teammates suffered similar treatment.

[Curse] *ailment! You cannot recover HP/SP and your chances of suffering from critical hits are doubled.*

"Can't heal?" Orcine scoffed. "They would have to damage us first!"

It was a good one, so Basil let her have it.

An entry corridor flanked by guard posts awaited the group beyond the threshold. The black stone walls showed dents, nicks, and other signs of damage; including a carved heart with the initials 'L+D' inside. Purple fumes rose from the cracked floor and carried a terrible smell of rotting flesh.

A pack of ten suicidal wolfmen formed a spearwall in the party's path, protecting a closed set of wooden doors. "Don't let them pass!" one of them howled. "The baron will have our heads otherwise!"

"Don't worry!" Basil roared as he charged with his halberd. "I will behead you myself!"

A swing of his weapon broke the spears raised at him. Orcine and Buggy smashed into the wolfmen, the first with her shield, the other with his mandibles. Kuikui supported both with thunderbolts.

Basil couldn't call what followed anything but a massacre. His halberd chopped heads left and right, Orcine's mace smashed skulls hard enough to paint the walls with brain matter, and Buggy incinerated the survivors with his fire breath. The fight lasted less than two minutes.

It felt good to be the one with the level advantage for once.

"Strange we didn't receive a quest from it, Boss," Buggy commented amidst the broken corpses of their enemies. "We got one with the first dungeon, no?"

Basil wondered as well. He wondered what parameters dictated when the System awarded quests; perhaps it only sent them to entice Players without a clear goal of their own, or a party could only accept a limited number of them. Basil had already three of them sitting in his logs.

It didn't matter. The party was slaughtering pro bono today.

Orcine smashed the next set of doors with her mace and shattered them into splinters. The group walked into the next room, an immense central hall large enough to put cathedrals to shame. A dark gray rug covered the floor, its texture tainted with dry blood. An intricate wolf motif relief dominated the ceiling.

Three sets of doors stood on both sides of the hall, all of them locked and topped by a burning skull. A central, Y-shaped stairway leading to the upper levels faced the group on the other end of the room. The sunlight pierced through a sinister stained glass window looming over it.

Basil couldn't tell why, but the window's design disturbed him to his core. It represented a black demonic horned face, with four crimson eyes and two maws on top of the other. A magnificent field of flames surrounded the visage alongside familiar symbols of hands with fanged maws for palms.

"Kui scared," Kuikui admitted upon seeing the visage.

"I feel eyes watching us," Orcine said. She tried to look cool, but Basil could tell it was a front from the worry in her eyes. The stained glass' design spooked her.

Maybe they were indeed being watched. Basil had clashed with a mermaid trying to set up an Apocalypse Force altar near the river shrine. The description said that it allowed the Maleking to watch through it. The stained glass was covered in similar symbols.

"Enemies incoming," Buggy warned, head raised at the stairway. "Here."

Two men walked down from the upper floor, under the glass window's stained sunlight.

"I warned Eric we should have kept the famine worm at least." The first was a gaunt caucasian young man no older than twenty, with well-groomed short hair and an elegant face twisted into a frown of worry. His refined dark jacket, fleur-de-lys brooch, gloves, and elegant boots reminded Basil of a noble stereotype. He carried a black violin with a sinister skull motif. "We don't have the numbers to push them back."

"Who needs numbers when we've got levels." His compatriot was a tall, medieval knight in heavy plate armor. Light reflected on the shining, lustrous surface of his triangular shield and his

sharp longsword's blade. The visor was up, revealing the mustached face of a middle-aged man underneath. "That fool's build is all over the place. We can take him."

Basil focused on these two, the System quickly confirming his suspicions. What he read from the screens made him want to puke.

Paul-Octave Malherbe

Level 25 [Humanoid] (Mercenary 20/Knight 5)

Faction: Apocalypse Force (Empire Lalande).

Dominique Grard

Level 25 [Humanoid] (Bard 16/Gambler 9)

Faction: Apocalypse Force (Empire Lalande).

They were humans.

"Shit." Orcine's eyes widened in dread upon seeing the knight climbing down the stairs. "A capped Mercenary!"

"You're human," Basil whispered in astonishment. He couldn't believe his eyes. He had long wondered what kind of monsters supplied Apollyon with white phosphorus bombs, but now he realized that he might be facing them. "You're Players."

"So are you," the knight shot back, his voice deep and heavy with contempt. He put on his visor and his black eyes glared at Basil through the slits. "Beat me."

"You're humans fighting for the *Apocalypse Force*!" Basil snarled, stretching the last two words. The dungeon's walls quaked from the explosions outside. "Don't you know? They want to kill us all!"

"You know what they say," the knight replied, his sword and shield raised for battle. "If you can't beat them, join them."

"What my friend means to say is that when asked to throw our lives away for nothing, we chose to take the higher road, the better road." The bard smiled ear to ear. "The road of friendship and collaboration."

Basil almost choked at the man's blatant cynicism. His pulse quickened with anger and his uneasiness at the thought of fighting fellow humans immediately vanished.

"You betrayed mankind to *bugs*?" he snarled at them.

"I resent that wording, Boss," Buggy muttered under his breath.

"'Betrayed' is such a dirty word." The musician stopped in the middle of the stairs and tugged a string of his violin with a black bow. "We prefer the term '*switching to the winning side.*'"

"Veni, Vidi, Vichy, huh?!" Basil taunted them before pulling his gun's trigger. He aimed for the bard's head, but the knight managed to intercept the ice bullet with his shield. "Give them no quarter!"

"Vichy this, sassy bitch!" The violinist started a fast-paced melody as his teammate rushed down the stairs. "Bardic Song II!"

"Bodyguard: Dominique," the knight shouted, a blue glow shrouding his armor. "Vitality Up!"

Dominique's [Bardic Song II] buffed his allies' physical stats!

Allies? Basil noted, much to his confusion. *Plural?*

"Kill the bard first!" Basil ordered as he ran across the hall. It would be easier to defeat the knight once his buffer was defeated. "I'll take the other!"

"No, big man, we must finish the Mercenary off first!" Orcine shouted back as she and Buggy rushed after him. "If the class works like it does in my world, then he has a busted Perk!"

By the time her words registered, Basil had crossed the hall and the knight reached the stairway's bottom. Basil's halberd clashed against his enemy's shield but failed to cut through it.

"Strong," the knight commented before pushing him back with a thrust of his shield. He raised his sword to counterattack, but Basil didn't give him the chance. Exploiting his longer reach, he struck the shield again and again with the top spike, forcing the knight on the defensive.

Orcine assisted her teammate by flanking their enemy. The knight's sword parried her mace as his shield did the same with Basil's halberd. Although outnumbered two-to-one, the man held his ground. Not a single blow went through his defense and he blocked the stairs with his body.

This left his teammate exposed to long-distance attacks, however. Kuikui and Buggy attacked the violinist from afar, the former with a lightning bolt and the other with a fiery breath.

The knight noticed the attack and suddenly vanished. Basil's halberd cut through the air as his foe teleported away in a flash. The knight suddenly reappeared in front of his violinist teammate, blocking the thunderbolt and fiery breath with his shield. His ally kept playing undisturbed.

It suddenly occurred to Basil that they weren't fighting monsters, but a Player party. What they lacked in power, these two made up in class synergy.

"You ain't getting past me, punks," the knight declared as he lowered his shield.

"Watch me!" Orcine snarled as she climbed the stairs after him. Kuikui howled again, reapplying his buff to his allies.

Basil almost followed Orcine up the stairway when he heard Buggy shout a warning. "Boss, enemy to your left!"

Basil turned his head in the right direction, but saw nothing. He heard a crackling sound and suddenly noticed slight inflections in the carpet.

Invisibility.

Panicking, Basil swung his halberd vertically and hit *something*. The blow dispelled the illusory veil, revealing a hidden opponent.

Much like her teammates, the newcomer was a human; a lovely young woman with long red hair, cruel blue eyes, and a black cloak covering her shoulders. She wielded a longsword in one hand and a shorter dagger in the other. Both crossed under the shaft of Basil's halberd, preventing his blade from cracking her skull open.

Lucine Lalande

Level 25 [Humanoid] (Outlaw 12/Poisoner 13)

Faction: Apocalypse Force (Empire Lalande).

The woman grinned, her teeth white as snow. "Shocking, isn't it?"

Electricity coursed through her sword and traveled through the halberd. The feathers of Basil's mantle absorbed the lightning harmlessly, much to his joy.

[Curse] ailment negated your **[Lightning Rod]** SP recovery!

Basil savored the incredulous look on his would-be assassin's face before pushing her back with a thrust of his weapon. The woman leaped back, only for Buggy to breathe fire at her from the side. Flames consumed her cloak and threatened to spread to her flesh.

"I thought he was weak to Lightning?" the assassin snarled angrily. She threw her burning cloak away before it could consume her, revealing a black leotard underneath. An array of knives and potions were attached to her belt. "Fucking fake news!"

"You don't need it anyway, darling!" Her bard ally shouted over his own music. Basil suddenly realized who the carved initials outside stood for. "I believe in you!"

Unwilling to fight an assassin in close combat, especially one with a Poisoner class, Basil opened fire at the woman with his handgun. Empowered by the bard's song, the woman dodged the bullets. She rushed at Buggy, grazing his exoskeleton with her blade and nearly beheading Kuikui with another swing.

"Forget the monsters, Lucine!" the knight shouted, his sword clashing against Orcine's shield. Being higher on the stairway, he held the ground advantage over the orc and pushed her down. "Crit the Tamer to death and they'll all perish with him!"

"Don't give me orders, jackass!" The assassin ignored her teammate's suggestion and slashed at Buggy's exoskeleton with her lightning sword. The blow drew blood, but the centimagma remained undeterred. "That freak burned my cloak!"

"You stupid bitch, do as I tell you!"

"Don't you dare insult my girlfriend, you asshole!" his bard teammate shouted back.

They're strong, but they don't get along, Basil realized. The enemy party exploited their class abilities to cover their mutual weaknesses, yet failed to coordinate effectively. If they had focused on Basil as the knight suggested, they might have won by now. They were a gang, not a tight-knit unit. *We must pick them one after the other. Their formation will fall apart afterward.*

But who should he start with? The knight's defense was impenetrable, the bard's music strengthened his allies from a safe distance, and the assassin moved too fast to hit.

And although the knight was clearly better at defending than attacking, he was slowly pushing the lower-leveled Orcine into a corner. Basil himself, with all of his Berserker power, had failed to get past his guard. Walter Tye had warned him that specialization offered better rewards than versatility, and this fight illustrated it well; the enemy party had Basil's own beaten in terms of raw power.

But specialization meant an inability to adapt quickly. It could be a strength and a weakness.

Basil remembered what that man, Malherbe, had said earlier. Bodyguard: Dominique. Assuming the first was the Perk allowing the knight to teleport around to shield his teammates from danger, the fact he needed to specify the target meant that it only protected one ally at once.

"Gang up on the rogue, long-range!" Basil shouted, an idea crossing his mind. He dashed behind the assassin with his gun raised. "Orcine, keep the knight occupied!"

Buggy and Kuikui followed his lead by attacking from multiple directions. Lucine Lalande dodged a stream of flames, avoided a bullet hitting the wall behind her, and saw her luck desert her on the third try. Kuikui's thunderbolt hit her in the chest.

The lightning sent the assassin tumbling back on the carpet, a shroud of darkness briefly surrounding her body.

I knew it! Basil rejoiced. They suffer from the castle's curse too!

That explained the knight's determination to take hits for his team. His armor and defenses mitigated the danger critical hits posed, allowing him to soak damage for his team. Perhaps he was the only one immune to the castle's curse.

"This is the end," Basil said. He pointed his gun's barrel at the assassin's head, right as Buggy activated Agility Up to finish her in melee.

"Lucine!" her violinist boyfriend shouted in alarm. "Paul-Oc, save her!"

"You stupid whore!" the knight snarled in anger upon seeing the tide turn. "Bodyguard: Lucine La—"

Basil turned his gun away at the last second.

"—lande!"

Basil pulled the trigger right as the knight teleported in Buggy's way, stopping the centimagma's charge. His bullet crossed the room and hit the surprised bard in the chest. The violinist dropped his bow, the bullet in his body freezing his blood as it poured out of his wound. A shroud of darkness briefly formed around him.

Critical hit! You [poisoned] Dominique Grand!

The assassin's eyes widened in panic. "Dommy!"

"Nice shot, Boss!" Buggy cheered Basil, only to be pushed back by a thrust of the knight's shield.

"His bullet fucking poisoned me!" the bard complained. He neglected to recover his bow to instead cover his wound with his hand. "I need healing!"

"Don't you dare run away, you pussy!" His knight teammate showed him no sympathy. He charged at Basil, but slower than before. His allies' buffs only worked so long as the music carried them. "Power through and keep singing!"

The bard grit his teeth and moved to pick up his bow... only for Orcine to crush it underfoot as she climbed up the stairs. The man's eyes widened in horror as he faced the orc without anyone to protect him.

"Nope," Orcine said casually.

Then she bashed the bard's skull with her mace.

It was a testament to his level that the blow didn't kill him instantly. Orcine's mace shattered his jaw, sent his teeth flying, and hit him hard enough to throw him down the stairs. The bard laid at the bottom and didn't rise up, blood flowing from his mouth.

"Dommy, hold on!" His assassin girlfriend abandoned her knight ally to Kuikui and Buggy, her expression one of utter panic. She rushed at the bard as soon as she could. "I'm coming!"

She found Basil standing in her way.

"You know what people I hate more than tax collectors?" Having run out of bullets, Basil stored his handgun in his inventory and carried his halberd with both hands. "*Traitors*. You didn't just betray your nation, you betrayed the entire human race!"

Filth of their sort deserved no mercy.

"Climb down from your horse, you filthy immigrant!" The assassin snarled as she lunged at Basil with her sword. "When the dust settles, we'll be alive and you shall be dead!"

Basil brought down his halberd. The assassin dodged by rolling to the side, but he didn't give her any breathing room. He forced back with a flurry of swings, buying back Orcine time to climb down the stairs.

The assassin deflected one thrust with a well-placed strike, only for Basil to quickly follow with a swing. His joy turned to despair as the knight suddenly teleported in his way. Shield and halberd clashed, a crack appearing in the former.

"What did I tell you, Lucine?" The knight attempted to skewer Basil with his sword. "Headshot the Tamer and you kill them all!"

Basil blocked the blow, but this gave the assassin an opportunity to flank him.

"Kui!" Kuikui shrieked a warning. "Kui!"

The assassin threw her dagger at Basil's skull.

The weapon moved at lightning speed, cutting through the air with a whirring sound. Basil's eyes widened as a flash of steel crossed his gaze.

The dagger splattered blood all over the carpet.

Chapter 3: Man vs Man

The dagger pierced straight through Kuikui's ribs.

Basil wasn't certain whether the dinosaur had been trying to catch the dagger in midair with his maw or if he had tried to push his master out of the projectile's way. The result was the same. Kuikui's timing was wrong and he took the dagger straight-on. Time slowed down as feathers and blood swirled around Basil.

Lucine Lalande [poisoned] Kuikui!

Kuikui finished his flight course straight into Basil's face, making him stumble. The assassin lunged in his direction, sword raised for a fatal blow...

And then she leaped past Basil.

"Lucine, what are you doing?" the knight snarled at his teammate. "You had him!"

"Dommy!" The assassin rushed past Basil in a foolish attempt to rescue her boyfriend. Orcine had reached the bard and was busy beating his head into the ground with her mace. "I'm coming baby!"

Orcine saw the rogue coming and raised her shield at the last second. The assassin's sword bounced off the steel, but she followed through with a whirlwind of strikes.

"You... you rooster hater, I won't forgive you!" Buggy furiously rushed at the assassin from behind, mandibles open. "Agility Up!"

The centimagma wasn't quick enough to catch the assassin even with a buff, but his swift assault forced her off Orcine's back.

Basil immediately exploited the brief respite to grab Kuikui with one hand. The poor velociraptor's wound was severe, with blood pouring out of his ribs. Basil was no expert on dinosaur biology, but the blow seemed to have cut through major arteries.

"Kui... cold..." Kuikui rasped as he struggled to stay conscious. "Kuikui... sick inside..."

"Hold on," Basil said, gritting his teeth. "Monster Cure!"

Kuikui's [Curse] ailment negated your Perk!

Damn it! He had to carry Kuikui out of the castle for healing!

"Rah, women!" The knight turned to face Basil, a malevolent glare peering through his helmet's slits. "Fine, I'll kill him myself!"

Basil roared and flailed his halberd around with one hand. He attempted to push the knight back, to force himself a path outside. Yet his foe deflected each blow with his sword and shield.

"You're wasting your time trying to save that bird, boyo," the knight taunted him as their blades clashed. The greater reach of Basil's halberd prevented his foe from gaining ground, but he wouldn't let him escape the castle either. "Lucine's Poisoner Perks double poison damage and bypasses resistance. Your pet is already dead."

"Out of my way!" Basil threatened him while desperately searching for an opening. Kuikui's breathing was growing heavier and slower by the second.

"Leaving before the real fun begins?" the knight chuckled. "I have lost enough HP to trigger my best Perk. Bear witness!"

The knight's sword shone with a malevolent red aura. Basil sensed an invisible, overwhelming pressure build in the air.

"Revenge!"

Man had developed a peerless fight-or-flight reaction over millions of years of evolution. So when the knight swung his sword again and all of Basil's instincts *screamed* at him to dodge, he didn't try to parry. He leaped to the side, the blade narrowly missing him.

The knight's blow hit the floor with enough strength to shatter it.

Stones went flying around the point of impact and part of the ground collapsed into a dark basement below. So powerful was the blow that the entire hall shook from it.

Basil could only stare in shock at the crater left by the attack. Red and green particles floated around the cracked stones like blood out of a wound.

"Kui..." Kuikui rasped weakly under his arm.

"What the..." Basil whispered in astonishment. He couldn't rival so much destruction even under Warp Spasm.

"It's that busted Mercenary Perk I warned you about!" Orcine shouted. The orc desperately protected herself from the assassin's furious assault as she juggled between attacking her and avoiding Bugsy's bites. Each of the woman's sword swings dented Orcine's shield further. "It adds half the difference between his current and max HP as raw damage! The more he's hurt, the harder he hits!"

"That's right." The knight tossed his shield aside and grabbed his sword with both hands. "And with the curse affecting you, I can reach four digits damage on a critical hit. Death in a single blow!"

So that was why the knight was fighting defensively so far. Protecting his teammates also allowed him to charge his ultimate ability. And considering how much damage he had suffered so far...

When Basil thought the situation couldn't possibly get worse, a wolf's howl echoed in the hall.

A new challenger walked down the stairs from the upper floors, but this one was no man at all. The beast resembled a red-furred wolf humanoid, albeit twice larger than the soldiers defending the castle. He wore two bandoliers strapped to the brim with bombs, flasks, and powder pouches. His cold blue eyes looked the same as the human assassin, and a fleur-de-lys symbol was tattooed on his naked chest right above a pair of tattered boxers.

Baron Eric Antoine Lalande, Boss of Château Muloup

Level 25 [Beast/Humanoid] (Alchemist 13/Cultist 5/Skinchanger 7)

Faction: Apocalypse Force (Empire Lalande).

Basil assumed it was the party's leader considering his name. And from the bombs and classes, he had finally found the Apocalypse Force's weapon supplier.

"Why are you wasting so much time? The witch and the cait sith are inside the castle already!" The werewolf's cold eyes surveyed the hall and paused in contempt on his wounded Bard ally. "Ah, I should have known Dominique would screw this up. What an imbecile."

"This fight would already be over if your dumbass sister listened to orders, Eric!" The knight pointed his sword at Basil. "He's the Tamer!"

The werewolf grabbed two bombs from his bandolier and threw them at Basil with inhuman strength. The projectiles crossed the hall in the blink of an eye.

Basil dodged the bombs as they exploded in a fiery burst. However, this allowed the knight enough time to tackle him with his shoulder.

Critical hit!

The blow propelled Basil against a wall. His head and back hit cold hard stone with enough force to briefly whiten his vision. Kuikui slipped through his arms without a sound.

The knight charged at Basil, sword raised for the kill.

"Big Man!" Orcine broke from the fight with the assassin as she struggled to dodge Buggy's firebreath. She rushed at the knight with her shield raised and managed to cross the gap between them in seconds. "Back off!"

The knight turned around, his sword shining with power. "Revenge!"

Orcine raised her shield to stop the blade.

It failed.

The knight's sword shredded Orcine's shield like tissue paper before continuing its course. The blade cleanly sliced the orc's left arm, cut the breast, and kept going. Orcine spat blood and her eyes widened in terror. The black shroud indicating a curse-powered critical hit surrounded her.

Orcine fell on her back in two halves neatly severed at the chest.

Basil's blood froze and boiled in the span of a single second. First came the horror, then the fury. Acting entirely on instinct, he grabbed his halberd with both hands and hit the knight in the back.

Basil's weapon had cut through a dragon's neck and ignored half of a target's defensive stats. Yet it barely managed to cut through the knight's armor and grazed the hard flesh underneath. His blow tossed the knight to his chest, a little blood dripping from his back.

Basil raised his halberd for another strike when a terrible screeching noise echoed inside his brain. A red screen message flashed before his eyes.

Kuikui the Dinosaur has left your party. Your buffs have run out.

Basil blinked in confusion. His eyes wandered from the wounded knight at his feet to his velociraptor. Poor Kuikui lay on the ground, his blood turned green by the poison infecting him.

He was no longer breathing.

Basil was frozen in place, his mind unable to compute the dire reality in front of him. His house's destruction had shaken him, but here he felt something snap inside him. The fire inside him smoldered, leaving only coldness.

When Basil struck the knight's back before he could rise to his feet, he felt *nothing*. No anger, no sorrow, no nothing. His halberd dented his enemy's armor without inflicting lethal wounds, yet he persisted in his futile task. Did the knight's vitality increase the closer to death he was?

"Orcine, Boss, I'm coming!" Buggy shouted, only to take a bomb to the face. The blast propelled the centimagma back and knocked him out of the fight. His exoskeleton was beaten and battered.

"Finish them and let's run to the walls," the werewolf ordered as he climbed down the stairs. "The monsters outside overran our soldiers. We need to take out the dragon before it tears down the fortifications."

"Dommy..." The assassin knelt at her boyfriend's side with tears in her eyes. The Bard was pale as a corpse, his head lying in a pool of his own blood. "Brother, you have to help!"

"My potions can't cure death," her sibling replied without a care in the world, "and you were too good for a lowly banneret anyway."

It can't end like this, Basil thought as the werewolf and his assassin sister walked in his direction. The latter was crying tears of rage and grabbed a new dagger from her belt. *Not like this*. "Warp Sp—"

The hall's stained window shattered into a thousand pieces.

All eyes turned to it, Basil's included. He immediately beamed in relief upon seeing the intruder.

"Sorry to be late!" Vasi said from atop her broomstick as she flew above the battlefield.
"Clearing the walls took longer than expected!"

"Guys, we're here!" Plato's voice echoed from the hall's entrance. The cat leaped into the room, followed by Shellgirl, House Garden, and a dozen fire seeds. "Luck Up!"

"Peasants storming the gates, how droll," the werewolf taunted them as he grabbed two new bombs off his bandoliers. "Where are the torches and pitchforks?"

"You couldn't afford mine anyway!" Shellgirl replied with a volley of ice pearls.

The werewolf and the assassin both deftly dodged her projectiles, but Plato exploited this distraction to hit the dungeon's Boss with a wind slash. When the werewolf prepared to retaliate with a bomb, Shellgirl shot it out of his hand.

As for House Garden and the others, they rushed at the assassin with suicidal fervor. The latter skewered the lower-level plants as they approached with her dagger and sword, but Rosemarine's fire seeds violently exploded whenever they perished. The assassin took a few steps back to avoid the blowback.

The knight at Basil's feet attempted to slash at his leg with his sword. Basil responded by pinning his hand to the ground with his foot and stabbing his helmet with his halberd's spike. It drew blood, but failed to kill the knight.

What was he made of, iron?

"My gods..." Vasi whispered as she landed next to Basil, a hand on her mouth. She had noticed Orcine and Kuikui's corpses. "I'm so sorry, I... I should have come quicker..."

Basil knew Orcine was dead long before he checked her empty eyes. Her shredded organs had spilled all over the hall's rug.

The knight hadn't lied. *Death in a single blow*.

"He did this," Basil said angrily as he glared down at the knight. "But I can barely damage him."

"Hold him down," Vasi said as she set her broom aside. "I have an idea."

Basil followed her advice, keeping the knight pinned to the ground as Vasi knelt beside him. She lifted his helmet's visor and Basil expected her to blast his face off, maybe poison him. Yet Vasi did none of these things.

Instead, she forcefully kissed the knight on the lips. Quickly, vigorously.

Basil watched the scene in utter incomprehension, and from his gaze the knight was as surprised as him.

"Witch Kiss," Vasi whispered after breaking physical contact.

A pink fume traveled from her mouth to the knight's. His pupils dilated as he breathed the strange vapor. Pink phantom hearts floated above his head.

Vasi [charmed] Paul-Octave Malherbe!

"Now, my dear knight," Vasi said with a fake smile. "Why don't you protect my servants and kill all these horrible Apocalypse Force villains instead? That way, nobody would stand between us."

"At your service, my queen!" the knight answered with unbridled lust.

Vasi nodded at an awestruck Basil. He reluctantly let the knight go, half expecting him to turn around and hit him again. His worries vanished as his former foe rushed at his werewolf leader, sword first. His wild charge reminded Basil of Don Quixote assaulting the windmills. The knight hadn't even bothered to put on his visor again.

The werewolf kicked Plato away from him just in time to see his crazed teammate close the gap between them. "What in the world—"

"I will take your foolish orders no longer, Eric!" The knight's sword glittered with dark power. "Revenge!"

The knight slashed his teammate across the chest, cutting through powder pouches and spraying the ground with alchemical components. His mighty blow cut through the werewolf's skin, flesh, and bones. The dungeon Boss roared in terrible pain, blood staining his fur.

"What the hell are you doing?" the assassin snarled in anger at the betrayal. Two dead members of House Garden, Onion Spider and Strawboogie Berry, were impaled on the tip of her sword. "Traitor!"

"You shut up!" the knight shouted back with crazed fanaticism. "You are unworthy to breathe the same air as my future wife!"

"I told you I had experience with charming paladins," Vasi boasted to Basil.

"Does that spell work on anyone?" Basil asked, shocked by this turn of events. The werewolf was forced to run around the hall to escape his crazed teammate's fury. The knight proved as dangerous to his teammates' wellbeing as he had been to Basil's.

"Only on brave and lustful fools."

Basil squinted at her. She had kissed him on the cheek before... "Did you ever—"

"No, Basil, I don't use roofies," she replied with a cold tone. "What kind of gal do you take me for? I only use this Perk for menial tasks and assisted suicides."

Basil couldn't tell how he should take this confession, but he relished the thought of these two Quislings killing each other. His dark joy turned to worry when Buggy rose up in a corner of the hall, his exoskeleton bleeding from half a dozen spots.

"Buggy, run outside to Rosemarine!" Basil ordered. "Get healing!"

"But Boss, I can still fi—"

"Don't you dare die on me too!" Basil snarled angrily; anger born of worry and remorse. "We lost too many friends already!"

Buggy flinched as if he was slapped. He glanced at Kuikui and Orcine, lowered his head in shame, and then crawled out of the hall as commanded.

Vasi watched the scene with an unreadable look, before asking, "What next?"

"I'm a feminist and proponent of gender equality, but just this once..." Basil glared at the female assassin. "Ladies first."

The rogue had slaughtered her way through the plants, leaving only three members of House Garden alive: the Ghostie Pumpkin, the Demon Tomato, and the Bean Ninja. The assassin stood proud, drenched in juice and surrounded by corpses. She was moving to finish the job when Basil and Vasi moved to help the vegetables flank her.

The rogue found herself trapped between the two groups and threw a dagger at Vasi's head. The projectile moved almost too fast for Basil's eyes to follow, but he managed to deflect it with his halberd. The assassin immediately lunged at him with her sword before he could adjust his stance.

"Murderer!" she shouted, crossing the gap between them in a blink. "This is all your fault!"

A feint!

An ice pearl from Shellgirl missed the assassin's head, distracting her at the last second. Vasi snapped her fingers and unleashed a burst of flame. The assassin stepped back from Basil to dodge.

With the werewolf safely occupied by his own teammate, Plato and Shellgirl joined in the attack. The former cut the air with his rapier and the latter fired a volley of ice pearls. The assassin grit her teeth, sweat dripping from her forehead as she dodged the projectiles.

"Don't let her catch her breath!" Basil swung his halberd at the assassin's head and narrowly missed. Vasi assisted him with bursts of fire, forcing their target back.

It said a lot about the assassin's agility that she could dodge so many attacks at once. Yet she lacked eyes on the back of her head. House Garden's Bean Ninja jumped at her from behind and stabbed her in the throat with a knife. The assassin choked on her own blood and tripped. The Demon Tomato and Ghostie Pumpkin bit both of her arms and pulled in different directions.

Quartered by vegetables was a humiliating way to go, but one that the assassin deserved. House Garden's survivors kept her pinned to the ground as Basil raised his halberd.

"You cost me many vegetables, a dino, a rooster," he said, his voice heavy, "and a friend."

The assassin glared at him even after he carved her skull open.

Her werewolf brother's scream of horror was only matched by his pain.

"Sister!" he roared, holding himself against a wall with two enormous gashes on his chest. He had lost so much blood that Basil could see bones beneath his fur. "You'll pay for this..."

"Your fur will make a fine coat for my lady!" his knight teammate ranted as he lifted his sword for the coup-de-grâce. "Reven—"

Exploiting his former ally's lack of visor to protect him, the werewolf shoved a bomb into the knight's mouth. Vasi's charmed thrall choked on the device as if it were an apple. His headless corpse fell to the ground after a flash of blood and light. Pieces of brain matter stained the ground.

The werewolf's relief lasted mere seconds. Basil and his allies converged on him from all directions and surrounded him. He looked for an escape, but found only barrels and blades pointing at him.

"It's over," Basil warned.

The werewolf sighed in defeat and moved his hands above his head. "I surrender."

The creature lost pounds and fur. Within seconds, the mighty werewolf transformed into a half-naked scrawny man, with short red hair and cold blue eyes. He was clearly the male mirror of his assassin sister.

Shellgirl and the others kept their weapons pointed at him, but didn't open fire. They glanced at Basil and waited for his signal.

"I'll tell you whatever you want to know," their prisoner said, pleading for his life. "I'll surrender control of the dungeon to you too. The server is in the central tower."

"Why?" Basil asked dryly. The question had been burning on his lips since the fight started.

"Because Apollyon will have my head for my failure to hold this place anyway."

"Why did you ally with him in the first place?" Basil clarified. "To spare your family's life?"

"I did it for my family, yes. These lands belonged to us before the Revolution." The baron shrugged. "I took back what belonged to us by right. The French government cheated us. If I had to convert to undo that wrong, who was I to argue?"

"That's it?" Basil spat at the ground in disgust. "You betrayed your country so you could call yourself a baron again?"

"This country was turning into an Islamo-leftist ghetto anyway," the traitor replied without remorse. "France needs to undergo a national regeneration process to regain its greatness. The right men at the top, and people like you purged."

His sick phrasing made Basil's skin crawl. It reminded him eerily of some of Europe's darkest hours. No wonder his kin crawled out of the woods to join the Apocalypse Force. It wasn't so big of a jump.

"I've got a question too," the baron said with a curious look. "Why did you come? What did we do to you?"

Basil searched the man's gaze for any hint of mockery and found only puzzlement. This man ruined so many lives and distributed so many bombs to Apollyon's soldiers that he couldn't be bothered to remember them all.

"You burned our house," Basil replied. He glanced at his team, raised his thumb, and mimicked a gutting gesture. "So now we're taking yours."

The man glared back with malevolence. The comment seemed to have struck a chord with him.

"My only regret," the baron said as he faced his incoming death, "is that we didn't kill more of you fuc—"

A volley of ice pearls and wind slashes interrupted him, and his corpse soon hit the floor with a soft thump. A red wolf pelt covered in strange symbols materialized over his remains like a funeral shroud.

Congratulations, you received 180,000 EXP (36,000 for you). You earned 4 levels (total 29).

By defeating Baron Eric Lalande, your Party can now bypass the Neurotower's barrier and decide the dungeon's fate.

You earned the [Pèth] accessory reward.

"We could have questioned him," Vasi pointed out.

"You don't make deals with his kind, even to betray your word later." Basil looked down on the baron's corpse with contempt. "It's just beneath us."

Nobody argued. In fact, nobody spoke. Shellgirl hopped to Orcine's corpse's side with a grim expression, and House Garden's survivors gathered around Kuikui without a word. Basil exchanged a silent glance with Plato.

The battle was won and no one cheered.

Chapter 4: Man vs Guild

The dungeon was healing its wounds.

His group's attack on Château Muloup had caused lasting damage. Rosemarine had savaged the façade and Vasi had bombarded the outer walls with fireballs to clear out the defenders. Broken ramparts, shattered glass and crumbling gargoyles were their legacy.

Yet the walls healed. Rifts closed on their own. Stone fragments pulled themselves back together. Red and green particles swirled around damaged areas, filling gaps, closing holes, repairing doors and statues. Damaged walls that would have taken months to restore the old-fashioned way regained their former glory in minutes.

In the early days of the apocalypse, Basil had wondered where the mass lost from crafting processes vanished to. Watching the dungeon's self-repair ability made him wonder if the extra matter was somehow stockpiled in the dungeons and then spent to repair whatever damage they suffered. The hypothesis held on paper, though Basil shuddered to imagine the complex physics involved.

But what about the energy? Where did the unfathomable power needed for the System's magic to function come from? The three gods of the Trimurti? Did the calories Kalki consume fuel the entire dungeon infrastructure? Would a steady diet of meat improve the process?

Basil should keep pondering these questions. It distracted him from the fact two of his allies and half his vegetables had perished in battle. It occupied his mind away from the sorrow, the guilt, the feeling he should have done better.

The only thing Basil didn't feel guilty for, ironically, was the death of his fellow humans. He had grown desensitized to the idea of killing after slaughtering hundreds of monsters in the name of survival. He had slain and eaten sentient, sapient creatures. It would be hypocritical and racist to treat human deaths as more meaningful.

The enemy party had been monsters anyway, just on the inside.

His group advanced slowly due to Shellgirl's lack of legs; Basil had to push her up the stone steps so she wouldn't roll back to the bottom each time she missed a leap. The members of House Garden acted strangely too. The three survivors dragged their dead comrades' remains around and refused to relinquish them. Basil would have attributed this behavior to mourning, if not for the strange focus in the vegetables' eyes.

They seemed to await an event of some kind, for a lack of a better term.

The group silently reached the fourth floor of Château Muloup. They had barely fought any monsters over the course of their ascension. Most of the dungeon's defenders perished on the

walls, and the stragglers were more interested in flying away rather than fighting a losing battle. Vasi had seen Apollyon drones flee north soon after Baron Eric's death.

That behavior surprised Basil a lot. Dungeons allowed factions to teleport troops according to the System; that was the main reason why his party had destroyed the Barthes' Ogre Den months ago. So why didn't the Apocalypse Force summon additional reinforcements?

Seignosse wasn't a strategic location as far as Basil could tell. If the Apocalypse Force couldn't afford to spare more soldiers to protect it, then it implied that they needed their soldiers elsewhere. To fight what? To fight *whom*?

It was either that or the Apocalypse Force simply *couldn't* summon more soldiers to Château Muloup. Perhaps Baron Eric's death had cut off the place from his masters' wider dungeon network.

Basil guessed he would get his answers in the neurotower's room soon enough.

The flight of stairs led the group to a lavish gallery corridor. The crimson carpet crackled under their feet. A long line of statues of medieval knights holding torches faced stained glass windows representing wolves, bears, foxes, and other woodland beasts. It looked as if both sides stared at one another in defiance.

Basil absentmindedly tugged at the warm wolf pelt around his shoulder. This trophy, the Pèth harvested from Eric Lalande, was all his party had to show for their victory.

Pèth

Family: Accessory (Cloak)

Quality: B.

Effect 1: [Werebeast]: The Pèth allows mono-Humanoid Type wearers to transform the wearer into a werebeast. The type of werebeast and associated bonuses depend on the wearer's personality and/or totem spirit.

Effect 2: [Moonflower]: You benefit from a HP/SP Regen effect under the moonlight, allowing you to regain 1/16th of your HP/SP each minute.

Effect 3: [Manslayer]: Attacks made with natural weapons such as claws, fangs, or unarmed strikes will benefit from a Manslayer effect (x3 damage against [Humanoids]).

A magical pelt harvested from a wolf who didn't run fast enough. Infused with the fury of the animal world, it is mostly used as a comfortable rug nowadays.

As a beast's skin, this item is compatible with [Slaughterer I].

"I wonder what kind of animal you'll turn into," Vasi said, trying to lighten the mood. "A brave wolf perhaps?"

"He will turn into a cat if God exists, or into a bear otherwise," Plato replied immediately.

"Definitively bear," Shellgirl added with a quiet voice. Orcine's death had demoralized her.

"Bear King Basil!" House Garden's members said as one. "Bear King Basil."

Once, Basil would have cracked a joke about turning into a werewolf after eating so many of them. His lips remained closed. He wasn't in the mood for humor.

His eyes wandered to the stained windows. Basil enjoyed a wide view of the marsh outside the castle and the giant plant dragon at its doorstep. Rosemarine was treating Buggy's wounds with glowing light. A court of fire seeds surrounded them, watching over the corpses of Kuikui and Orcine's severed halves.

The sight soured Basil's stomach. Vasi had fire seeds transport the dead outside the castle until they could bury them properly, but he had the nagging feeling she did so to keep them out of mind instead.

She had failed.

"Why did he jump?" The words flowed out of Basil's mouth on their own.

"I'm sorry?" Plato asked, his head turning in his best friend's direction.

"Kuikui, why did he jump?" Basil asked. The question had been bugging him for a while, and he couldn't avoid facing it any longer. He needed an answer *now*. "He joined us to breed with my chickens and I didn't deliver. He mated for a night before everything went to hell. We met less than a week ago."

Basil knew Kuikui hadn't actually intended to take the hit for him. The velociraptor had tried to grab the dagger that slew him in midair so he could live to tell the tale. Even if he failed, he should have understood the risk involved in the maneuver.

So why did he jump?

"Are you asking me why did he jump or why did he jump *for you*?" Plato asked.

Basil grunted. "Does it make any difference?"

"It might," Plato replied calmly. "I arrived after, so I can only imagine. Even birds can be surprisingly brave when pushed into a corner."

Vasi interrupted the conversation. "Don't do it, Basil."

"Don't do what?" he asked.

"Mull over what happened. You'll only blame yourself for things you had no control over."

"Gotta agree here," Plato said. "Did you blame yourself for René's illness? No, because bad things happen for no reason."

"What about the things I did have control over?" Basil asked, his voice brimming with frustration. He wasn't angry at Plato and Vasi; he was angry at himself. "Kuikui didn't sacrifice himself for me. He was trying to push me out of the way, to catch the dagger in his jaws. But since we never drilled for battle or tactics, his timing was off and he paid the ultimate price."

Basil was the party's leader. It was his job to protect his team, and when he couldn't, to prepare them for the worst. His group never drilled for combat or discussed tactics. They winged their way through each fight, constantly improvising with little to no foresight.

Their luck had to run out at some point.

"And Orcine did die trying to save my sorry ass," Basil pointed out. It stung all the harder considering she was the last of her family. "If I handled the knight on my own—"

"You're wrong, Partner," Shellgirl said with a surprisingly cold tone. "Orcine didn't die for you. She died to avenge her family and succeeded. Don't say otherwise. She knew the risks. Hearing you whine about her death is an insult to her dedication, do you understand?"

Basil locked eyes with Shellgirl. The clam mimic held his gaze firmly. She must have been closer to Orcine than Basil expected.

"I still bear part of the blame," he said.

"You don't," Shellgirl insisted.

"I do. I'm not whining or complaining, I'm stating a *fact*. Orcine knew about the Revenge Perk and said we should blitzkrieg the knight before he could activate it. If we had communicated more clearly, we could have coordinated better and Orcine might have survived."

"Or you could have both perished anyway," Vasi pointed out. "Battles to the death never go as planned, Basil. I thought you would have learned that by now."

"We didn't prepare as much as we could have," Basil replied grimly. "The Systems of your and Orcine's worlds are incredibly similar to our own, and that knight showed that some classes roughly work the same between them."

"You couldn't expect to fight a fellow human with the Mercenary class," Vasi replied. "It wasn't your fault."

"Maybe not," Basil conceded. "But I only ever studied the various Systems when I needed to, and never in-depth. I never paid much attention to my long-term class progression and chose them based on short-term benefits. Harvest more food, kill more goblins, improve the garden."

Walter was right, Basil had spread his classes too thin. His party outnumbered Lalande's group by more than three to one with equal levels, and they still suffered casualties because the enemy had better Perks. Without counting the knight's Bodyguard-powered teleportation and Revenge, Lucine Lalande's Poisoner abilities had cut many lives short.

If he had put his utility levels in Runesmith, Gardener, Alchemist, and Fisherman into Berserker, what powers would have Basil unlocked by now?

"I need to take it seriously from now on," Basil decided. "The Trimurti System's inner workings, elemental affinities, my class planning... I need to figure it all out. The knight was right, my build is all over the place."

Vasi crossed her arms and studied him closely. He could tell she thought he was too hard on himself, but held her tongue.

"If you're really serious about this," she finally said, "I can give you a crash course on my world's System when we find the time to sit and talk peacefully. There are enough similarities between it and this planet's Trimurti System to provide insight. But I would consider what you want to become if I were you, Basil."

"What do I want to become?" Basil frowned. She sounded like self-help book crap. "I know who I am."

"You misunderstood me," Vasi replied calmly. "The reason your build is 'all over the place' as you say, is because you're trying to do too many things at once. You want to become the lone warrior fearlessly charging into the fray, the crafter, the monster tamer... you can either dedicate yourself to one path and excel in it, or try them all halfway."

Shellgirl nodded in approval. "I want to become rich, Partner. Vasi wants to stare into the abyss of magic and watch it blink. We drew strength and focus from our goals."

"And so will you, Basil," Vasi whispered. "Once you decide in which direction you want to go."

Basil pondered the witch's word and wisdom. She had a point, many of his classes lacked synergy. Berserker was a powerful warrior class, but one that thrived on loneliness. His Warp Spasm Perk made him as much of a liability as an asset to his party in a fight. It complemented Runesmith and Technomancer, true, but it didn't fit well with Tamer and Gardener. These two encouraged Basil to recruit allies and to fight in a team.

All his classes had served him well so far. Yet for his team's sake, he would have to let a few fall by the wayside.

Basil folded these questions in a corner of his mind. The group had reached a tall wooden door at the end of the corridor. A horned wolf's skull loomed over the frame, its eyes burning with hellfire.

Plato hissed, his rapier unsheathed. "I smell a bug close by."

Basil's wariness turned to fury. He smashed the door to pieces with his halberd and stepped into the next room with murderous intent.

The corridor beyond the threshold lacked any window or decoration. Its architecture immediately reminded Basil of the Ogre Den's depths. The castle's stones turned into paper-thin layers of otherworldly metal covered in golden circuitry. Colorful pulses of energy traveled through cables embedded in the ground and tall ceiling. Energy particles floated in the air in increasing concentration the further the group advanced. The neurotower's room awaited them at the end.

So did Apollyon.

A single drone stood in the vast central tower of Château Muloup. The walls twisted into a spiral of circuits surrounding a colossal black steel monolith. The dungeon's server was five times the size of the late Ogre Den's, so huge that its shadow loomed over the entire group. Pulsating cables larger than Basil himself thrummed at its feet and streams of particles erupted from its summit. A crimson barrier of energy protected the machine.

"So you survived," buzzed the drone. The bug was no different from its siblings, green and no stronger than level 10. Yet its shadow belonged to a larger creature, a malevolent insect with colossal cannons for shoulders. The Horseman of Famine Apollyon spoke through his thrall's mandibles. "A pity. Humans make for disappointing soldiers."

Basil barely resisted the urge to behead the creature; barely. Only his wariness of a trap and concern for his comrades stayed his hand. His teammates formed a half-circle around the Horseman's puppet, ready to tear him to pieces.

Apollyon showed no fear. Why would he? After all, his true body was safe somewhere beyond Basil's grasp. Killing the drone wouldn't even give the party experience points.

"You wasted your time," Apollyon buzzed. "This place is of no importance to our goal. Our work is done. We destroyed crops and poisoned wells. The region will starve, its people will wither. What we didn't devour, the winds of winter will freeze to death. This dungeon means nothing to us anymore."

"Then why did your troops fight so hard to defend it?" Plato taunted him. "Unless you treat them so terribly that they would rather die to us?"

To Basil's surprise, Apollyon actually nodded in agreement. "We Horsemen care not whether our troops win or lose. So long as blood flows, levels will rise. You think strength will be your salvation, but you are wrong. It will be the key that shall unlock Earth's doors to us."

Basil's jaw clenched in fury. Megabug and his ilk were scouts. The real armies of the Apocalypse Force remained trapped beyond the level barrier, so it mattered little whether they perished. The surviving population would grow in levels over time and trigger a new Incursion.

It was a vicious cycle. The stronger Basil and his team became, the higher the threats they would eventually face.

"So go ahead," Apollyon taunted them. "Claim this place as your own. We will retake it in due time and our troops will gain more experience from your corpses."

"Did you come here to gloat?" Basil snickered. "You're wasting your time and ours."

"And he's lying." Vasi smiled at the bug, though her lips didn't reach her eyes. "Even if this dungeon isn't important to him, it makes more sense for him to destroy it rather than abandoning it to us. The fact he can't bypass the barrier suggests his servant's death blocked his faction from controlling this place. It's not that he won't send reinforcements to protect it; it's that he can't."

Vasi's smirk widened even further.

"Am I right, or am I right?" she asked.

The Apollyon vessel hissed in response. Vasi had guessed correctly. And much like every sore loser, the Horseman of Famine threatened Basil's group with retaliation. "The barrier is weakening a little more every day. Each death makes this world more worthy of our presence. In time I will cross over into this lush, verdant planet myself, and when I grace it with my full power..."

Apollyon's vessel locked eyes with Basil.

"We will see how brave you are then, Bohen."

Basil raised his halberd for the kill, but screams froze him in place.

House Garden's members, both the living and the dead, glowed all at the same time. Basil recognized the glow of incoming metamorphosis, yet this one was clearly different. The five vegetables' shining forms merged together into a single mass.

This is what they had been waiting for, Basil guessed as he raised a hand to protect himself from the light. But how could they all meet transformation criteria at the same time? Only when the process finished did Basil understand what happened.

The single creature that emerged from the light rivaled Buggy in size and combined elements of all House Garden members. Two slices of pumpkin with ghastly red eyes and sharp teeth closed on a ring of fried onion, strawberry pieces, and a steak of black beans. A tongue in the middle of the maw salivated with blood-colored tomato sauce. The beast lacked legs or hands, and instead floated in the air through the sheer power of its will. Basil immediately identified the creature's true nature.

A burger.

A giant, *vegetable* burger with vicious red eyes and teeth powerful enough to split a man in half, but a burger all the same. The beast that was once House Garden roared with hunger; and even Basil, a dedicated carnivore, couldn't help but stare in awe at its tasty beauty.

Veggie Burgerlord

Level 25 [Plant/Demon]

Party: House Garden.

The Apollyon drone looked up at the creature and whispered a small, soft word.

"Oh."

The monstrous burger's jaws closed on its torso and bisected it at the waist. The creature chewed hungrily under the amazed eyes of his allies. Its tongue grabbed what little remained of Apollyon's incarnation in an instant and swallowed it whole.

"What the hell just happened?" Plato asked. The cat sounded a little terrified. "Can food... Can food eat us back?"

Basil wondered too. A burger-themed evolution made sense for garden vegetables, especially considering the constant oppression they suffered from vegan predators; nature was bound to strike back at one point. Yet House Garden's members seemed to have merged rather than transforming individually.

The System swiftly answered his question.

Polymorphosis is a rare phenomenon when two or more monsters combine into a stronger one under specific conditions. The resulting entity is more powerful than the sum of its parts.

Astonishingly, the corpses of the Strawboogie Berry and Onion Spider had merged with their living brethren. Monsters could undergo metamorphosis post-mortem, at least as part of a fusion.

The implications were... startling, to say the least.

"I guess they had a beef to settle," Basil joked. The sight of a giant hamburger chewing Apollyon's vessel to death filled him with dark glee. The Veggie Burgerlord belched proudly, having left nothing of its victim behind. "Good burger."

Basil petted it on the pumpkin slices and heard the Veggie Burgerlord bark like a dog in response. Come to think of it, he had never given names to House Garden's vegetables before...

Inspiration suddenly struck him like lightning.

"Ronald," Basil decided. "*Colonel* Ronald McVeggie."

Tasty. Intimidating. *Popular.*

*Veggie Burgerlord accepted the name change! Veggie Burgerlord is now: **Colonel Ronald McVeggie.***

Vasi and Shellgirl exchanged a glance. "You'll get used to it," said the latter.

Vasi raised a finger as if to ask a question, lowered it, and then crossed her arms with a skeptical look. As for Plato, he would rather lick his ass rather than comment. Basil shouldered their silent criticism with pride, as did his new pet.

With Apollyon gone and the party close, the crimson barrier around the neurotower collapsed into nothingness. A screen appeared before Basil's eyes.

Congratulations. By defeating Baron Eric Lalande and removing the neurotower's barrier, you may now decide the dungeon's fate. You can either claim it for your party or destroy it.

Here are the benefits of claiming a dungeon:

- *You can partly rearrange the dungeon to fit your preferences. As a level 25 dungeon, Château Muloup is limited to twenty-five rooms.*
- *A dungeon will allow your party to transition into a Guild.*
- *Party members can teleport back to the dungeon at any time. Any new dungeon claimed will be added to the teleportation network.*
- *You can prevent the dungeon from spawning monsters or force newborn ones to obey your party. The monsters' numbers, types, and levels depend on the dungeon. Monsters spawned before your takeover will stay independent.*

However, you must select a player or monster who will act as the dungeon's Boss. They will maintain the barrier around the neurotower so long as they remain alive within the dungeon's confines. If they exit it, any intruder may hijack the core by selecting a new Boss.

Basil had read the same text when he destroyed the Ogre Den. He had blown up the place back then rather than risk constant raids and possible attacks on his house. The realization that a dungeon's destruction could delay Incursions had only strengthened his resolve.

But Basil's home was gone. A few of his friends were dead. And Basil had sworn eternal war upon the Apocalypse Force. If conquering dungeons and using its resources to attack foes was the nature of the game, then Basil would play to win.

"I'll claim it," he said.

Please select Château Muloup's new Boss among your party. Once a Boss has been chosen, only death will free them from their role; if the core is hijacked in their absence, they will also perish. A Boss' level will be capped at that of their dungeon, but they will gain additional abilities and grow in power after each Incursion.

Of course there was a catch.

"We need to select a Boss," Basil declared, his lips curling in frustration. "But they'll have to stay inside the castle for life and can't level up normally."

"I'll pass," Vasi said immediately.

"Me too." Shellgirl put her slimy hands behind her head. "Don't get me wrong, I would love a new HQ, but I would rather stay in touch with the customers. Keep my ear close to the ground."

"Mmm..." Plato briefly seemed to consider it. "I love the idea of sleeping all day inside a warm, well-protected litter, but I know you Basil. Left to yourself, you would screw up and die within days."

"Thank you for your concern," Basil deadpanned.

"You're welcome."

Ronald barked like a dog and hopped in front of Basil. In its—His? Her? Did burgers have gender?—eyes, Basil saw the burning desire to prove its worth.

"Will you throw yourself into the grill if I ask it of you?" Basil asked with gravitas. Ronald licked its fangs in response. "If only Bulgaria had more meals of your calorie caliber."

With Kuikui's death, Basil's party was one member short. He added Ronald to his team and selected it as the new Boss. A red aura briefly flared to life around the creature before disappearing just as quickly. The crimson barrier reformed around the neurotower, protecting it from danger.

Colonel Ronald McVeggie has been selected as Château Muloup's Boss. As the local Boss, ***Colonel Ronald McVeggie*** will benefit from a bonus to HP and SP, gain dominion over the monsters summoned by Château Muloup, and alter the dungeon's room composition within limits. ***Colonel Ronald McVeggie*** can also authorize teleportation of allies into the dungeon's confines.

Colonel Ronald McVeggie gained the hidden perk [Butcher Bistro].

Congratulations, your party assumed control of a dungeon! You can now transition into a Guild!

Now they were reaching the truly interesting part.

"How does a guild work?" Basil asked.

A Guild is an organization of multiple parties, whether they are made of monsters or players. To exist, a Guild needs a dungeon homebase. A Guild that loses all dungeons under its control will cease to exist.

When a Guild is created, its members must elect a Guildmaster who will administer it; if a Guildmaster is slain without selecting a replacement, then the highest-level party leader in the Guild will replace them. In the case of a tie, the System will select the member with the longest guild membership.

A Guild offers multiple benefits:

- *Party Leaders can communicate across vast distances through a chatroom, so long as they remain within the same world.*
- *Parties can teleport to any dungeons claimed by their Guild if they have the local Boss' approval.*
- *Parties can store excess loot in a shared Guild inventory managed by the Guildmaster.*
- *Parties in a Guild are interlocked, allowing members to easily jump from one party to another within the organization with the Guildmaster's approval.*
- *Some of the Guildmaster's beneficial Perks will apply to the entire Guild instead of only their party.*
- *Once a Guild reaches a hidden threshold of claimed dungeons and recruited parties, it will transition into a larger Faction.*

"Common inventory?" Shellgirl choked behind Basil. It appeared the dungeon had sent the same notice to all party members. Her eyes lit up with greed. "Vote for me! Shellgirl for Guildmaster!"

Ronald snapped its jaws at Shellgirl, making her squeal and retreat inside her shell.

"King Basil for guildmaster!" Ronald snarled with a deep, inhuman voice. "King Basil toastie for life!"

"Sorry Shellgirl, I can't trust you with the shinies. You'll just pilfer them." Plato raised a paw. "My vote is for Basil."

Shellgirl's eyes peeked in her shell's slit and looked at Vasi with insistence. The witch rolled her eyes in exasperation. She chose the same as any boomer.

"I'll abstain," Vasi said with a shrug.

"Treachery!" Shellgirl complained from inside her hideout. "Fence-sitter!"

Alas, democracy had spoken and Basil was invested with new responsibilities.

Selected Guildmaster: Basil Jean-François Bohén.

Please choose the name of your guild.

Basil considered half a dozen names before settling on one. A title that would forever remind Apollyon and his ilk of their odious sin.

New Guild created: Homeowner Revenge Association.

Current Parties: The Bohens, House Garden.

Dismaker Labs wishes you a happy apocalypse!

Basil grinned cruelly. The great neighborhood crusade had now officially begun. He would take back Europe, one dungeon at a time.

Today's slaughter was only the beginning.

Chapter 5: Man vs Planning

Nothing better than the smell of cooked flesh in the evening.

Basil rejoiced at the sight of steaks warming up on his grill. Rosemarine's Fire Seeds burned in the castle's shiny new courtyard, their very presence providing as much heat as coal. Gargoyle ham, bug drone ribs, and the few fish the party harvested from the lake nearby would make for fine dining.

The rest of his party sat around a long table next to a pool. Rosemarine, the only one too big to fit in the courtyard, instead squeezed her body halfway through a stone archway in the outer wall. Saliva drooled from her lips and Buggy snapped his mandibles in anticipation.

"Dinner's almost ready!" Basil tossed a slice of wolf-man to Ronald. The burger used his tongue to lift a plate covered in bread and catch the meat in midair. The food briefly glowed and transformed into a delicious meat burger, which he served to Plato.

Like every monster joining Basil's party, Ronald had developed a new Perk: Bistro Butcher. It allowed the fanged burger to craft meals without a need for a recipe, though he couldn't use fruits or vegetables. Basil guessed it made sense for a living veggie burger to swear off cooking his fellow plants.

"Bon appétit!" Basil said.

"Less words, more food!" Plato replied before hungrily biting into his own burger. The others looked at him with jealousy and awaited their turn in tense silence.

"How does it taste?" Basil asked as he kept tending to the grill.

Plato briefly raised his eyes from the food to grin at his best friend. "Like victory."

Good answer.

"So good, Bosh!" Buggy thanked the cooks as his turn came. His mandibles swiftly closed on his own burger. "Thanks Ronald!"

"Do we keep humans for dessert?" Rosemarine asked cheerfully. "I'm sure they taste sweet."

"Rosemarine, royalists aren't good for your diet," Basil chided her. "I wouldn't feed those four to cannibals."

"They were a complete disappointment," Shellgirl complained. "I barely found a golden tooth and a silver watch when I looted their corpses. A pauper's bounty."

"Where did you dispose of the corpses?" Vasi asked. "I could make burning skulls from their remains."

"I thought you got rid of them?" Shellgirl frowned. "Uh. Where did the corpses vanish then?"

Ronald belched in response.

I'm torn between worry and amusement, Basil thought. Best not make it a habit though, he might develop a taste for it... hmmm?

A stream of red particles flowed in front of Basil's eyes.

"The repairs aren't over yet?" Basil's gaze followed the particles, half-expecting them to flow into the walls. Instead, they swirled around Ronald. "Are you reshaping the rooms again?"

"No," Ronald replied. "Hired help!"

Basil wondered what he meant when the particles suddenly condensed into solid forms. The shape of horns and fangs appeared... alongside wolflike-ears.

"Oh, newborns!" Buggy swooned with happiness.

"Sweet!" Shellgirl replied with a grin. "New interns!"

"I hope there are plants among them." Rosemarine licked her fangs. "Or else..."

Could it be? Realizing what was happening, Basil observed the phenomenon with great interest. Half his group was born this way after all. *So this is how it unfolds...*

Eight new creatures stood in the courtyard when the cloud of red particles cleared. Half of them were the same bestial humanoids that Basil's party fought earlier today, although none of them appeared hostile. The rest were a trio of demonic stone gargoyles with cruel claws and a rusty knight's armor. When Basil looked into the last creature's helmet, he found himself staring at empty darkness.

Gargoyle

Level 18 [Demon]

Guild: Homeowner Revenge Association.

Lycan Warrior

Level 14 [Beast/Humanoid]

Guild: Homeowner Revenge Association.

Haunted Armor

Level 16 [Undead]

Guild: Homeowner Revenge Association.

Gargoyles unlocked the **[Dark Claw]** active Perk. Lycan Warriors unlocked the **[Beastman Melee I]** passive Perk. Haunted Armor unlocked the **[Grudge]** passive Perk.

The dungeon had spawned new mooks.

"My liege and overliege!" The empty armor bowed at Ronald and Basil, its voice sounding like a creaking door. The rest of the newborn monsters followed suit and knelt. "We answer to your will!"

Basil remained silent as he analyzed the situation. The System warned him that the dungeon's newly spawned creatures would be under his guild's command, but watching it unfold raised many new questions.

Those were the same particles used by the castle to repair itself. Basil glanced at the auroras in the skies. They all followed the same color scheme, so these phenomena relied on a single source to function. Did it mean that the dungeon drew from its own mass to create new monsters? Did the neurotower *produce* these particles or did it *summon* them from somewhere else?

He needed to find Kalki as soon as possible. He was probably the only person with the answers Basil sought.

"Go fetch more steak," Basil ordered his new recruits as he focused back on his grill. "I'll think better with a belly full."

"At your service, my overliege." The rusty armor turned its empty helmet at the rest of the guild. "Must we kill one of them or fetch the food elsewhere?"

"Just try," Plato threatened.

"There's a storehouse in the castle, first door to the left," Basil replied half-mindedly. "Ronald, I leave them to you."

And like any good middle-manager, Ronald immediately barked out orders.

"You slice!" The fanged burger pointed at the armor with his tongue, and then at the gargoyles. "You tend to fire! Rest, get raw food!"

"Ugh, hazing..." One of the gargoyles groaned. "One minute in and I already want to die."

Ronald roared loud enough to make the new recruits flinch. Tomato sauce dripped from his fangs like warm blood.

"You complain about food?" Ronald asked. The flames of the grill flared briefly, as if to echo his anger. "You *become* food."

Basil wondered if McDonald's ever considered that turnover method.

In any case, the mooks swiftly went to work and never complained again. The haunted armor proved itself an excellent kitchen assistant too, though Basil insisted that it clean its rusted sword before it could cut the steaks. *I expected more vegetables among them. Seems like the dungeon determines the kind of creature summoned, not the Boss.*

A Boss has no control over which monsters are spawned by a dungeon nor their numbers, though they are automatically under their control. The levels and Types of the summoned creatures depend on the dungeon. Château Muloup can spawn [Bug], [Beast], [Demon], [Humanoid] and [Undead] Types with a level range of 13-22 each day.

"Couldn't a cursed castle spawn teddy bears for a change?" Basil asked. "Where's the originality?"

Dismaker Labs wishes you a happy apocalypse!

Of course a Metaverse corporation would make a bland, soulless product.

Still, the monsters might have been walking clichés, but they were all relatively high-levels. The haunted armor could probably massacre a small human settlement the same way Megabug rampaged through the Ogre Den.

And there were *eight* of them.

Basil did some mathematics in his head. If the dungeon summoned new monsters at the same frequency each day, then Château Muloup would grow a sizable garrison of over two hundred soldiers within a month's time. An organization with dozens of neurotowers under its control could generate entire armies on short notice.

This realization solidified Basil's decision to either claim or destroy any dungeon he came across. Mankind would never survive the unceasing flood of monsters they unleashed daily otherwise. Especially if they unlocked new Perks at random...

The realization hit Basil like a ton of bricks. "System, you said some of my Guildmaster Perks applied to my entire Guild?" he asked. "Which ones?"

As the Homeowner Revenge Association's Guildmaster, your following Perks apply to your entire Guild: [Monster Charmer III], [Monster Cure I], [One for All I].

Basil reread the notification a few times and mulled over the implications. As he suspected, newborn monsters recruited into his Guild immediately unlocked an additional Tamer Perk. They would benefit from enhanced stat growths, more metamorphosis choices, free healing...

No wonder Megabug wanted to recruit Basil. His class could potentially strengthen thousands.

"Finally," Basil whispered as he finished cooking the food. Ronald served him his own hamburger. "Thank you."

"Want bone fries?" Ronald asked. "With blood sauce?"

"I'll pass." Basil sat between Buggy and Shellgirl to join the feast. How could bug meat taste so good? "Like victory indeed..."

It might be a long while until the group could enjoy a feast like this one. Apollyon's troops cleared the castle of supplies. What they couldn't take in their mad dash to escape their base's takeover, they poisoned and burned.

The new Homeowner Revenge Association would have to ration their remaining food or hunt game, but that could wait for tomorrow. Basil's friends deserved a moment of joy after all that happened today, however short-lived.

Short-lived. Basil's burger suddenly tasted like ash in his mouth. *Where do monster souls go?*

The thought wouldn't leave him. Basil had seen a mermaid raise the dead as zombies, so souls definitely existed in some form. Yet where did dead monsters go? Was Orcine in some orc Valhalla and Kuikui breeding with angel chickens? Basil's faith used to provide easy answers to the afterlife questions, but now... now he wondered.

They hadn't even followed Orthodox rites for their dead. Orcine scattered her parents' ashes to the winds, so the party did the same with her remains. As for Kuikui, they buried him under a tree outside the castle so that he may watch the view from the afterlife. The same way Basil had once buried the Old Man.

Who else would he outlive?

Basil glanced at Buggy. The centimagma sensed his leader's gaze and raised his eyes from his plate. "Boss? Is something on your mind?"

"How are you holding up?" Basil asked. His friend's wounds had closed thanks to Rosemarine's healing.

"I'm alright, Boss. No offense, but you hit me harder the first time we met than anybody else since." Basil winced at that. Buggy cleared his throat. "I-I, I mean it's good that you did! You taught me respect, and self-respect too!"

Yet the last battle had been a close call. If Buggy hadn't received emergency healing, he might have died fighting Lalande's party. Kuikui and Orcine's deaths already hit hard even though Basil barely knew them. He didn't want to imagine Buggy's potential demise.

"Why are you still with us?" Basil asked Buggy.

The centimagma looked at him in confusion. "Why wouldn't I, Boss?"

"When I first asked you if you wanted to leave soon after we first met, you stayed to become stronger," Basil pointed out. "You succeeded."

"I still have a long way to go to surpass you, Boss." Bugsy raised his head with pride. "I'm strong, yes, but I don't just want to get stronger. I want to become the strongest. So strong we can rebuild the house and that nobody will dare to interrupt our Major Chicken marathon nights again!"

Basil couldn't help but chuckle. "Is that truly your goal in life?"

"Yes, it is," Bugsy replied with a nod. "I guess you rubbed off me, Boss. The good way."

"I hope so," Basil said as he finished his burger. He felt the calories travel down his gullet and into his veins.

Ronald's [Wolf-Warrior Burger] buffed your strength for one hour.

Neat. A shame they would leave Ronald behind when they moved to Bordeaux. His food would have eased their woes.

"Why were you asking me these questions, Boss?" Bugsy's eyes widened in fear. "Y-you're not going to kick me out of the party, right? I didn't disappoint you?"

"No, of course not. You can stay as long as you want." Basil would respect his wishes, whatever they were. "But you've got to understand that our next battles will only grow deadlier."

"When weren't they, Boss? Mister Megabug almost killed us all in our first fight." Bugsy locked eyes with Basil, his eyes brimming with determination. "Boss, I made the same oath as you. What the bugs did to our rabbits and place wasn't right. And Kuikui..."

He snapped his mandibles in anger. "His death makes me want justice all the more, Boss."

Rosemarine, who had listened to the conversation from afar, loomed over the table.

"Once we find a cannon big enough for me, Mister, we'll kill them all," she told Basil. "I will pull our carriage and we will sow each corner of the world with their corpses. Flowers of death will bloom over their graves to cover the Earth!"

His monsters spoke with such sincerity that Basil couldn't help but feel moved. For a long time since René's death, he felt he had finally made dear friends. "Bugsy, Rosemarine?"

Bugsy tensed up. "Y-yes, Boss?"

"You have brave hearts," Basil said before patting him on the head. Bugsy's antennae wriggled in response and Rosemarine giggled at the sight. "I swear to you, today's fiasco won't happen again. We'll train for battle from now on."

"We won't disappoint you, Boss," Bugsy promised, head raised with pride. "I won't disappoint you."

"I'll need a new gun, Mister," Rosemarine said. "One big enough to shoot down the moon."

"We'll find one in Bordeaux, I promise," Basil promised. "Even if the army doesn't have any, Bordeaux has one million and more inhabitants. We should meet a crafter equipped for the task among them."

Shellgirl, who hadn't touched her own dinner—a pile of bread, since Ronald refused to cook vegetables—turned in Basil's direction so fast her slimy neck squeaked. "One million customers, you said?"

"That's nothing," Basil replied with a shrug. "Paris had ten million inhabitants before the apocalypse. The place's a goddamn ant mill."

"Mmmm..." Shellgirl joined her hands with a pensive look. "Partner, don't you think it's time we officialize our relationship? That we go public?"

Basil raised an eyebrow. He felt Buggy's heavy stare on his back. "What do you mean?"

"So far we've danced around the subject," Shellgirl said. "We've met in your old basement at night, tried not to look too close in public... don't you think it's time we announce it to everyone?"

Now Buggy's eyes reeked of... condemnation? Basil didn't know what to make of it.

"The hell are you talking about?" Basil asked Shellgirl.

"Our company!" Shellgirl grinned wickedly and waved a hand at the new mooks. "Look at our new employees! No more garage start-up, Partner! We've scaled up and the world should know!"

"Ah, I'm so relieved!" Buggy let out a loud sigh. "I'm sorry I doubted you, Boss. I thought you were cheating on Vasi behind her back."

"I'm not..." Basil frowned at his friend. "Wait, what does that mean?"

"Ah, uh..." Buggy looked strangely embarrassed. "You know... you and Vasi..."

"Someone called me?" Vasi walked around the table and sat on the edge next to Shellgirl. She held a half-asleep Plato in her arms, his belly fuller than a Swiss bank account. "What are you gossiping about?"

"Nothing!" Buggy lowered his head to avoid the witch's gaze. "I... I thought you and the Boss... you know..."

"You thought that they shared a toothbrush?" Plato asked mirthfully.

"Yes!" Buggy replied immediately. His antennae wavered, his voice trembled, and the lava in his veins let out a faint mist. He was a terrible liar. "Yes, I thought you shared a toothbrush! Which is good and healthy!"

"I doubt that," Vasi replied with a coy smile. She was no blinder to the obvious lie than Basil was. "Though Basil is welcome to clean my teeth, if he dares."

"Don't confuse him," Basil groaned as Buggy gasped and swooned. Too late. "Look at what you've done!"

"Stealing someone's spotlight?" Vasi winked at Shellgirl and petted Plato's behind the ears. The cat purred in response. "I'm sorry dear, please go on."

"Thank you." Shellgirl clapped her hands, happy to regain the group's attention. "Imagine, Partner. Millions of customers are lost, terrified, and confused! They demand to be spoiled! Reassured! We could barely satisfy a few dozen, but with an ever-growing number of unpaid employees, we can flood the market with cheap scavenged goods!"

"You want to hire newborn monsters as merchants?" Vasi asked. "I see. So you would follow Walter Tye's example?"

"I'll go beyond! Corporations steal, but entrepreneurs innovate!"

"What goods would they peddle?" Basil asked with skepticism. They were already stretched for supplies.

"What we'll find," Shellgirl replied with a wave of her hand. Of course she focused on the big idea over the pesky limits that reality involved. "Look at Dax. The city was full of gizmos we didn't have space to store."

"Wouldn't merchants have the same problem?" Vasi asked. "Basil and you can transport items thanks to your inventory. I don't think newborn monsters possess the same ability."

"Vasi, Vasi, open your mind!" Shellgirl joined her hands with a devious face. "If each guild member can draw upon the Guild Inventory, then they can safely transport items with no risk of theft nor troublesome logistics! What can be stored can be unstored, right?"

Basil opened his mouth to say that the Guild Inventory didn't work that way, realized he didn't actually know, and swiftly asked the System for clarification. "How does the Guild Inventory work?"

*Your **[Guild Inventory]** can store 50 item slots per neurotower under your Guild's control. You can set permission for each item or category, allowing you to regulate who can access your supplies.*

"I'm limited to fifty items per dungeon," Basil explained.

"We could always build storerooms inside the castle, Boss," Buggy suggested. He seemed to have calmed down from... whatever he believed was happening between his chief and Vasi. "Or an underground storage vault."

"We could," Basil conceded. As Château Muloup's new Boss, Ronald could alter its layout once per day, organize space, split stones to create open gardens, duplicate towers, and even dig tunnels underground. The dungeon couldn't create new matter from nothing, but it could instantly reshape what already existed. This courtyard used to be the hall where they fought Lalande's party mere hours ago.

The System set *one* key limit to the interior decoration: a path to the neurotower always remained. The party's efforts to wall off the dungeon's core had ended in miserable failure. New doors opened into nearby rooms or the layout changed to accommodate a route.

The message was clear: a dungeon would never be entirely safe from a takeover.

"But my idea can be done, right?" Shellgirl asked for confirmation.

"I can give special Inventory permission to guild members," Basil confirmed. "On paper, your plan might work."

"Deep dive into the next generation, Partner!" Buzzwords started flowing out of Shellgirl's mouth in a confusing storm of business advice. "With our core competency, we can ballpark the hell out of this new market, achieve synergies, leap over the pain points, and achieve a quick win! Complete holistic takeover!"

Her audience grew more and more confused with each new buzzword, except for Basil, who simply scowled. Shellgirl hastily stopped herself upon seeing his expression. She looked at him anxiously, the way a start-upper would after pitching their idea to an unfeeling venture capitalist.

Once, Basil would have decried the idea as risky... yet his experience with Orcine and the short-lived Barthes market showed that trade had become all the more relevant after the apocalypse. In spite of Basil's dear hopes, complete self-sufficiency was difficult to achieve.

The more he thought about Shellgirl's idea, the more promising it sounded to Basil. Faraway crafters could provide goods that his team needed and they needed to rebuild food stores for the winter. Traders might encounter potential allies or friendly communities, and the Guild Inventory would allow the group to access stored supplies across vast distances.

The risk of discovery remained, but Château Muloup broadcasted an aurora visible across the entire region on its own. And besides, Basil was *done* hiding.

"Alright," he said.

"Now, I understand your reservations, but I can show you the business plan and—" Shellgirl blinked. "Did you say yes?"

"I did," Basil replied with a shrug. "I'll give you access privileges to the Guild inventory so you can set this up."

"Great!" Shellgirl had clearly expected him to argue over it, but she wouldn't look at the gift horse in the mouth. "I knew you would see it my way!"

"You can even stay here if you want to help Ronald manage the castle," Basil suggested.

"Woah, woah!" Shellgirl crossed her arms. "Why would I do that?"

"You could manage your *'unpaid employees'* more easily," Basil replied. The expression sounded bitter in his mouth. Too many unpaid internships. "I mean, you joined my party to expand your own business. Nothing forces you to go with us to Bordeaux. If anything, it'll be detrimental to your idea."

"What kind of mimic do you take me for?" Shellgirl sounded genuinely offended. "You think I would suck you dry and then leave with the money? That I would abandon you midway? I'll teach the newbies the basics and trust them to innovate. I don't micromanage."

Basil chuckled. "You're sure?"

"Weren't you listening? We're Partners, thick and thin." Shellgirl grinned. "I'll stick to you whether you like it or not. Vasi can attest to that."

"I do," Vasi said with a chuckle. "You'll grow fond of it."

His last doubts cleared, Basil smiled at his teammate. "Thank you, Shellgirl."

"Thank me by assigning your goddamn levels," Shellgirl said, her fists pumping. "I'm soooo close to a premium promotion. I can feel my bank account shuddering in anticipation!"

"When I evolve again, I will gain wings." Rosemarine glared at the rising moon on the horizon. "And then we will see... we will see!"

"Come to think of it, now is as good a time as any to discuss your class progression, Basil," Vasi said with a coy smile. "Unless you want to ask me if I want to leave your new association or commit?"

How insightful. "I thought I would wait to survive Halloween first."

"We will survive, and I'll stay." Vasi scratched Plato behind the ears. "I can't abandon our dear king of cats or my lovely Shellgirl."

"Aww, you're so sweet," Shellgirl replied. "You make me swoon inside!"

"I appreciate this group. You're fun." Vasi winked at Basil. "We aren't done yet, handsome."

"I hope not," Basil replied. "I appreciate you too."

Bugsy glanced at Shellgirl, Vasi, and Basil in quick succession. His breath shortened and he struggled not to squeal. Basil shuddered at the idea of whatever dark thought crossed the centimagma's mind.

"I asked you earlier if you knew what you wanted to become." Vasi gave Basil a sharp look. "I think you do now."

Yes, he did.

A part of Basil always wondered if his party stayed with him because they had nowhere else to go. Half of them were born from dungeons barely a few months ago. For all of their intellect, the likes of Bugsy and Shellgirl remained naïve.

But tonight's discussion cleared his doubts. Basil's party stayed with him because they *cared*. A small community had formed under his eyes, odd yet tightly-knit. Maybe that was what ensured their victory against Lalande's group: mutual trust.

He would honor it.

"My Tamer Perks apply to all members of the Guild, including the killswitch." Basil clenched his fist. "I'm responsible for everyone who'll sign with us, but I'll also strengthen them."

"The more, the merrier," Shellgirl replied. "I'm sure we can milk it out for money."

"I understand I have minor temper issues, and I'm working on them," Basil said, ignoring the remark. Plato opened his eyes and squinted at his owner. "I'm *working* on them."

"You can't tame your inner bear, Basil," Plato said. "I tried, I failed. It'll always bubble up beneath the surface and burst like a volcano."

He was probably right, but Basil would make an effort all the same.

"Anyway, a part of me knows Berserker is the best class for me. It's the one that fits me the most." Basil glanced at his allies. "But it's not the best class for you."

"That's one way to put it," Vasi replied with a soft, affirmative sound.

"What I want, besides unleashing the wrath of God on the Apocalypse Force, the Unity, Dismaker Labs, and all the assholes that crawled their way into this world, is to make sure you all live through it." Kuikui and Orcine's deaths had opened his eyes on that front. "You guys..."

Basil crossed his arms and struggled to find the right words. How could something so simple sound so difficult to say?

"You're my friends," he finally said. "I care for you and I want you to live long and happy lives."

"Aww..." Buggy had tears in his eyes. "Boss, I've waited so long to hear those words..."

"That's noble of you," Vasi said, more grimly. "But you can't guarantee it."

"I can do my best," Basil replied. And that would have to do. "Instead of hoarding strength for myself, I can share it with you all. I'll make sure our Guild's monsters behave, and that they'll help people rather than hunt them for levels. That's who I want to become."

Basil inhaled sharply before speaking.

"The Apocalypse Tamer."

He would domesticate the shit out of Armageddon.

His party welcomed his declaration with silence... which Plato quickly broke.

"Apocalypse Tamer?" Plato choked on his own laughter. Vasi herself struggled to hold him, her lips curling into a smile. "Seriously, Basil? You came up with it on your own?"

"Judas!" Basil accused his cat. "I show my heart to you, and that's how you answer?"

"It's alright, Boss." Buggy at least showed some support. "It's amazing."

"I like it!" Shellgirl replied. "Sounds trendy... and appropriate."

Rosemarine nodded in appreciation. "We will tame the apocalypse and let it run wild, worse than before!"

"Bootlickers." Plato snorted. "I'm the only one willing to speak the truth to power."

"Then speak a truth I can agree with," Basil replied.

"Apocalypse Tamer..." Vasi's coy grin didn't falter. "If you want to walk that path, you should complete the Tamer part first. As Walter said, Perks exponentially increase in power as you progress in a class. Once you've done that, I suspect new options will present themselves."

She was right of course. After trying out multiple paths to power, Basil went back to the basics.

It was time for him to specialize.

Tamer Level 12, 13, 14 & 15 Stat Gains: +3 STR, +4 AGI, +1 VIT, +4 MAG, +3 INT, +4 CHA, +2 LCK. You have earned 80 HP and 65 SP.

Monster Insight (Passive): You can passively glean information from monsters by observing them closely, including their elemental affinities and useful trivia. Your chances of analyzing a monster depend on your Intelligence, their level, and the influence of secondary Perks.

Monster Lair II (Passive): *Your monsters can now create Lairs of their own; however, they must have undergone a metamorphosis at least once. Your monsters will keep this ability and their lair even if they leave your party.*

[Monster Lair II] *will apply to your entire Guild.*

The rush couldn't compare to Basil's terrible glee as he read the last lines. It unsettled Vasi greatly. "Basil? Basil?"

"Oh, a new Perk!" Buggy rejoiced. "I can make my own Lair now!"

"I can make my own litter now." Plato shrugged. "Big deal."

Clearly he didn't see that Perks's potential.

"Samhain is a dangerous night and we should expect a fight," Basil said. "Those were your words, Vasi."

"I said the dead would rise, that fairies would come out to play, and that with dark magic at its apex we should expect a fight." Vasi's frown deepened. "What do you have in mind, handsome?"

"Killing many birds with one stone." Basil grinned ear to ear, as a devious idea crossed his mind. He glanced at the pelt on his shoulders.

It had been a while since he put a Halloween costume on...

Chapter 6: Man vs Mystery

It was on Monday, October 31st, that Basil Bohem would learn the true meaning of dread.

Dusk crept on the horizon and the supermoon slowly rose in the skies. Basil enjoyed a clear view of the phenomenon from Château Muloup's battlements. The moon was the closest to Earth yet and would soon dominate the skies. Its orange glow reminded him of a giant pumpkin.

"So beautiful," Buggy whispered at Basil's side. The centimagma was supposed to oversee fortification work, but the presence of a bright glow moving close to the moon distracted him. "What's that, Boss? Is that a star?"

"I think it's the ISS reflecting sunlight at us," Basil replied. It had been a while since it last became visible from the ground, especially without a telescope.

My eyesight sharply improved since I started leveling up. Basil could see details on the moon's surface he never noticed with the naked eye before. *Must be the Skill points showing. I wonder how far a class specialized in it could see.*

"The isowhat, Boss?"

"The international space station. One of mankind's greatest achievements." Basil's astronomy phase never truly went away. If his life had gone in another direction, he would have loved to become an astronaut. "Great nations worked together to build a ship sailing through space around the globe."

Basil wondered what happened to the ISS's crew. Seven astronauts worked on the station before the System's arrival if memory served. Unless NASA and other space agencies survived the apocalypse, they must have run out of supplies by now.

"Oh, so multiple Guilds pooled their resources to create it?" Buggy asked. As a young centimagma, he had little understanding of Earth's culture. "And what do you mean by space? Can it teleport around?"

"How should I put it..." The discussion brought Basil back to his astronomy classes. "There is a layer of air around our planet called the atmosphere. Beyond it is a vast, infinite void called space. The moon, the planets, the stars, they all float in this sea of nothingness."

Buggy nodded with fascination. Basil couldn't help but smile at his reaction. The centimagma reminded him of himself at a young age, fascinated by the cosmos and its mysteries.

"Each star is like our sun, with planets orbiting around it," Basil explained. "Some say some of these planets host life like Earth, though scientists could never confirm it before the System's arrival."

Basil himself was pretty sure aliens existed out there. The universe was just too vast for humans alone to inhabit. Other species thrived in other dimensions, so why not among distant planets too?

"So there are dungeons creating monsters in space?" Bugsy asked. "Are the stars dungeons?"

"No, they aren't." Or at least, Basil didn't think so. Dungeons already roughed Earth up pretty badly, he didn't want to imagine them infesting the rest of the universe.

"What about the moon?" Bugsy pestered Basil like a child eager to learn the universe's secrets. "Are there dungeons on the moon, Boss?"

Basil frowned in response. In truth, he had never pondered the question. Dismaker Labs needed to build a neurotower server to summon dungeons and he didn't see the point of building one in space. Who would explore a moon dungeon? An astronaut party?

Yet Bugsy's question planted a seed of doubt in Basil's heart. He unstored a pair of binoculars from his inventory and looked up at the emerging supermoon. He would rather have used his telescope, but Apollyon burned it alongside the house.

Only the moon's top was currently visible beyond the horizon, yet Basil's enhanced sight allowed him to detect small shades of unnatural colors on its surface. Glowing spots of red, green, blue, purple, and white were faintly visible in the lunar region known as the Sea of Rains.

Colored auroras.

"I can't believe it!" Basil choked in astonishment. "How did they—How did they build a neurotower on the freaking moon?!"

Did Dismaker Labs have contacts among NASA? Did Mars have dungeons too? Was Elon Musk in on the conspiracy?

Most importantly, why? *Why?* Why the hell would anyone build a dungeon on the **moon**?

Basil's stomach turned as a dark thought crossed his mind. If Dismaker Labs could build a dungeon on Earth's satellite, could they have sent others into orbit?

"The virtual reality showcase," Basil muttered as he swiftly turned his binoculars in the ISS's direction.

"What did you say, Boss?"

"Before the apocalypse, there were talks of a virtual reality showcase of life aboard the International Space Station." Basil clenched his teeth as he gained a better view of the station.

"Doesn't that sound familiar to you, Bugsy?"

Basil was too far away and under-equipped to properly observe the ISS, yet he distinguished a halo of abnormal colors surrounding the light point. His fears were immediately confirmed. Dismaker Labs turned the ISS into a dungeon.

"That's not good," Basil whispered. "Not good at all."

As if on cue, the System sent him a notification.

*Congratulations, Players of Earth! You have survived long enough to reach the **[Halloween]** yearly event!*

*The **[Halloween]** event is a pseudo **[Incursion]** where rare, horror-themed monsters will spawn under the light of the supermoon. They will drop **[Ghost Candies]**; at dawn, parties will gain useful prizes depending on how many candies they collected. The monsters' levels and danger will increase as the night progresses.*

Dismaker Labs hopes that you will survive to collect your reward!

A short, hour-long countdown appeared at the edge of Basil's vision.

"It will begin soon," he noted upon lowering his binoculars.

"It's alright, Boss, I think we're ready." Buggy looked over the ramparts. "All is good?!"

"The traps are set!" A gargoyle replied from below the outer walls. He and his kindred finished covering a pit trap dug into the castle's earth bridge with branches and a layer of dust. "Ain't nobody getting past us without inside help!"

"Nor through us!" a lycan warrior said from atop a rampart, a crossbow in hands. Apollyon's troops ravaged the food supplies, but thankfully didn't have time to destroy the castle's armory. "We'll shoot any intruder down!"

Basil's plan was simple: trap the bridge with pits to immobilize incoming monsters, then have long-range attackers shoot them from the walls to harvest experience. Close-combat specialists like Basil would then intercept the few enemies that managed to make their way to the dungeon.

It honestly surprised Basil that the previous occupants didn't think of it. He assumed the baron's party members were too self-assured that nobody would dare attack them in their own base.

Thanks to Lair II, tonight should be extremely profitable. Ronald had turned Château Muloup into his own Lair and spent most of his Lair Points purchasing EXP and Loot boosting features. Lairs' positive effects benefited all party members within its vicinity, and as it turned out, that included fellow Guild members as well. Everyone would benefit from additional experience.

Basil reorganized his troops into three parties to fully make use of the situation. The Bohens included Plato, Buggy, Shellgirl, Vasi, Rosemarine, and Basil himself. House Garden, led by Ronald, included the haunted armor, one gargoyle, and three Fire Seeds. The remaining

monsters formed the last party, Muloup Watch. Each of them would rack up a kill count tonight and spread experience to the rest of their team.

On paper, the night should go well. Yet Basil felt uneasy whenever he looked at the sky.

"Bugsy, can you survey the moon and the ISS?" Basil asked as he moved down the stairs in the walls. "Inform me if you notice anything unusual."

"Sure, Boss," Bugsy replied. He was expected to snipe at incoming threats with his firebreath. "You expect something to happen?"

"I'm not sure," Basil replied, his jaw tightening. "Call it intuition, but I have the feeling nothing good will come out of this. There's something brewing up upstairs."

Basil had grown wise enough to learn that nothing ever went as planned in the new world.

He climbed down the outer walls to find Shellgirl, Vasi, and Ronald discussing in the courtyard. Vasi had traced a circle full of arcane symbols on the ground and set five candles in a pentagram formation. From afar, the three looked like a Satanist club reunion.

"—I find it risky," Vasi said. Basil had caught the conversation midway through. "The night will be difficult enough as it is."

"So?" Shellgirl replied with a shrug. "All the new monsters will flock to our walls already. They just have to follow the aurora. At least we can ensure we'll profit from the newcomers."

"More food better," Ronald added. "If King Basil allows it."

"Allow what?" Basil asked, before pinching his nose. A terrible stench of rot filled his nostrils. "Ugh, what's with the smell?"

"It's the candles," Vasi apologized. "I used orc fat for one of them."

On second thought, Basil decided not to ask for more details.

"Partner, perfect timing." Like any good salesman, Shellgirl immediately lobbied for his authority. "Ronald has enough Lair Points left for one last feature, and I suggest we take the Attractive one!"

"Hell no." Basil squinted with skepticism. "That one makes it more likely for rare monsters to attack us. It will put the dungeon in greater danger."

Shellgirl silently pointed at the very visible aurora floating above the castle. It advertised its location across the entire region.

"Okay, yes, anyone wishing to attack our place can find it," Basil admitted. "But that's not a reason to make it more likely. If this Halloween event is anything like the last Incursion, we'll face many enemies already."

"But that feature won't summon more monsters," Shellgirl pointed out. "It'll just make it more likely for the rare ones among them to approach the Lair!"

"Rare monsters do offer better rewards," Vasi agreed. "The Attractive feature would make Samhain more profitable for us, that's a fact."

"So why are you against it?" Basil asked.

"Well, my ritual involves sacrificing five babies and harvesting their souls for power. I need perfect concentration to cast it."

"Babies, right," Basil deadpanned. "Did you order them from a magazine?"

"I received a discount for the lot," Vasi joked back. "More seriously, my ritual involves turning the dungeon into a fulcrum to harvest Samhain's magical energies and use them to undergo a special form of metamorphosis. It's an exceedingly complex task and I must fully focus on it."

"I see." Basil could read between the lines. "So you can't help defend the dungeon while casting it."

Vasi nodded with an apologetic face. "I would prefer it if you prevented any interruptions."

"Come on, Vasi, most of us are level twenty-nine and the Incursion level limit is four levels lower than that!" Shellgirl argued. "Plus we've got a good defensive position, traps, and preparations! I'm sure we can handle anything that comes our way!"

Basil sighed. "If it's about money—"

"It's not about loot, it's about the exp, Partner! I'm this—" Shellgirl raised her thumb and a finger. "*This* close to metamorphosis! One level tops! That way I can transform at the same time as my dear Vasi! At our level, we'll need enemies above level nineteen to gain any experience at all!"

Basil crossed his arms and mulled over her point. True, the experience level penalty was starting to rear its ugly head. Basil hoped to reach level 30 before leaving for Bordeaux tomorrow, and that would be impossible if the castle only attracted level 10 critters. The rewards proposed by the System might also prove invaluable on the expedition.

It said something about his team's progress for him to consider the equivalent of Megabug to be beneath his notice.

"There's another advantage you don't see," Shellgirl said. "That feature will make it easier for us to recruit new Guild members!"

"How so?" Basil asked with a frown.

"Because all Guild members gain enhanced experience and loot from this place!" Shellgirl grinned deviously. "It'll make it the best training ground in the entire region! Monsters will flock to our ranks to benefit from it!"

It... it made quite a lot of sense. The combination of the Attractive Lair features and dungeon defenses would turn Château Muloup into a precious level grinding spot. And Basil couldn't hope to bring peace to the region again without recruiting troops...

"Alright, you've convinced me." Basil decided to take the risk. "On one condition."

Shellgirl tried to suppress her enthusiasm. "Yes, Partner?"

"You'll be responsible for Vasi's protection during her ritual," Basil warned. "If she fails her ritual because you let an enemy through, I'll hold you personally responsible."

"Sweet, I would have done it for free anyway!" Shellgirl smiled at Vasi. "Don't worry, I won't let anybody approach you. I'll be the best bodyguard you ever had."

"I have mixed feelings about this plan," Vasi replied with a sigh. "But I trust you, Shellgirl. Very well."

Ronald barked in agreement and purchased the Attractive feature. With the countdown approaching half an hour, Basil decided to put on his Halloween costume.

"Pèth." Basil touched his animal fur cloak. "Activate."

A flash of bright light swallowed the world around Basil. He felt his body transform, his muscles strengthened with new power. His nails lengthened into fearsome claws and a layer of fur covered his skin. His clothes adapted to his new shape.

Basil expected to suffer from body dysmorphia when he regained his sense of sight. He did not. He had grown a head taller, his nose had turned into a muzzle and his hands had developed paws, but otherwise, his new body felt strangely comfortable. As if he was born to wear fur rather than skin. Perhaps the Pèth influenced his mind and reflexes somehow.

You have transformed into a [Werebear] (Humanoid/Beast). Your physical stats are buffed and your HP temporarily doubled.

And of course, he transformed into a bear. Basil hoped it wasn't the panda kind, that would be humiliating.

A mere glance told Basil that none of his party members were surprised. Shellgirl told Ronald that he owed her a bone charm, whatever that meant, and Vasi blushed a little. Basil wondered why until he looked into the courtyard's pool and stared at his reflection.

Basil looked like a bear alright; a proud brown Bulgarian bear, with soft fur, an adorable muzzle, and a terribly big belly. He looked a bit weird with the feathered armor on, but his large fangs would make up for it.

"I look like a zoo mascot," Basil said with a deep and powerful voice. The transformation affected his vocal cords. "Why a bear though?"

[Werebeast]: The Pèth allows mono-Humanoid Type wearers to transform the wearer into a werebeast. The type of werebeast and associated bonuses depend on the wearer's personality and/or totem spirit.

"I get that, but why a brown bear?" Basil asked in confusion. "Why not a polar bear? Or a grizzly?"

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Some of nature's mysteries were best left unsolved.

Plato, who was patrolling the castle, happened to walk into the courtyard at the same time. He locked eyes with Basil and immediately guessed what was happening.

"Saddening," Plato said in disappointment. "I hoped for a werepanther."

"Check this out." Basil unstored his halberd, ready to take an intimidating bearbarian pose... only for the weapon to slip through his grasp. "What the..."

Basil tried to grab his halberd's shaft and struggled. His hands had changed into paws with a few digits missing. His thumb was almost as long as his other fingers and nearly merged with them. It made a task as simple as grabbing a weapon exceedingly frustrating.

Plato watched Basil fruitlessly failing to lift his halberd for a full minute before exploding in laughter.

"Don't make me use Warp Spasm!" Basil snarled as he dropped his halberd for the sixth time in a row. "Damn it!"

"Not so funny when it happens to you, right?" Plato taunted him. "You miss the thumbs, don't you?"

"Try it with your mouth," Shellgirl suggested.

At his wit's end, Basil grabbed the halberd with his fearsome fangs and lifted it. His saliva dirtied his weapon's shaft.

"Hosh do I losh?" Basil blurted through his teeth while struggling to keep his dignity.

"Ridiculous," Plato said bluntly.

"Tasty," Ronald replied.

Even Shellgirl appeared skeptical. "It looked better in my imagination."

Basil dropped his halberd in frustration. "This bear form is less practical than it sounds."

"Basil?"

Basil turned his head to stare at Vasi. The witch's green complexion had taken a pink complexion.

"Basil, could you..." Vasi let out a breath of embarrassment. "Could you dance for me?"

Basil stared back at her without a word.

"With your little paws?" Vasi gulped, but even in her shame she wouldn't shut up. "Pretty please?"

"No," Basil said grumpily.

"Oh." Somehow, Vasi's cheeks reddened further. "Then, can I... can I ride you? On your back?"

Basil immediately undid the transformation. In a flash of light, he shed his brown fur for pink skin. He and Vasi stared at each other in silence, until the witch crossed her arms and looked away in disappointment.

"Boss! Boss!" Buggy shouted from the ramparts and glanced at the courtyard. "Boss!"

"What is it, Buggy?"

"Uh, um..." Buggy cleared his throat. "I noticed a star falling towards us, Boss."

A falling star? After exchanging a short glance with his allies, Basil climbed back up on the walls and pulled out his binoculars.

"To your left, Boss," Buggy said, guiding him. "Can you see it now?"

"I do." A shining fireball crossed the skies under the rising moon. A meteorite descended from the heavens towards the region.

"It came from the Isezes," Buggy said, mispronouncing *ISS*.

"The International Space Station?" Basil squinted behind his binoculars. The closer the object approached, the stronger its glow. Basil couldn't even distinguish its features. "Are you sure?"

"I saw that star emerge from the station's light," Buggy replied. "Maybe a part of the dungeon fell off?"

That was what Basil worried about. Could Attractive summon monsters from space?

The meteorite glowed so bright that it briefly illuminated the dark skies. A booming sound echoed as it crashed in the northern marshes a few minutes away from Château Muloup. Smoke rose from the distant crash site, black as coal.

"Phew, I thought it would fall on us," Buggy said with a relieved voice. "I could sense the blast from here."

A System notification appeared the moment Basil lowered his binoculars.

New Main Quest: The Eye of Brahma

Recommended Level: 20.

Find the crash site's treasure before Halloween monsters destroy it, and uncover the shocking nature of the new world. Warning: sanity checks incoming!

Reward: 30,000 Bonus EXP + hint for the Lotus of Remembrance Quest.

A main quest. Brahma was a member of the Trimurti, and the Lotus of Remembrance involved Kalki. Either of these pieces of information would have caught Basil's interest, so both at once immediately raised alarm bells. He reread the notification with interest and swiftly reached a decision.

"Plato, with me," he ordered. "We'll go check on the crash site with Rosemarine. The rest of you, protect the castle."

No time to waste.

The Halloween countdown hit zero before they reached the crash site.

Basil was riding atop Rosemarine's back with Plato across the marsh when the first monsters spawned in their way. A festering zombie rose from muddy ground alongside a skeleton without warning, both of them hungry for flesh.

Marsh Zombie

Level 2 [Undead]

Skeleton Warrior

Level 3 [Undead]

"Brains..." the zombie rasped. "Brains—"

Rosemarine stomped it and its comrade underfoot without slowing down. Their remains swiftly transformed into colorful pumpkin candies that the party didn't bother picking up.

"Can I stomp them all, Mister?" Rosemarine pleaded, tossing trees aside as she followed the smoke to the crash site. More zombies rose from the ground all around them, weak yet numerous.

"You won't gain any levels from it," Plato pointed out.

"But they make a nice sound when I squish them," Rosemarine argued. "It makes me feel warm inside."

"Only those in our path, Rosemarine," Basil replied. He had unstored his halberd and cut down any zombie foolish enough to try climbing on Rosemarine's back. His weapon felt slippery with all the bear saliva left on the shaft. "Focus on the objective. We'll indulge and recover the candies after securing the crash site."

The monsters were low-level so far, but Basil wondered how long it would take for stronger creatures to spawn. The quest warned him that a few of them would try to destroy whatever treasure awaited him, and considering it was recommended for level 20 Players, he expected threats to escalate.

And the moon... The supermoon loomed in the night sky, so bright that it obscured the stars. Basil had taken a better look at it with his binoculars on the way and noticed multiple auroras centered around its Copernicus crater. He was now almost entirely sure a dungeon was located in its center.

Basil struggled to imagine any monster surviving a trip from the moon to France, but he had seen weirder shit. If a dungeon's influence terraformed the land around it until it became unrecognizable, he shuddered to imagine what impact it would have on Earth's satellite. This could mean trouble.

"Careful," Plato said after taking a long, deep breath. "I smell cooked flesh ahead."

"I wonder how aliens taste," Rosemarine replied hungrily.

"I'm not sure the smell comes from aliens," Basil replied grimly as they finally reached the crash site.

Rosemarine stepped over the edge of a small crater of broken trees and overturned dirt. The tattered remains of a parachute burned on the ground, filling the sky with smoke. A bullet-shaped capsule of blackened steel leaned at the crash site's center. Its portholes cracked and spewed fire.

Basil recognized the device as a Soyuz, or what remained of it at least. The parachute must have malfunctioned during reentry and forced a harsh landing. It was a miracle it hadn't disintegrated on impact.

Basil only had to look around the crater to identify the responsible parties: spherical, eye-shaped orbs lying broken around the shuttle. His teammates tensed up upon recognizing them.

"Not them again," Plato whispered in annoyance.

"I'm afraid so," Basil replied as he glared at the destroyed Unity watchers. "Looks like killer robots entered the space race."

Chapter 7: Man vs Hand

The Soyuz crew didn't survive the impact.

Basil only had to take a look through the broken window to confirm it. Two dead astronauts lay inside the capsule: one facedown against a complex panel of switches and buttons, the other a charred skeleton with a shattered helmet. The corpse's ghoulish visage of bones and burning flesh was frozen into a ghastly grin. The third 'seat'—if Basil could call a bed of metal and airbags that—between the two remained unoccupied.

They may have died during the landing, perhaps earlier. A quick glance at the second corpse's chest confirmed Basil's hypothesis. The astronaut's spacesuit showed steaming holes all over its surface. Bullets? No, acid.

Since the Soyuz itself didn't show similar holes, then it meant the astronaut suffered these wounds before boarding it. If these astronauts indeed came from the ISS, then the crew must have valiantly fought their way to the shuttle. The fact two passengers used an evacuation vehicle meant for three people pointed in that direction.

Did they film a remake of Alien upstairs? Basil looked up at the broken watchers around the crater. With a dash of the Terminator?

"What are we looking for exactly?" Plato asked. He didn't care for the dead, and neither did Rosemarine.

"The quest mentioned a treasure, but didn't specify what kind," Basil replied.

"I don't see any chest full of gold lying around," Plato mused. He touched the capsule with his paw and immediately pulled it back with a screech. "Ah, it's hot!"

"Do I crack this egg open, Mister?" Rosemarine asked as she examined the Soyuz.

"No need." Basil put a hand on the Soyuz's shielding. "I'll store it in my inventory and teleport us back to the dungeon. We can examine it in a safer place then."

Item selected: [Soyuz].

Storing attempt failed.

Basil frowned at the screen. "You could store my Renault and a road roller, why not a spacecraft?"

You cannot store creatures in your inventory.

"One of them is alive?!" Basil glanced at the corpses through the window in utter incomprehension. Neither of the astronauts breathed, let alone moved. "Or unalive?"

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Basil raised his halberd. He had seen enough alien movies to know how the situation might take a dark turn. "One, two..."

He brought his halberd down on the Soyuz's shielding and cut out a large hole in it. His sharpened blade sliced through steel the same way it once did with Gearsmen. A cloud of smoke and carbon dioxide erupted from inside the shuttle, forcing Basil back.

After fruitlessly waiting for the corpses to wake up like zombies for a good minute, Basil dared to take a peek inside the Soyuz. The two dead astronauts were curled up on beds of punctured airbags and cut wires. Their hatch's wheel had fallen off on a button panel after the impact. Basil couldn't make any sense out of all the electronic devices packed inside the small shuttle.

His hole into the Soyuz allowed him to better check on the first astronaut, a woman. Her body was still warm, but Basil didn't detect a pulse. Her neck was twisted like an owl's and blood poured from her mouth. The damaged equipment made the crash fatal for her.

"I saw her on the news," Basil said upon recognizing her face. "She was an ESA astronaut from... Greece? Italy? Can't remember."

"Her neck does look like spaghetti," Plato joked darkly.

"That's not funny." These two died fighting off the Unity and thus deserved Basil's respect. Moreover, the scene reminded him of the day his party rescued Neria from a Gearsman. She could have easily perished like these two if they had been slower to reach her.

Rosemarine's head loomed over the shuttle. "Do I bury them underground, Mister?"

"You don't want to eat them first?" Plato asked, ignoring Basil's glare. "Not that I advocate it, of course. I'm just surprised."

"Mister Who-Feeds-Me never allows me to eat humans," Rosemarine replied. "I don't want Mister to scold me."

Aww, Rosemarine was maturing! She had learned boundaries and foresight!

"Thank you for your concern, Rosemarine, it'll earn you a treat," Basil replied, much to her joy. Positive reinforcement always won the day. "We'll bury them after taking everything we can carry."

"They smell wrong, Basil," Plato warned with a frown. "I sense... ah, what do you call that stinking liquid you used to spray all over the house's floor once a month?"

"Javel?" Somehow Basil doubted the ISS crew used common cleaning products.

"Yes, they smell the same."

Basil inhaled the Soyuz's smoke-infested air. He indeed detected a strong scent of chemicals stronger than the smell of burning flesh. Did the Unity use poison on them? Or did they practice chemical warfare among the stars?

"Rosemarine, can you help me take them out of the shuttle?" Basil asked before removing the astronauts' belts and seat safeties. "If the corpses move and strike back, you can eat them. Better safe than sorry."

"Yes, Mister." Rosemarine obeyed the order, her slippery tongue closing around each astronaut's waist and pulling them out of the Soyuz. She dropped the corpses on the ground with surprising delicateness.

"Plato, check the shuttle from within," Basil asked his cat. "Take out anything that isn't nailed down."

"Are you kidding?" Plato hissed back. "It's dirty! Why me?"

"Because you're small and cuddly," Basil mocked him. "Besides, you should have experience with stealing."

"Is this about that time I hid your Switch away?" Plato glared back at his best friend. "I only did it because you used the pointer first. You don't bring a pointer to a snuggle fight, Basil."

"That plays a part, but honestly you're the only one of us small enough to check the shuttle and bolt out of it if anything happens."

Plato glanced at the shuttle with suspicion. "If that thing explodes and costs me another life, I'll come back to haunt you. This is the right night for it."

Basil patted his cat on the back and watched him enter the Soyuz. Plato grumbled all the way through but did as he was asked.

"Mister, over there!" Rosemarine uttered a warning.

Basil turned his head in her direction and barely had time to dodge a projectile. A red sphere missed his skull by a few inches.

"I missed!" A monster walked into view at the crater's edge. For a moment, Basil thought he was watching a remake of Stephen King's *It*. The creature was a monstrous clown with sharp long fangs and a garish costume. His hands juggled bloody bouncing balls. "How could I miss?!"

Another horror, a crumbling mummy wielding a rusted axe, shambled after the clown.

"Flesh..." It said with a rasping noise. A black spider the size of a horse followed in the undead's wake. "Flesh..."

"Get the human!" the clown rasped, blood dripping from his fangs. Basil might have found him scary twenty years ago, but a lifetime of watching low-budget horror movies had raised his fright threshold tenfold. "Kill him!"

Killer Clown

Level 10 [Demon]

Giant Spider

Level 13 [Bug]

Axe Mummy

Level 12 [Undead]

Damn it, Halloween was already spawning monsters with levels in the two digits. "Rosemarine—"

The noise of a massive tail hitting the ground interrupted Basil's sentence. Rosemarine squashed the three monsters like bugs, their broken remains swiftly transforming into Halloween candy.

"Good job," Basil complimented Rosemarine.

"I hope they will wake up healed of their wounds," she whispered kindly. "So they can suffer all over again."

"Just wait, Rosemarine," Basil said as he examined the astronaut corpses. "At this rate, it's only a matter of time before something capable of fighting back spawns from nowhere."

The charred corpse held nothing but his spacesuit and a pistol, which was surprising enough by itself. Basil didn't remember astronauts being allowed to carry weapons on the ISS. As for the woman, she was clutching a black camera with a telescope accessory. The device appeared relatively undamaged by the crash, mostly because the astronaut shielded it with her body.

"Is this the quest's treasure?" Basil wondered. A System notification popped up when he grabbed the camera, but the content wasn't the reward he expected.

*You have a Logs message from: **Colonel Ronald McVeggie** (House Garden Party Leader).*

*COLONEL RONALD MCVEGGIE: King Basil, Queen Rosemarine, meat besiege castle.
Ronald cook them all?*

How will you answer?

The Guild's messaging system worked perfectly. Basil almost regretted destroying the Ogre Den dungeon instead of preserving it. A long-distance system would have made his life much easier in the past few months.

"Tell him to defend the dungeon and that we will return shortly," Basil said. His words appeared on a screen and a notification followed shortly afterward.

Message sent, message read.

With Plato inside the Soyuz and Rosemarine surveying the crater, Basil examined the camera... after stabbing both corpses with the spike of his halberd just to be sure. Both bled red blood without moving.

It confused Basil. Both astronauts appeared dead, so why would the System prevent him from storing the Soyuz? Was the woman still alive back when he opened his inventory?

"Do you see any monster hidden in the shuttle?" Basil questioned Plato. "A watcher, a fly?"

"Nothing," Plato replied from inside the Soyuz. "Ugh, the stench is unbearable. Making me toil like this is cat slavery!"

"If you have enough strength to complain, you have strength to work." After one last glance at the corpses, Basil pressed the camera's switch and immediately accessed the video files. "Mmm... strange."

Basil didn't know the protocols aboard the ISS, but he found it odd they didn't put safeties or pin codes on such a confidential device. Unless the astronauts wanted everyone to see the content?

Basil checked the most recent files. According to its title, the last entry was recorded this morning. A feed showing the astronaut woman sitting inside the Soyuz appeared when he activated the video.

"This is captain Giulia Valentino," the woman said. Basil wondered if she spoke in Italian and the System translated it. "I am an engineer, air force pilot for the Aeronautica Militare of the Italian Republic, and for the last three months, the European Space Agency's representative aboard the International Space Station under NASA Commander Lincoln, now deceased. Considering the high risk of a failed landing without assistance from the ground, I am leaving this recording in case I don't make it back to Earth alive."

Ah, that explained it. From the look of it, she had recorded the video right before takeoff.

"The Dismaker Labs reality showcase device..." Captain Valentino grit her teeth in fury. "We aren't sure how, but it transformed the ISS into a madhouse and cut us away from agencies on the ground. Moreover, hostile drones of alien origins have boarded the station in an attempt to

take it over. My crewmates were either captured or killed trying to keep them at bay. Colonel Sergei Vasilov and I are likely the only survivors."

Basil glanced at the charred corpse next to Valentino's before continuing the recording. He didn't know what was worse: that Dismaker Labs had indeed sent dungeons into orbit or that the Unity was now in control of an orbital station four hundred kilometers above everyone's heads.

"If you are watching this, I am either dead or incapacitated," said the captain. "You should find a flash drive in a black box in the compartment under my seat. This device contains all the encrypted data, recordings, and files we could salvage from the station's computer systems. Whoever you are, I beg of you, deliver the device to the nearest space agency immediately. The fate of our civilization, no, of the entire solar system might depend on it."

"What's left of it, you mean?" Basil heard a male voice mutter behind the captain in a thick Russian accent. It was probably her co-pilot sitting outside the camera's range.

"What I am about to tell you may sound crazy... even terrifying. It took me days to process... to process it all." Captain Giulia stared at the camera with a haunting, hollow gaze. "I suggest you sit and relax before hearing the rest of the recording."

Charming. "Plato—"

"I've heard," his cat replied from inside the Soyuz. "I see the box behind the wires. Gimme a minute to pull it out."

Basil nodded and watched the rest of the video. Captain Valentino let out a heavy breath, as if speaking would be physically painful.

"Everything beyond the moon's orbit is *gone*."

What the fuck is she talking about? A chill went down Basil's spine. That doesn't make any sense.

"Mars, Venus, even the sun, they're all gone," the captain explained. "Vanished. The stars, the constellations? They're illusions. Ghostlights. The solar system, the Milky Way, Andromeda... everything beyond the moon's orbit disappeared months ago."

Basil paused the recording and exchanged a glance with Rosemarine. The tropidrake returned his gaze, utterly confused. Even Plato's head peeked out of the Soyuz to better listen.

Basil silently played the video once more.

"We don't understand how it happened, or how it is even possible," the captain explained with a disturbing kind of calmness. "But all objects within the Earth-Moon satellite system were physically displaced inside a hermetically sealed sphere of colossal proportion. Its surface mimics the appearance of the night sky, so individuals on the surface won't notice the difference

without special equipment. Moreover, our research indicates that the sphere is held in the palm of an... an inhuman *entity* roughly twice the size of Jupiter, if not larger."

Is this a joke? Basil searched for any hint of a lie in the captain's face and didn't find any. He had made a mistake. Captain Valentino wasn't *calm* but *exhausted*. She went beyond denial and straight to acceptance. *Shit, she is serious.*

"I know my words sound outlandish, but this is the truth. You will find the data we gathered to prove it in the flash drive. And if that's not enough..." She stared at the camera with such intensity that Basil thought her ghost would emerge from the video, *Ring*-style. "You can check the video file 15-10-2022 and see for yourself."

Basil checked the video folder. Recordings were classified by date, so he assumed she referred to the one from October 15th.

"If I do not make it out... tell my mother that I love her." The captain smiled at the camera. The deafening noise of a propulsion device resonated in the background and caused the feed to shake. "I'll return, Mom. One way or another."

The video cut off on these words. Basil glanced at the corpses and examined Captain Valentino's remains. He hoped that he could find ID papers, a passport, anything that would help him find her family. It was a long shot, but he couldn't ignore that woman's last request without at least trying to fulfill it.

"I don't know what catnip they're sniffing in space, but I want some for myself," Plato said in disbelief.

"You don't believe her?" Basil asked. His body search came up empty, much to his chagrin. The astronauts must have left in a hurry.

His cat squinted at him. "Do *you*?"

"I don't know." The astronaut's last words sounded outlandish, but she had said them with utter conviction. Only madmen or experts spoke with such certainty. "We've seen so much shit lately, nothing will surprise me anymore."

"Basil, Basil, there are thresholds of weirdness," Plato argued. "I can believe in giant birds and gods walking the earth, but come on, the entire universe vanishing? That's too big."

"You believed Estrid when she told us how her world had been destroyed," Basil pointed out. "That was just as big."

"I didn't believe her. I believed in *you*, who believed in *her*." Plato leaped out of the Soyuz with a black, hand-sized electronic safe in his paws. "Anyway, here's the treasure chest."

Basil examined it and clenched his jaw. Not only was the safe password protected, but the keypad didn't respond to his touch. He would need a specialist to unlock it without damaging the contents.

"So, did we complete the quest?" Plato asked.

"Not yet," Basil replied before storing the safe in his inventory. The Soyuz creaked in response, perhaps from the heat of malfunctioning electronics.

"So it's not the right treasure?"

"Or it's still in danger." The quest said that Basil's party had to recover the treasure before Halloween monsters destroyed it, and the night barely started. "You didn't find anything else?"

Plato shook his head. "Can we go back to killing monsters who can't fight back, please? All this cosmic stuff is giving me a headache."

"What about the sun, Mister?" Rosemarine asked with surprising insight. "Is it destroyed too? I hope I can still eat it."

"Oh right, isn't it farther than the moon?" Plato pointed out. "Shouldn't it have vanished too? Yet it shines all the time."

Well, there's proof, or so she said. Basil gazed at the video file folder in silence. He knew that the safest option was to return home, deal with the Halloween event, and examine the videos from a safe place. Yet the October 15th recording was barely five minutes long and Ronald hadn't sent any urgent messages. *Five minutes...*

Unable to suppress his curiosity, Basil played the video. He hoped it wasn't a cursed feed or ghost summoning tape.

The video started with a vision of a porthole. The moon's surface appeared beyond the reinforced plexiglass, pale and gray. The craft was flying perilously close to it.

"Control, this is research pilot Bob Hopkins speaking," an offscreen man said. His accent sounded Texan. "I am currently violating a good third of the procedures I spent half my life learning and flying a spacecraft of dubious origins. I hope it is for a good cause."

"Don't push it, Bob," another voice replied in the background. Either a copilot or a voice through the radio. "You drew the short stick."

"Curse my rotten luck." The offscreen cameraman chuckled. "I am filming from some kind of alien spacecraft recovered from the ISS's ship hangar, because it has a hangar now. And an alien crèche. I hoped for some Asari or *Avatar* blue babes, but a man can't—"

"Bob." His fellow cut through the chitchat. "Describe what you see."

"Right, right, better obey or they won't pick me up on the return trip." The feed's resolution sharpened to show a detailed view of the moon's surface. "Approaching Copernicus crater."

Colored auroras swirled above the moon's surface in vast whirlpools of light. Basil would have found the spectacle beautiful, almost entrancing, if it didn't spell disaster for Earth. The particles floated like currents in a sea of energy above a strange, beehive-shaped structure of alien black metal occupying a colossally large crater. The cameraman had found the moon's dungeon.

Or in this case, *dungeons*.

Each alcove in the superstructure—Basil counted at five of them—each as large as Château Muloup. All of them produced a singular aurora with a unique color, the sight reminding Basil of an industrial complex churning smoke into the atmosphere. He wondered the reason behind this dungeon cluster's peculiar organization.

Then the camera recorded Gearsmen building a neurotower.

It was difficult to distinguish them through the auroras, yet the feed's enhanced resolution let through a glimpse of the situation on the ground. Basil paused the video in shock and stared at the picture for several seconds. A group of Gearsmen had gathered at the crater's edge and were busy assembling a tall pillar of steel and gears. The device's design differed from normal neurotowers, yet matched the one that Neria Elissalde once showed to Basil in Dax.

Dismaker Labs didn't build dungeons on the moon.

The Unity did it.

Gearsmen must have landed on the moon either on the first day of the System's initialization or soon after the Incursion. Much like what happened in Dax, they immediately went on to build artificial neurotowers.

With no human troops to stop them, they succeeded.

This is bad. Basil clenched his jaw in frustration. Members of a faction could teleport between dungeons under their control. If the Unity transported troops from the moon to Earth, who could cross the void of space to retaliate? *They'll keep summoning reinforcements to their lunar base with no interruption.*

At least the Unity's moon dungeon network appeared unfinished. Basil and his party still had time to figure out a solution. If there *was* a solution. Basil struggled to find a way to reach the moon short of building a spaceship himself.

"What the fuck..." the astronaut muttered as he filmed the superdungeon. "I see machines building some kind of fortress and receiver. Control? Control, can you see it too?"

"Visual confirmed," the other voice said. Statics soon interfered with his words. "Comp... lete... moon tour and return... Bob..."

"Control?" The cameraman sounded worried. "Hey Lincoln, can you hear me? My radio is malfunctioning. Lincoln?"

"B... ob..." The words became garbled beyond recognition.

"Lincoln?"

"No need to shout, manling," a deep, inhuman voice answered through the radio. "I can hear you just fine."

Basil winced. "I have the most terrible sensation of déjà-vu."

"Me too," Plato said grimly.

The scene played almost exactly as their encounter with Steamslime.

"What the hell?" the cameraman asked. "Who is speaking? Control?"

"This is Queen-ranked General Blackcinders of the Unity and this planet is *ours*." The voice sounded similar to Steamslime's, but different; more feminine, more forceful, and far, far colder. "My forces will assume direct control of your dungeon shortly. Carry my message to your fellow apes: surrender or be destroyed."

"Control? Control?" The astronaut repeated, yet the Unity dragonlord didn't answer this time. "Control, do you hear me?"

The spaceship moved away from the moon's surface, so the camera stopped showing it. Instead, the cameraman faced a magnificent vision of distant constellations. The stars glowed like fireballs in the vast darkness of space.

"What the fuck was that?" The cameraman's voice lowered. "The stars... something's wrong."

The distance, Basil immediately noticed. The stars looked within reach. These fireballs were not only smaller objects than the real constellations, but so much closer too. *They're replicas*.

Moreover, the stars were organized in an abnormal way. A curved gulf of darkness separated multiple constellations from the rest of the 'sky.' The isolated stars were gathered into a rounded cluster with a familiar, innocuous shape.

The tip of a finger.

Basil stopped breathing in shock and neither of his pets moved an inch. In that moment, they all realized just how pitifully small they truly were.

For all of their beauty, none of the stars could compare to the sun's terrible majesty. Where the constellation had become large clusters of fireballs, the sun soon occupied the camera's entire field of vision. Its divine light caused the screen to glitch. A small sunspot black as sin occupied its center, almost imperceptible with the luminosity.

"Something is wrong..." the cameraman panicked. "Control, something is wrong!"

The central sunspot moved to directly face the camera, the same way a pupil would focus on a moving object.

"It's not the sun!" The astronaut shouted, his voice trembling with fear and existential dread. The camera's feed glitched until the entire screen turned into chaotic pixels. "It's... it's an—"

It's an eye, Basil realized to his horror.

The video feed turned into a sea of pixels and the echo of a distorted scream. Then it ended as abruptly as it started.

For a long moment, no one spoke. No one. Basil stared at the camera in shocked silence, his mind struggling to even comprehend what he had just witnessed. Plato's gaze was hollow, his body tense as a bowstring. Rosemarine was the least affected. She glanced in confusion at her teammates and then broke the silence.

"It's okay, Mister," Rosemarine reassured him with her usual cheerfulness. "One day, I will grow large enough to eat the sun... and blind it!"

Her words did nothing to ease Basil's existential dread, but at least it broke him out of his trance.

An illusion. It had to be an illusion. CGI. A NASA prank meant to top Area 51. Yeah right, that had to be a hoax. Fake news.

Basil told himself all these things and for a moment, he almost let himself be convinced. Then he remembered the quest's name and realized it might very well have been completely literal.

"The Eye of Brahma," Basil whispered. He looked up at the moon and tried to imagine the... the sun in its place. Looming. Shining.

Watching.

It took all of Basil's willpower to store the camera in his inventory and focus on the present moment. He did so by utterly repressing the last five minutes worth of memory, locking them away in a dark corner of his brain, and reminding himself that his allies in Château Muloup needed his help right now.

"I'm storing them all," Basil decided. "The Soyuz, the suits, everything."

Wait a second...

The first video was recorded when the two astronauts boarded the ship. Yet the latter one didn't sound like someone with acid holes all over his body. Neither did the rest of the capsule show acid damage.

Basil glanced at his halberd. On a closer examination, he noticed drops of green liquid on the blade's edge. He turned his attention to the Soyuz and noticed similar traces of chemicals where his weapon cut the shielding.

A lost treasure chest in the middle of the woods...

That was the most cliché adventurer trap in the world.

Rosemarine's colossal size and presence probably delayed an ambush, but if Basil's suspicions were correct, the creature that killed the astronauts was hidden in plain sight. From the way the Soyuz creaked after they took the safe, it would follow them to recover it.

"Shit!" Basil glared at the Soyuz and took a step back. "Rosemarine, stomp the ship! There's a mimic in—"

The ooze erupted from the ship's wreckage without warning.

As tentacles and fangs lunged for Basil's head, he suddenly realized why the shuttle crashed here of all places.

As it turned out, the Attractive Lair feature could summon monsters all the way from space.

Chapter 8: Man vs Halloween

Out of all the monsters Basil had expected to fight on Halloween, a spaceship mimic wasn't one of them.

Basil didn't know whether the Soyuz had been a trap from the start or if the creature had slowly taken over the shuttle like a hermit crab. It didn't matter: at this point, the Soyuz and the mimic were indistinguishable from one another. The shuttle's portholes transformed into globulous eyes and its hatch into a fanged mouth. Green slime tentacles surged from under the Soyuz to capture Basil and Plato.

The two barely managed to dodge the surprise attack by taking a step back. The mimic's tentacles lifted its metal body above the ground, revealing its hideous alien nature. To Basil's surprise, Monster Insight finally activated to analyze the creature.

Xenomimic

Level 20 [Slime/Alien]

Immune: Corrosion, all Ailments.

Resist: Metal, Fire, Earth, Frost, Darkness.

Weak: Slimeslayer, Alienslayer, Light, Water, Wood.

*A space mimic (because there's a space version of **everything**) that adapted to copy astronaut suits, spaceships, and electric cars. Its key resistances allow it to survive both the void of space and atmospheric reentry, while passive Perks hide its true nature from onlookers. Though toxic, its slime can be refined to make some sweet potions and marmalade.*

The creature roared at Basil and Plato with a maw full of sharp fangs. Both fighters raised their weapons, ready to fight for their lives and the honor of their house—

THOMP!

And then Rosemarine squashed the mimic underfoot.

To Basil, it felt like watching a big cat pouncing on a mouse... except the 'cat' in question was a giant flower dragon and the 'mouse' a slime monster probably less than a fifth of her weight. The ooze exploded into a shower of goo, metal shards and wire-innards. Green blood splattered all across the crater and stained Basil's clothes.

"I got it, Mister!" Rosemarine chirped happily. Her root-claws were drenched in mimic guts and brain matter. "I got it!"

For a moment, neither Basil nor Plato uttered a word. They simply stared at the thousand pieces and mimic organs splattered all over the ground. Rosemarine wagged her tail, humming a tune to herself.

Plato broke the silence. "Wait, that's all?"

"What do you mean?" Basil asked.

"Is it over already?" Plato squinted at the mimic's remains with suspicion. "It isn't regenerating?"

Basil carefully touched a few slime pieces with the tip of his halberd. Either the mimic was exceptionally good at faking death or even its alien biology had its limits. "I don't think it will recover."

"I can devour it, Mister," Rosemarine suggested. "Just to be sure."

"Rosemarine, I don't think eating aliens is good for your health," Basil replied with a sneer. The mimic's stench was horrendous. "You don't know where it has been."

Plato's shoulders hunched in sadness. "Uh... good job, Rosemarine. I guess?"

"Thank you," Rosemarine replied before licking the alien blood off her leaf-scales.

"Don't tell me you're disappointed?" Basil asked.

"I feel cheated," the cat admitted. "With that kind of presentation, I expected more."

"At three-on-one with a nine level difference, it could only end this way," Basil pointed out.

"You'll get yours another time," Rosemarine said.

"I know, I know, but..." Plato kept looking at the mimic's remains, as if expecting a second round of battle. "It's just sad."

Congratulations! You earned 30,000 EXP (500 for you).

Basil struggled to hide his utter disappointment. A *ninety percent* experience penalty really limited his leveling options and the mimic's remains were too damaged for harvesting. At best he could bottle up some of its slime blood. The creature didn't even drop ghost candies, as it was unrelated to the Halloween event.

"Well, at least they're avenged." Basil glanced at the dead astronauts. He stored their remains in the Guild inventory until the party could give them a proper burial. "Well guys, time to clean up shop and join the others."

Plato glanced at the night sky with a concerned look. "Basil, about that video..."

"I don't want to talk about it, Plato." Just looking up at the sun would give Basil chills from now on. "Not yet. Not tonight."

"Right," Plato replied with a low voice. Rosemarine swiftly grabbed whatever ghost candies were left from her previous kills in the palm of her root-hand. "Let's kill monsters. That, I can comprehend. The rest is too big for me."

Basil couldn't agree more. He had already struggled to imagine the System's influence on Earth, but to think the planet wasn't even in its proper place anymore shook him to his core. And that... that thing holding the planet in the palm of its hand...

A creature at least twice the size of Jupiter. Basil's mind couldn't fathom the dimensions involved. That was it. The power of an Overgod.

Basil hadn't understood what the term involved beforehand, but now he did. The only thing more terrifying than this entity, and the implications of its mere existence, was the idea of someone like Apollyon achieving the same power.

Basil never cared about the race for Overgod, but its true urgency now dawned upon him. He couldn't allow either the Unity or Apocalypse Force to reach level 100. The consequences would be *disastrous*, not only for Earth, but the entire cosmos.

And more than anything, Basil couldn't help but remember how Estrid illustrated her world's destruction: by taking a stone in the palm of her hand and crushing it utterly. If Earth and moon were indeed within the palm of an Overgod... then her metaphor might have been more literal than Basil imagined.

Now I see why Captain Valentino suggested I sit before watching that video. Basil opened his status screen and prepared to test his Guild's teleportation magic. He would need to watch it again alongside the camera's backlog, but not before a good night's sleep. *I wonder if that's how Job felt when God showed him the vastness of the universe: pitifully small.*

Plato had a point. A good monster hunt would help clear his mind. Distract him from his cosmic insignificance.

The teleportation effect was as abrupt as Basil expected it to be. The Soyuz crater vanished in a flash of violet light, and the next thing he knew he was back in Château Muloup's courtyard alongside Plato.

It was complete and utter chaos.

"Shoot them!" Shellgirl frantically shouted from the ramparts. Ice pearls and arrows flew up in the air, nailing zombie birds and skeletal bugs. Dinosaur screams echoed beyond the castle's walls. "Shoot them down!"

"I'm trying!" Buggy roared from atop the ramparts. Flames burst from his mandibles to incinerate a zombie thunderbird. The beast immediately exploded into a shower of candies. "There are too many of them!"

"Eat them!" Ronald snarled as he ate his way through zombies attacking the outer walls. None could scratch his invincible vegetable body, but Basil noticed that some of the monsters appeared to be skeletal versions of Apollyon's drones "Eat them all!"

"What the hell?" Basil asked as he almost tripped on a corpse. The courtyard's ground was covered in ghost candies and dead birds. None of them had landed around Vasi, who remained safe inside her magical circle. The witch chanted inside a pentagram formed of burning candles, eyes closed as if to shut out the outside noise. "Is it the Apocalypse Force?"

"Basil!" A rotting goblin zombie leaped off the walls and landed in the courtyard. It raised a dagger. "Do you remember me, Basil?"

Goblin Zombie

Level 5 [Undead/Beast]

Immune: N/A.

Resist: Frost, Darkness.

Weak: Deadslayer, Beastslayer, Light, Fire, Life.

Your table scraps.

"No, I don't." Basil frowned at the critter. "Should I?"

"You should, yes!" The goblin opened his mouth to show rows of rotten teeth. "When you cooked me with potatoes and pepper sauce, I looked like this!"

Basil looked down on the goblin with a shrug. "Alright."

He cut the critter in half with his halberd without fanfare and promptly moved on to the next. Plato joined in the fun by Wind Slashing any dead bird coming his way. And there were many. An entire flock of death fell upon the cat in a wild suicide dive bombing run.

"Begone!" Plato snarled, unleashing wind slashes after wind slashes at the flyers. The cat was facing his worst nightmare: birds unafraid of fighting back. "I'll hunt you and your entire feathered family!"

"What the hell is going on here?" Basil asked as he unstored his handgun, holding it in one hand and his halberd in the other. He didn't miss the fact that Vasi's magical circle had taken on the color of blood, nor the presence of ghostly presences floating around her. Now that he thought of it, her ritual appeared vaguely satanic...

"Boss, do you..." Buggy cleared his throat in between fire bursts. "Do you remember all the monsters we've eaten?"

"No," Basil replied with a scowl. "Don't tell me—"

"They, uh..." Buggy sounded a little ashamed. "They came back, Boss."

Basil climbed the outer walls and watched the horde beyond.

Hundreds of undead monsters besieged the castle. Zombie goblins drowned in Château Muloup's moat alongside skeletal dinosaurs and headless chickens. Reborn Apollyon drones and suicidal mummy birds banded into a flock of doom. An ogre ghoul struggled to escape a pit trap as Château Muloup's defenders nailed him with crossbow bolts.

Rosemarine, who had teleported outside the castle's walls, fought the mightiest of them: a gigantic, rotting brachiosaurus more than twenty-meters in length. The tropidrake tackled the green-skinned, long-necked dinosaur into the waters of the Etang Noir. Both beasts roared as each of their blows sent waves crashing on the castle's bridge. The two titans bit into each other under the light of the pumpkin moon, each of them fueled by primal fury.

Brachiozombie

Level 20 [Reptile/Undead]

Dragon vs dinosaur.

The fight Basil didn't know he wanted, but that he couldn't stop watching. Yet he had to. For almost all of these horde's members were familiar faces.

His party had eaten every last one of them.

"It's our meals, Boss," Buggy said with a sigh. "They came back from the dead for vengeance."

If there was karma in the situation, Basil missed it completely. "How did they know we moved out?"

The culprit sent him a notification.

Dismaker Labs wishes you a happy apocalypse.

Of course the System would direct all vengeful ghosts on Halloween night. Whoever programmed this System was a humongous **dick**.

"Okay, perhaps we should cut down on the meat consumption," Basil said with a frown. His party was clearly a localized extinction event. "But I think I would remember killing a brachiosaurus."

"That one is on me!" Vasi shouted from the courtyard. "I swear it was an accident!"

Basil looked at her in disbelief. "How can you accidentally kill a *prehistoric giraffe*?!"

"A traffic accident!" Vasi replied over the cackling noise of magical energies gathering around her. Creepy ghosts moaned around her. "He raised his head when I took a corner and I hit him! You can't brake quickly with a flying broom, Basil!"

She had committed a hit-and-run on a *dinosaur*? Basil couldn't help but stare at the brachiosaurus with pity. For such a noble creature to suffer a deer's death...

"How long until you're done?" Basil asked Vasi as he loaded his gun.

"I would say five... four..." Vasi smiled. "Straight to zero!"

A crimson thunderbolt fell upon Vasi's pentagram after coming out of nowhere. The candles flared with dark flames and a cloud of infernal power swallowed the witch whole. The ghosts floating around her wailed before fading away.

Vasi metamorphosed before Basil's eyes. Though her transformation wasn't as drastic as Rosemarine's or Bugsy's, she changed a great deal anyway. Her green skin took on a shade of light purple and ram horns formed out of her skull right above the ears. A sinuous, black, forked demonic tail stuck out from under her dress. Her short black hair had lengthened and grown spikier, wilder.

When the smoke dissipated, only burning traces on the ground remained of Vasi's circle and candles. The witch looked more sensual, more dangerous, and most importantly, brimming with devilish might.

Congratulations! [Changeling] Vasilisa Yaga metamorphosed into a [Night Hag] (Fairy/Demon)! She learned the [Night Terror] Passive Perk, the [Dreamrider] Active Perk, and the [Hasten], [Glamor], and [Shadowspikes] spells! Her existing Perks have also been strengthened.

"It worked!" Vasi grinned ear to ear. Her canines had lengthened, similar to a vampire. "Tier IV at last!"

"Vasi, are you alright?" Basil asked. Her new appearance slightly worried him, both as an Orthodox Christian and a fellow teammate.

"Alright?" Vasi's hands simmered with magical, violet flames. "I've never felt better, Handsome."

She snapped her fingers in Basil's direction.

"Hasten."

He felt her magic coursing through his veins and empowering him.

[Haste] buff! Dilated time will double your speed for one minute!

"Go get them," Vasi said. Time seemed to slow down as she spoke, her words stretching on for what seemed like forever.

She didn't need to tell him twice.

Basil leaped over the rampart and stomped on a mummy thunderbird which had the bad luck of flying too close to him. Both crashed on the ground amidst the undead horde, with the thunderbird serving as an unliving doormat to soften Basil's landing. The beast dissipated into a shower of ghost candies.

Its zombie kindred flocked around Basil to surround him for all sides. Yet they all seemed so agonizingly slow to him. The *world* was slow. He could see the dust from his landing fall around him in slow motion.

Basil swung his halberd and tore a path through the undead, swift as the wind. His feet moved faster than Usain Bolt's ever did. Basil flailed his halberd as he tore through the crowd like a tank through infantry. When he fired his handgun, he could perceive the bullets piercing through the air. Within seconds he had cut a line through the castle's stone bridge, deftly navigating around the traps his team had set for the intruders.

He wasn't the only one enjoying the fun. Vasi appeared atop her broomstick and floated above the walls. She cast her spell on Buggy, Shellgirl...

And finally, she cast it on Rosemarine.

Quick as a snake, the tropidrake bit the Brachiozombie's neck with her fanged maw, turned around, and tossed it over onto the shore of Château Muloup. The gigantic dinosaur's fall sent clouds of dust into the air and shook the ground all around the dungeon. Vasi quickly finished the beast by summoning shadowy spikes from the ground. They impaled the beast and tore it apart into a rain of candies.

Vasi's buff was incredibly powerful... but also just as short-lived. The rush of speed ended as abruptly as it started. To Basil's senses, it seemed as if time caught up to him. Everything accelerated back to normal speed around him.

But by then, almost all the invaders were already dead—or *deader*, in this case. Shellgirl and Buggy bombarded what remained with fast-paced projectiles, and Rosemarine simply had to walk on zombie goblins to finish them off. The difference in level, in buffs, in firepower, was simply too great.

Basil would have loved to say that he struggled for his life, that the battle was well-fought. But that would have been a lie. They came, they killed, and they returned to the castle with pockets full of candies. The end.

"I've learned a lesson tonight," Basil said as his group gathered the candies they earned inside the courtyard. The pile was tall enough to rival the outer wall. "A very important lesson."

"That we should stop eating sentient beings and become vegetarians?" Buggy asked anxiously.

"What? No, of course not!" If global warming and the apocalypse couldn't change Basil's diet, *nothing* would. "Next time we eat something, we'll use their bodies as crafting material before they can rise from the dead. That way they won't come back to haunt us."

"Oh, what a relief," Plato rejoiced. Buggy chirped in happiness behind him. "I love lessons that don't involve us changing anything."

Vasi landed her broomstick in the courtyard. "I think we sent them all running," she said before elegantly climbing down from her 'vehicle,' "I expected more danger from this event, but I suppose we were overleveled for it."

Basil suspected the rest of the world would have had a *significantly* harder time. His party was almost level 30, far above the Incursion limit. As odd as it sounded, they were among the world's top dogs for the moment.

And Basil liked it. After the last few harrowing battles and the crash site's discovery, it just felt good to bust skulls left and right. He had played through a *beat 'em up* game in real life.

Still, Vasi's new appearance unsettled him. She was as beautiful as ever, but Basil would need time to get used to the demonic features.

Vasi immediately noticed his unease and appeared a little disappointed. "You don't like my new look?"

"Are you kidding?" Shellgirl glared at Basil. "Look at her! She's wonderful! She's beautiful! Don't you feel your heart burning with lust, you cold-hearted man?!"

"She looks a little too demonic for my taste." Basil cleared his throat. "I have to ask, Vasi: are you a succubus?"

Vasi laughed. "No, Basil, I don't come from the below place. My mother was what you could call a hag. The fairy tale kind."

"I expected more wrinkles."

"No ancient crone is born old." Vasi touched her new horns with curiosity. "I admit the ritual allowed me to skip certain... evolutionary steps. I shouldn't have transformed into a mature night hag until a few centuries passed."

She locked eyes with Basil. "I can cast a glamor spell if it's really bothering you."

"No need," Basil replied with a shrug. "You're my friend, I'll get used to it."

"Thank you. I appreciate the effort." Vasi nodded slowly and turned her attention to the candy pile. "What do we do with them?"

"I'm sure an option will present itself shortly," Basil said. The night was almost over, and since the System started awarding him experience, he assumed no other monster would dare challenge them until dawn.

Quest: The Eye of Brahma, complete! *Your party earned 30,000 EXP (5000 for you) and a new video feed has been added to your Logs.*

Your party earned 240,000 experience (8000 for you) from the battle. You earned a level (total 30).

A level which Basil immediately applied to his Tamer class. He had the feeling it would be the last one in a long, *long* while. Anything under level 20 wouldn't provide experience now.

Level 16 Tamer Stat Gains: +1 STR, +1 AGI, +1 MAG, +1 CHA. *You earned 20 HP and 10 SP.*

"Oh!" Shellgirl moaned in pleasure. "I feel my assets titillating! Time for a promotion!"

[Clam Mimic] *Shellgirl can transform into:*

- **Gemstone Clam (Aquatic/Elemental).** *With a shell of precious stones, the Gemstone Clam sacrifices its humanoid brand for increased firepower and defense.*
- **Mimic Booty (Slime/Aquatic).** *Half trap, half booty, and 100% mimic, the Mimic Booty walks around the battlefield to boost employees and sabotage the competition.*

"Well, the Mimic Booty seems practical," Basil noted. "But the Gemstone Clam would be better in a fight. I suggest—"

"Mimic Booty!" Shellgirl shouted. "It'll boost my sales!"

Basil sighed and accepted her choice. Predictable. "As you wish."

And so, the last of his monsters who had yet to transform joined that exclusive club. When the light of metamorphosis faded away, Shellgirl came out of her shell. Literally. Two legs carried her, alongside a belt of octopus tentacles growing from her waist; small barrels grew at the latter's tips. The goo making up her body had taken on a shade of dark blue and her greedy eyes were now appropriately golden.

Her shell had also been streamlined. Its surface was now smooth and glowing with the rainbow's colors. Its cannons had vanished, but it seemed harder than ever.

And most importantly, Shellgirl had *legs*. Two slimy legs, but legs all the same. No longer would she hop around at a snail's pace.

Congratulations, [Clam Mimic] Shellgirl metamorphosed into a [Mimic Booty]! She learned the [Slimeshift] passive Perk, and the [Discord Bounty], [Draw Aggro] and [Motivate] Active Perks! Her existing Perks have also been strengthened!

Basil glanced at Shellgirl's breasts, which had doubled in size. Since he couldn't fathom why a mammary implant would make her a better fighter, he assumed one of the Trimurti System's programmers had been a perverted deviant.

I should have known the devs would make her lewder, Basil thought with utter resignation. A lifetime of playing video games had worn down his expectations. At least she's not a mermaid.

"Shellgirl, you are so beautiful!" Vasi covered her mouth. "You will make many fish blush!"

"Look at the size of these assets!" Shellgirl fondled herself and showcased her voluptuous curves. "You think I could charge customers for touching them?"

Basil didn't like where this was going. At all.

"I can walk!" Shellgirl grinned and took a step forward. "Vasi, look, I can walk—"

She tripped and fell on the ground with a loud 'thump' sound.

Basil and the rest of his Party looked at her in embarrassed silence, except for Plato, who shrugged in sympathy. "First time on two legs, uh?" he asked. "It happened to me too."

"Shellgirl, are you alright?" Vasi asked with concern.

"I'm okay..." Shellgirl said with a thumbs up and her face still against the ground. "I'll train for it..."

Like human babies, she had one hell of a learning curve ahead of her.

Chapter 9: Man vs Prizes

The pumpkin moon vanished beyond the horizon, signaling the event's end.

No other monster dared to challenge the Homeowner Revenge Association's might during the night. The candy mountain didn't grow any taller than it already did, which disappointed Basil a little. In retrospect, he should have been more proactive hunting weak monsters instead of focusing on the dungeon's defense. At least the Lair features should have boosted the number of candies dropped.

Basil, Plato, and Vasi spent the last few minutes coaching Shellgirl on how to walk. It was a long shot. Unlike Plato, who had at least been used to running on all fours before gaining the ability to stand, the former clam mimic never even had limbs below her waist.

Shellgirl was a quick learner, but by the time she managed to walk five meters without tripping, the courtyard was covered in face-shaped puddles of slime. Her sheer resilience astonished Basil. He blamed her exceptional Vitality and resistance to Physical damage, alongside a stubborn refusal to stay down.

In short, she possessed all the qualities of a good door-to-door salesman.

As for her stats... Shellgirl's metamorphosis would change a lot of things for the party.

Name *Shellgirl (Mimic Booty)*

Type *Aquatic/Slime*

Faction *Homeowner Revenge Association (The Bohens)*

Experience *110,018/120,000*

Immune

Resist

Weak

Water. *Physical, Frost, Darkness, Mind, all ailments.*

Aquaslayer, Slimeslayer, Corrosion, Metal, Fire, Lightning.

Level

Health Points

Special Points

30

1270

615

Strength	Agility	Vitality	Skill
35	13	54	25
(C+20%)	(C+20%)	(A+20%)	(D+20%)

Magic	Intelligence	Charisma	Luck
35	32	32	34
(C+20%)	(C+20%)	(B+20%)	(B+20%)

Physical	Mind	Soul	Corrosion	Metal	Wood	Life	Support	Ailment
Strong	Strong	-	Weak	Weak	-	-	Strong	Strong
Fire	Water	Earth	Wind	Frost	Lightning	Light	Darkness	Mythic
Weak	Strong	-	-	Strong	Weak	-	Strong	-

Passive Perks

Active Perks

Shelter+

Ice Bomb

Rainbow Shell Inventory Rainmantle

Moneymaker Discord Bounty

Slimeshift Draw Aggro

Motivate

Passive Perk:

- **Shelter+:** Shellgirl can retreat inside her shell to buff her Vitality and gain a 50 percent damage reduction. However, this also debuffs her Agility.
- **Moneymaker:** Increases chances of drops if a monster is killed within twenty meters.
- **Rainbow Shell Inventory:** Shellgirl can stock up to one item per level inside her shell. Additionally, she can summon her shell to her side at will. Damaging the shell will damage Shellgirl herself.
- **Slimeshift:** Shellgirl can modify her slime appearance as she wishes, though she cannot violate conservation of mass.

Active Perks:

- **Ice Bomb:** [Frost], 30 SP. Throws shrapnel made of ice at a target with her tentacle-barrels; the bomb inflicts [Frost] damage (base power 70) on impact and sends shrapnel hitting close enemies for additional [Frost] damage (base power 10).
- **Rainmantle:** [Water], [Life]. 30 SP. Shellgirl surrounds herself with a mantle of healing water for five minutes. She recovers 1/16 of her HP per minute, with the additional effect of buffing her Agility under the [Rain] weather or on a [Water] field.
- **Discord Bounty:** [Mind], [Ailment], 60 SP. Shellgirl creates an illusion presenting her shell as a desirable bounty. Enemies seeing the shell have a small chance of suffering from the [Madness] ailment for 5 minutes and fight over the bounty.
- **Draw Aggro:** [Mind], [Ailment], 30 SP. Shellgirl infuriates a foe, inflicting the [Berserk] ailment for five minutes. The target becomes focused on Shellgirl at the exclusion of any other target.
- **Motivate:** [Support], 30 SP. Shellgirl motivates an ally, buffing their accuracy and chances of inflicting critical hits for five minutes.

Basil blinked a few times when he read about Shellgirl's new Perks. Her Discord Bounty and Draw Aggro abilities opened so many options on the tactical front. She could disrupt enemy formations and protect weaker party members by focusing enemy fire onto herself. Her shell

and regeneration would allow her to weather assaults while her allies regrouped. Finally, her Motivate buff would synergize well with Vasi's Hasten spell. Basil already imagined himself and other frontliners butchering their way through enemy groups.

The situation reminded him of his experience with RPGs. The more powers he unlocked, the more options for devastation. Perhaps it was time to apply his experience with tactical games to real-life situations...

"You're doing great," Vasi encouraged Shellgirl as she walked around the courtyard. The Mimic Booty reminded Basil of a blind woman advancing carefully on a road: each step looked like the last. "Keep going."

"Remember, it's about looking down on others," Plato advised her. "You must draw strength from that."

"I'm getting the hang of it!" Shellgirl said with a grin. She was trying to fake it until she made it, but she wasn't good at either. "Now, time to run!"

"No, Shellgirl!" Vasi shouted in panic. "Don't!"

Shellgirl ignored her and started racing across the courtyard. To Basil's surprise, she was surprisingly good at it. Her steps were clumsy, her posture a little too bent, yet she managed to advance in a straight line without stumbling immediately.

"Ah, this is easy!" Shellgirl boasted. "I can feel the wind on my face—"

She tripped and crashed near the courtyard's pool.

Basil winced at the impact and Vasi immediately rushed to her friend's side. Only Plato remained utterly unfazed. "Baby steps," he said with a shrug. "Baby steps."

The gargoyle recruits cleaned up after the slime Shellgirl left everywhere with her footsteps. Basil noticed that one of them had metamorphosed when he wasn't looking and gained more draconic features. The haunted armor too enjoyed a redesign, its rusted steel now returned to pristine condition.

At least the night was profitable for them. Basil felt a little jealous. *I shouldn't think that way. Levels are a means, not an end in themselves.*

He had long suspected that the rush of pleasure that followed a level-up was a pernicious trap, meant to create an addiction in Players and monsters alike. Many of them killed for the thrill of new power nowadays. Basil couldn't allow himself to fall into a similar mindset.

"I'll get it right eventually," Shellgirl swore as Vasi helped her back to her feet. "Failure is part of the learning process!"

"Yes, but pain isn't," Plato replied dryly.

"Don't shame her, Plato," Basil said. If anything, he admired her grit. "You'll have to train too. We'll practice a drill on the way to Bordeaux."

"Yes, but—" Plato froze and squinted at his best friend. "A drill? What drill?"

"A combat drill," Basil replied. "It's time we practice our team tactics more thoroughly."

Basil wouldn't let the disastrous battle against Baron Lalande's party repeat itself. Craftiness and improvisation carried his party so far, but each new level threshold raised the danger they faced tenfold. Their future enemies had survived the culling of the early days and emerged victorious after many battles. They would be experienced, powerful, and *determined*.

"Luck is a poor substitute for preparation," Basil said. "So we'll practice each day until we get our party composition right."

"I can't wait to test my new Perks," Shellgirl said with enthusiasm. "I've always wanted to try out corporate sabotage in the field."

Plato groaned. "Fine, but only in the evening. I've got too much work in the morning."

"Too much napping?" Basil mocked him. His cat responded with a mock swipe.

"I'm all for target practice too," Vasi said. "But give me time to learn new Tier III and IV spells with the holomachine first. As a Night Hag, I added the *Chronomancy* and *Necromancy* schools to my repertoire. Both might affect my fighting style going forward."

"Necromancy?" Basil frowned at her. "Can you raise the dead now?"

"That's cliché," Vasi replied with a sad smile. "You can do a lot more with necromancy than just creating walking steaks, at least if half of what Walter told me is true. If you asked me if I could revive Orcine and the others... I'm afraid I can't."

Basil sighed. He had expected that answer, but still, a man could only hope. "I guess I need to study my runes too."

"Oh?" Vasi crossed her arms and gave him a coy smirk. "Would you like to become my bodyguard as we delve into the dark arts of magic, Basil Bohem?"

"Sure," Basil replied with a chuckle. He wouldn't let her teasing get to him and he needed to learn new Runic spells anyway. "Though I would prefer if you focused on Chronomancy first. I assume your Hasten spell comes from that spellcasting school."

"Spacetime magic is always the most overpowered," Vasi agreed. "Though it is unreliable. As you've seen for yourself, my Hasten spell is exceptionally short on duration... not to mention SP intensive."

Basil crossed his arms. "I wonder if we could craft an item to help with that."

"Speaking of crafting, an idea crossed my mind." Vasi put a hand on her waist. "If I understand correctly, you cannot store the Steamobile in your inventory because it counts as a house?"

"That's correct," Basil replied before quickly catching on. "Ah, I see. I made my house into a Lair, so you think you could do the same with the Steamobile."

"My thoughts exactly." Vasi smiled. "Now that I metamorphosed, your Lair II ability allows me to select one. I was thinking of equipping our humble steel caravan with crafting, spellcasting, and experience boosters."

"Don't forget the loot boost feature either," Shellgirl chimed in. "We'll make a killing from long-distance shipping."

"Sure, more bonuses are always good on the road," Basil said right as he received a notification. With dawn rising on the horizon, the Halloween event was officially over.

Congratulations, for surviving the [Halloween] event! We hope to see you participate in the future [Christmas], [New Year], [Easter], [Valentine's Day] and [Summer Break] seasonal events too! Great rewards await you!

Will they make a fighting tournament on every popular holiday? Basil wondered if that included national festivals too, though he doubted it. It would give too much of an advantage to one country. Still, he wondered what each season held in store for him. If the Easter boss is a murderous rabbit, I'll throw in the towel.

Your Guild accumulated 45,554 Ghost Candies. You've earned the following Rewards:

- *10,000 Reward: Unlocked the Halloween skin redesign option for your dungeons.*
- *20,000 Reward: Halloween Crafting Item. Option selected: [Jekyll & Stein].*
- *30,000 Reward: Halloween Equipment Set. Option selected: [Hallowitch Robes].*
- *40,000 Reward: Guild Players each unlocked a Halloween-themed Class.*

Halloween Class unlocked for you: [Deathknight] (Fighter/Monster Hybrid class).

The ghost candy mountain in the courtyard disappeared in a puff of smoke. Two new items materialized in its place: a large black book with a stylized version of Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man on the cover and a folded dress topped by a witch hat.

Seeing a hill of delicacies shrinking into these two tiny items left Shellgirl disappointed. "Wait, that's all?" she asked. "A book and a dress? Where's the gold? The diamond pumpkins?!"

Dismaker Labs does not offer prize refunds.

"Quality over quantity," Basil replied as he picked up the book. He expected a sinister tome of human flesh penned with blood, but it was made of good paper instead. He flipped the pages to stare at human diagrams, potion recipes, and steampunk schematics.

Jekyll & Stein

Family: Crafting Manual

Quality: A

A crafting recipe collection including entries from respectable British scientists such as Dr. Jekyll (ghostwritten by Mr. Hyde), Victor Frankenstein, Van Helsing, and the Invisible Man. Contains dozens of alchemical recipes, guidelines to build flesh golems, and everything to build your mad science lab. If you don't laugh maniacally at least once in its possession, you truly don't deserve this book.

Nice, a Victorian horror science compendium. Basil always wanted one for Christmas.

Reading this book filled his heart with the urge to craft. Basil had ignored the Alchemist class since the house's destruction, but the Steamobile was large enough to house a mobile lab. It shouldn't be too hard. Drug dealers did it all the time.

As for the dress...

Hallowitch Robes

Family: Clothing (Dress).

Quality: B

Effect 1: [Spell Duration +]: Doubles the duration of spells cast by the wearer, whether they are buffs, ailments, or lingering effects.

Effect 2: [Spell Range +]: Doubles the range of spells cast by the wearer.

Effect 3: [Gremory]: The dress will automatically adapt to the wielder's body shape and gender.

A Halloween-themed witch garment woven from spider silk and the hair of naughty children (harvested by the Boogeyman association using eco-responsible methods). The hat is magically enchanted to always stick to the wearer as long as they wear the dress, no matter the weather conditions. This gown will make kids weep and adults scream... with joy!

Vasi's eyes burned with greed. Basil suspected she had seen the item's stats. "Basil, do you mind if—"

"Yes, you can keep it," Basil replied with a shrug. She was the only one with decent spellcasting abilities in the team, so who else could wear it?

"No take-backs!" Vasi immediately grabbed the dress before Basil could change his mind. He suddenly realized why she got along so well with Shellgirl.

"Ohohoho, girl time!" Shellgirl clapped her hands. "I've found jewels that will make you look dashing with these new clothes!"

"A mimic after my own heart," Vasi replied with enthusiasm.

Basil watched the two with amusement before analyzing his newly unlocked class. Considering its hybrid nature similar to Technomancer, it was probably unusually powerful.

Deathknight: *A fearsome black knight class with deadly melee abilities and lordship over night creatures. STR (A), AGI (B), VIT (B), SKI (B), MAG (B), INT (C), CHA (A), LCK (B).*

Basil wasn't sure what to make of this new addition to his repertoire. It sounded quite useful, but he was dedicated to Tamer for now and Deathknight didn't sound like a respectable occupation. If anything, he would rather become a Paladin.

But since beggars couldn't be choosers, Basil would question Vasi about the class later. Perhaps she heard of it in her world.

Basil set his class progression questions aside to check on Ronald. The burger was supervising his troops from the ramparts as they cleaned up the corpses outside the walls; those that Rosemarine hadn't eaten already at least. Since not all of them turned into candies, Basil assumed they rose on their own rather than through the event's power.

"Everything good?" Basil asked.

"Castle safe, King Basil," the burger monster said with a belch. "Good experience, kitchen safe, soldiers strong."

"I'll entrust this place to you then." Basil glanced at the rising dawn. Its brilliance reflected on the Steamobile and Rosemarine's scales. The tropidrake rested for the time being, her scales absorbing the sunlight for the journey ahead. "We've delayed our departure until Vasi could complete her ritual, but now... now we must go."

Bordeaux and Kalki awaited.

The Bohens left the dungeon at noon.

As Buggy and Plato loaded the last of their supplies aboard the Steamobile, Basil finished attaching its harness to Rosemarine's back. It felt strangely heavy; not because of its weight, but because of what this action represented.

The end of a journey and the beginning of another.

Basil looked at the marshes with a mix of longing and nostalgia. He had called the region his home for years. It held as much of a place in his heart as his native Bulgaria.

And somehow, although it was a teleportation button away... Basil had the feeling he wouldn't see it again for many, many months.

"Goodbye, my queen!" Ronald declared from atop the walls. A dozen fire seeds wept embers at the sight. "We shall await your triumphant return!"

"I will return atop a bridge of corpses, or not at all!" Rosemarine swore.

"Are we ready to go?" Plato asked Basil.

"Almost." Basil faced the walls and shouted. "Vasi! Shellgirl! We need to go!"

"Coming!" The two women emerged from the dungeon with a cadre of Lycan warriors after them.

Shellgirl dragged her treasure shell across the ground with one hand. Much like Vasi, she took the opportunity to dress up a bit by putting on rings, golden bracelets, and a shell necklace. Basil suspected that she pilfered most of them from Baron Lalande's bedroom. These items all looked nice individually, but Shellgirl put on so much that it became downright vulgar.

Vasi, though, was the very picture of elegance. The Halloween witch costume she wore was an elegant black gown falling down to her ankles, with long sleeves and a feather partlet covering her shoulders. Golden lines woven into the fabric formed a spiderweb motif all over the dress. A dark blue corset fit her curves perfectly and exposed her cleavage. A witch hat sat atop her groomed hair, tastefully hiding her ram horns under its shadow, and a red ruby necklace glowed around her neck.

"Like what you see?" Vasi teased him.

"You look great," Basil complimented her. He couldn't wait to see her blasting monsters apart while in her finery.

"Great? Are you kidding? Vasi looks dashing!" Shellgirl's enthusiasm suddenly turned to sourness. "Hey wait, no compliment for me? Look at all the gold I put on!"

"You look like a Newmont ad," Basil replied pitilessly. "Your appearance screams *Nouveau Riche*."

"I'm sure she shines in the dark," Plato mused.

"I told you it was too bling-bling," Vasi whispered. Shellgirl crossed her arms in response. "Oh come on, don't sulk over it."

"I'm not sulking, I'm suffering," Shellgirl grumbled. "It would all fit together if I had a crown."

"If you have time to complain, you've got time to climb into the giant snail's shell," Basil said. "We've got a long drive ahead of us."

"Of course, of course," Vasi replied softly. She climbed into the Steamobile like Cinderella in her carriage while looking like Maleficent. Basil missed his Disney movies.

Basil sensed Buggy's eyes on his back and frowned at the centimagma. "What?" he asked.

"I'll never stop believing," Buggy replied with a strange form of determination. "Never."

Basil had no idea what he meant, and he wasn't sure if he wanted to understand at all. "Uh, okay I guess?"

"Alright boys, remember my lessons!" Shellgirl coached the lycans one last time before departure. "Be polite, be professional, build trust! A happy customer is a buying customer!"

"Can we eat them if they're disagreeable?" a lycan asked. Apparently Shellgirl designated him and others as her new 'employees.'

"Only if they attack you first," Shellgirl replied. "Verbal attacks don't count!"

The wolf-men groaned in disappointment. Basil suddenly wondered if sending bloodthirsty monsters trading across the countryside in his Guild's name truly was a good idea. Any incident would reflect on him.

Well, too late to change it now. He had given his word to Shellgirl and would trust her judgment.

Basil climbed on the Steamobile last. "Rosemarine, onward!"

"Yes, Mister!" the tropidrake answered before walking away. The Steamobile creaked as Rosemarine dragged it across Château Muloup's bridge of stone and the road beyond. Basil and co waved goodbye to the rest of the Guild from the vehicle's back, until the dungeon disappeared from view.

The two groups would remain in contact through the messaging, but it might be a long while before they met in the flesh again.

I can't shake the feeling I've forgotten something. Basil always felt that way when he went on a trip. *At least I double-checked my toothbrush this time.*

Reminder: you have a new video feed in your Logs. It will provide a hint for the Lotus of Remembrance Main Quest.

Basil winced at the notification. The Soyuz's camera still remained in his inventory alongside all of its dark secrets.

Basil opened his System Logs. The submenu included a board for quests, a guild messagery box, a bestiary for registered monsters... and a file folder with a notification. Basil clicked on it and checked the only video available. Its title was short, but ominous.

Video Feed: Dismaker Labs board meeting.

Basil clenched his jaw and went looking for a mattress. This time, he would follow Captain Valentino's advice and sit comfortably before playing the recording.

He had the feeling he was in for a hell of a ride.

Chapter 10: Man vs Investigation

Basil's bedroom in the Steamobile was a tiny alcove with a mattress and a single window. It was terribly small, uncomfortable, and trembled with each road bump.

In short, it was the perfect place to watch a world-shaking video. The truth wouldn't hurt as much as Basil's back.

I've got hours to kill. Basil sat as comfortably as he could. He had instructed Rosemarie to follow the coastline north on the way to Bordeaux, which would take longer than the highroad but should also be safer. With the loss of Neria's radio, Basil couldn't tell what kind of troubles his team might encounter on the way. *I would rather watch Netflix or Major Chicken, but this will do.*

Clicking on the *Dismaker Labs board meeting* video in the Logs folder widened his System screen until it spanned his entire field of view. Basil heard a screeching, glitchy sound echo in the back of his head. It reminded him of the time he tried the Oculus Rift headset technology, though he wished the quality was as good.

The video feed was shoddy as hell. Visual glitches interfered with Basil's vision and a stream of static noise buzzed all around him. Blocks of Minecraft-like blue data vaguely assembled in the shape of a table floating aimlessly inside an infinite white void. This place looked no more real than a dream.

As if on cue, colored particles gathered around the table and condensed into five spots. Humanoid shapes formed from nothing, four of them sitting in ethereal chairs. The fifth figure stood at the table's end, hands behind his back.

Basil struggled to see much of these entities. He could tell they were humans, or at least looked the part, but visual glitches blurred their features. He could only pick out a few traits: a Caucasian lady, with short auburn hair and an elegant dress; an Asian man, old and wrinkled, carrying a portable bottle of oxygen to keep him alive; a tall male executive dressed to kill; a scrawny, mousy programmer typing lines of codes on a holographic screen...

"This Zoom upgrade looks terrible," Basil cursed under his breath. Of course Dismaker Labs' System wouldn't let him identify its board's members.

The only exception was the figure standing at the table's end; his projection alone didn't suffer from any visual glitch. The man was built like ox, tall, broad-shouldered, and dressed like a Giorgio Armani model. His skin was light brown, his facial features vaguely Indian. A bright red beard and wild hair gave him the look of a wild lion straight out of the savannah. Dark sunglasses covered his eyes and hid his expression from outsiders' sight.

His posture reminded Basil of eccentric billionaires like Richard Branson, the late John McAfee, and a little of Elon Musk. A man so successful that he could dress like Mufasa and no one would find it abnormal. Eccentricity and showmanship had become part of his identity.

It didn't take a genius to figure out the man's identity.

"Welcome ladies and gentlemen, to Dismaker Labs' last virtual board meeting," the leader declared with a thin smile and a showman's wave of hand. "After so many years, we are finally ready for the Trimurti System's launch! I hope you are all as excited as I am!"

"We couldn't have made it this far without you, Maxwell," said the only female executive present. "A virtual toast to you."

The digital ghosts clapped as their leader offered them a polite bow. "Thank you, thank you," he said. "I am touched."

I knew it. Basil could finally put a face on the man who destroyed the world. *Anton Maxwell, Dismaker Labs' CEO.*

Basil tried to punch the virtual dick on principle, but his hand went through Maxwell's face. Such a shame. That asshole deserved at least seven billion slaps; one for each person on Earth he had fucked over.

"Forgive me, my dear Hypathia, for you are wrong," Anton Maxwell declared with false modesty. "The lion's share of this historic victory, of this monumental achievement, goes to you all. My dear friends, it is your money, your resources, your determination and your hard work that led us to this point. I offered the blueprints to heaven, but it was the sweat of your brows that paved the pathway."

"And this System you promised us better deliver," the old Asian man in attendance rasped. "I lent you billions, Maxwell. Billions."

"What is money compared to immortality, Mr. Tamura?" the well-dressed executive replied politely. "We will soon be crowned as kings... no, as *gods*."

"Knock on a stone bridge before crossing it, Ashok," 'Mr. Tamura' replied with a snort. "If this fails, Maxwell, there will be consequences. I do not forgive bad investments."

Basil's blood boiled in his veins. He was almost certainly watching the conspiracy that brought the world to an end, and they discussed it with the same enthusiasm as shareholders debating over a quarterly report. There was no anxiety in their digitized voices, no remorse, no appreciation for their plan's catastrophic consequences.

Dismaker Labs treated the incoming apocalypse with utter indifference.

It's not that they don't understand what they're about to do, Basil thought, fists clenched in quiet fury. One of them simply cared more about his return on investment than the global disaster ahead. *It's that they don't give a fuck.*

"I am wounded. Have I not delivered?" Anton Maxwell put a hand on his heart. "Have I not shown you what the System can accomplish through the trials and testing phases?"

"You have created wonders," the bespectacled programmer among them conceded. "But you promised us miracles."

"And I will achieve them, Benjamin," Anton argued before surveying each executive in turn. "Do not worry, I will fulfill our contract to the letter. You will all receive your heart's desire. Eternal youth and pleasure; power and fame; retribution for your losses; ascension and enlightenment... you will be akin to gods among men, free to shape the world as you see fit."

"What about you?" 'Benjamin' asked. Basil wondered if those were their true names or pseudonyms to avoid identification. "You haven't set a host avatar for yourself. I've checked."

"You know I do not need one." Anton Maxwell's smile sent shivers down Basil's spine. There was something predatory in his pale white teeth. "Neither do I intend to participate in this little contest. I will watch the show from the gallery."

"I don't believe you," the programmer replied dryly.

I don't either. Basil thought. He couldn't imagine someone knowingly planning the end of the world with godhood as a prize to just sit it out.

"Believe what you want, Benjamin," Anton replied calmly. "I have no need for godhood. All I seek is a functional gate to the great beyond. That is my wish."

Basil squinted. A gate? A gate to where?

"Whatever," 'Benjamin' said with a snort. "So long as I get her back, you can go to Hell for all I care."

The Asian executive, 'Mr. Tamura', grunted in response. "What now, Maxwell? I assume that you didn't summon us right before the launch to exchange barbs. Speak clearly and stop wasting my time."

"Is the plan going as scheduled?" 'Hypathia' asked, more politely.

"Yes... and no." Anton's smile wavered. "Everything is unfolding as we planned with a tiny little exception. Due to interferences, we cannot pinpoint where the Avatar of Vishnu will manifest. He might appear outside of India."

"What ab-ab-about Lakshmi's avatar?" Hypathia's voice briefly glitched, to the point Basil struggled to understand her words. She turned to face the last executive, the best dressed of the lot. "Capturing her is your task, Ashok."

"We are ready to welcome Her Majesty properly," 'Ashok.' replied The man shifted in his chair with calm, quiet confidence. "The Prison Dungeon will capture her the moment she manifests. As for Vishnu, it doesn't matter where his avatar will appear. He will come to find her and share her cell soon enough."

Benjamin joined his hands together. "There is a risk that he might die. Our alterations to the System should summon the Preservation Avatar in a weakened state. The Kalki may not even be aware of his true significance nor be capable of defending himself."

"This is a risk I wanted to address today," Anton confirmed. "He must be captured alive as soon as possible, or our efforts will come to naught."

"What happens if he perishes?" Hypathia asked.

"Each of the Trimurti's aspects will become dominant at one point of the System's initialization," Anton Maxwell explained, his pose shifting to that of Steve Jobs giving a lecture to newbie tech students. "Brahma will fuel the world's rebirth, and then Vishnu will move on to maintain the balance between creation and destruction. He shall spin the wheel of death until a new Overgod is selected. But if his avatar dies, then Shiva the Destroyer will ascend to prominence."

A terrible silence settled on the board room. Basil could cut the tension with a knife.

"Should it come to that, this competition..." Anton marked a short pause as he examined each executive one after the other. "Will come to an abrupt end."

The world in the palm of a god's hand... our mages summoned the Destroyer... crushed it like a stone...

Basil shuddered as the true seriousness of his situation dawned upon him. *I let Kalki go, he cursed himself for his ignorance. That clueless hippie could be anywhere, at the mercy of anyone.*

Damn it, that man played music to strangers and monsters! He was exactly the kind of person to attract trouble!

Ashok broke the silence. "Leave him to us, Mr. Maxwell," he said before turning to face his colleagues. "I ask that we all collaborate and belay your personal ambitions until the threat is dealt with. Any objection?"

None of the others argued, though Basil could tell a few had reservations from their body language. He barely understood half of what was unfolding before his eyes without the necessary context, yet it seemed to him that Dismaker Labs' board didn't entirely get along. He felt no camaraderie from these people; only an alliance born of convenience.

It made sense. If all of them expected to become Earth's Overgod by the end of it, then their collaboration was bound to implode at one point.

"Very well," Anton Maxwell said. "Besides this small hurdle, everything will happen as planned. Do any of you still have concerns?"

"Concerns are for people who don't know what they want," Mr. Tamura declared with arrogance. "I am ready."

"We all are," Hypathia agreed. "We've waited years for this."

"Then in case we do not meet again, I wish you all good luck in my new world." Anton Maxwell made a bow. "It was an honor working with this company."

"As well, Mr. Maxwell," Hypathia replied before disappearing. One after another the various digital avatars vanished. Mr. Tamura and Benjamin vanished without a word or gesture. Ashok bowed respectfully at Anton Maxwell before imitating them.

Only Dismaker Labs' CEO remained alone in the room. He stood motionless for a few seconds, as if checking if any of his board members would return.

Then he revealed his true colors.

"Foolish creatures." Maxwell's mouth curled into a contemptuous smile. "Yes, I will fulfill my promises. You will get *exactly* what you deserve... for what little time this world has left to live."

Well, that was ominous.

The recording came to an end and Basil abruptly returned to reality. He found Plato sitting in front of him, looking up at his best friend with worried eyes.

"How long have you been there?" Basil asked.

"Minutes. You zoned out for a while." Plato slouched on the mattress. "What's up, dog?"

"Oh nothing." Basil rested against a steel wall. "Just watching scary corporate videos about the world's end."

"Sounds boring," Plato deadpanned. "Come on, do enlighten me. I love scares."

Where should he start? That a conspiracy of boring corporate drones managed to bring mankind to its knees, knowing full well what would happen? That their leader clearly played a different game than the rest? That they intended to seal a goddess and then Kalki? Or that a single death could spell the world's end?

Yes, Basil should start with the worst and work his way up. That would keep his cat's expectations of the future low. "I think I know how Estrid's people summoned the Destroyer now. From what I understood, if Kalki dies then so does the world."

Plato assessed the news in silence for a few seconds before sighing in despair. He didn't even question Basil's words. At this point, he just went along with the flow. "You know he looks like the kind of boy who'll end up shanked in an alley, right?"

"Yes, which is why we've got to find him fast." Basil gritted his teeth in worry. "I hope we lost contact with Bordeaux due to a technical mishap, but I know better. We're not that lucky."

"The world is still here though," Plato pointed out. "So whatever happened in Bordeaux, that boy lived through it. There's still time."

Basil prayed so. Besides confirming Kalki's importance, the video hadn't provided many leads. He heard the names of executives involved in Dismaker Labs' conspiracy—Hypathia, Benjamin, Ashok, Mr. Tamura—but he had neither their faces nor their family names. Basil would need to cross that information with the company's records to learn more about these people.

Then he would hunt them down like dogs.

Parts of the discussion also confused him. One of the executives mentioned creating 'avatars' of their own. What did he mean by that? Did these five tweak the System to give themselves unfair developer advantages? Walter said Dismaker Labs couldn't hope to fully control the Trimurti System or they would have made themselves Overgods from the start, but what control did these people truly have? Could they grant themselves access to unique classes or cheat abilities?

And what Maxwell said at the video's end... foolish *creatures*. Basil didn't know what to make of it. It sounded like a mere insult, a revelation of contempt, but the wording bothered him.

In fact, everything about Anton Maxwell sounded unnerving now that Basil thought of it. The man appeared from nowhere according to Neria, built a multi-billion software company that implanted magical servers across the world with no one the wiser, before finally summoning Hindu gods and then turning Earth into a madhouse

That stretched credibility. That kind of knowledge, of efficiency, was positively demonic.

"Is he human at all?" Basil muttered to himself.

"Excuse me?" Plato asked.

"Maxwell, the man behind it all. How could he invent something as powerful as the neurotowers and spread them around the world without anybody noticing?" Basil would have considered this theory outlandish months ago, but after the apocalypse he had come to believe anything was possible. "It just sounds unbelievable."

"Maybe he didn't invent them," Plato said. "The servers. I think he copied them from the scabies."

Basil squinted at his cat. "I'm listening."

"Of course your human mind cannot see as far as my feline genius, but follow me for a moment," Plato said, his voice brimming with pride. "The bots and the bugs have been at war for decades, if not more. Earth isn't even the first place they've crashed. Don't you think one of their gizmos could have found its way here somehow?"

Basil's eyes widened in surprise. "You think Dismaker Labs based their neurotowers on the Unity's server design?"

"It spooks me too that a human could change the world on his own. I mean, your species can barely find its lost socks. How could you make us cats masters of the world? It's beyond your meager capabilities."

Plato's opinion of Basil's species was heartening, but he might have guessed correctly. Dismaker Labs could have based their dungeons on existing alien tech. But how did these blueprints arrive on Earth in the first place?

What did Maxwell say? I have no need for godhood; only for a functional gate to the great beyond.

A gate to another world? Were Incursions the end-goal of the System's arrival rather than a byproduct of them? Basil could only make guesses for now without additional information, yet he felt like he was on the right road to uncover the System's mystery.

Plato's expression suddenly darkened. "Will you tell the others? About what we saw on the camera?"

"I'll have to." Though his team's morale would take a hit, Basil didn't believe in keeping secrets from friends. They always bred discontent or misunderstandings. "Honestly, it feels like tackling global warming on my own. Events are unfolding before my eyes and I can't do much on my own to prevent them."

"Hey, don't say that." Plato kneaded his owner's chest. "Maybe we can change little, but a little is better than nothing. You never know what your actions will have an impact on. Maybe they won't matter, or maybe they'll pay off big time. You can't find out unless you try."

Basil smiled at his witty cat. "Do you remember why René and I called you Plato?"

"Because I was wiser than both of you?"

"Smartass." Basil petted his cat behind the ears, making him purr in pleasure. "I should have called you Diogenes and put you in a barrel."

"Anyway, if you're done doubting my formidable intellect, Vasi wanted to see you downstairs." Plato wagged his tail. "Something about crafty this, class that."

Basil sighed as he rose from his mattress. "Alright, I'll be back in a minute."

"Mine!" Plato leaped on the makeshift bed the moment his best friend left. "Take your time!"

"Don't put furballs everywhere please," Basil grumbled as he traveled down the Steamobile. He found Vasi training on the holomachine in the engine room. The witch remained so focused on the device that she didn't pay him any mind at first. "Hey, Vasi. You wanted to see me?"

"Ah, Basil, just in time." Vasi didn't look away from the holomachine's mirror-screen. A vision of Wyrde showcased some kind of purple mist spell on its surface. "Since I'm learning new spells and you wanted us to practice as a team, I thought we could discuss your class progression. See how we could develop synergies."

Basil wondered if he should make her his official class advisor. Certainly the Guild system could award titles to its members?

"I actually unlocked a new class as a Halloween reward that I wanted to discuss with you," he said. "Deathknight."

"Deathknight?" Vasi turned away from the holomachine and raised her eyebrows at him. Basil took it as a good sign. "Are you sure?"

"You've heard of it?"

"I have. It's a rare and powerful prestige class in my world, extremely popular among villains and aspiring dark lords."

"Charming," Basil deadpanned. "Should I start dressing in black armor and holing up in a dark tower?"

"No, not unless you want us to settle down," Vasi reassured him. "Classes don't affect your mindset. When I said Deathknight is popular among villains, I mean that they're more likely to unlock the class compared to would-be heroes. From what I've heard, you need a very high kill count as an unlocking condition."

The memory of thousands of undead meals assaulting his castle flashed in Basil's mind.

"I don't see what you mean."

"You do," Vasi said mirthfully.

"It's not my fault if bugs and monsters keep throwing themselves at me." Basil would have been happy sticking to his little corner of the world, but everyone seemed to have a deathwish

nowadays. "And if a kill count is all that's needed, then the woods will be crawling with Deathknights soon."

"They might," Vasi conceded. "But that's good news for you, Basil. Deathknight isn't as good as Berserker in close combat—because Berserker is probably the best in that field—but it's easily in the top ten melee classes. It offers dark magical powers and most importantly, leadership Perks."

"It'll make me a better public speaker?" Basil mused.

"More like you'll passively buff allies and debuff enemies in your vicinity." Vasi chuckled. "Why do you think dark lords love it? It helps with whipping orcs and undead soldiers into shape."

Basil pondered her words. Odd as it felt to him, Deathknight sounded quite useful for a Tamer. Still, he had already invested in too many classes to dedicate himself to yet another.

"I would rather have unlocked a Paladin class," he confessed. Basil would have loved to strike down demons and dragons like Saint George reborn.

"You won't," Vasi replied. "I'm sorry Basil. I doubt you can unlock Crusader either, or any holy class for that matter."

"What?" Basil choked. He was an Orthodox rather than a Catholic, but his faith remained unshaken. It had to count for these classes, right? "Why?"

"You have a weak Light affinity," Vasi explained. "Holy light literally hurts you more than normal people, and these classes make use of it. Considering how affinities work here, I don't think it will allow you to unlock them.."

"This... this is an outrage!" Basil protested. "Who decides affinities anyway?!"

Player affinities are determined by your history prior to the System's initialization. You earned a Weak affinity to Light due to your night owl lifestyle.

Basil glared at the screen. Was it karma for a lifetime dedicated to avoiding natural sunlight and playing video games?

Dismaker Labs wishes you a happy apocalypse!

Basil wondered which of the five executives programmed that damn message. He would punch them all, just to be sure he didn't miss the right one.

"How do you even know that?" Basil asked. "I thought Affinities weren't a thing in your world?"

"To prepare my ritual, I've been cross-referencing information with Walter, Orcine, and others," Vasi replied with a smile. "And it's simple deduction. If a weak affinity prevents you from learning spells of an element, then it should block access to classes affiliated with one."

Basil squinted at her. "Are you subtly suggesting I be more sociable?"

"Anyway," she said, blatantly ignoring the question. "Can I see your current stats? I want to see if one or two stand out from the rest."

Basil opened his status screen and forwarded it to her through the Logs system.

Name Basil Jean-François Bohem
Type Humanoid
Faction Homeowner Revenge Association (The Bohems)
EXP 110,018/120,000

Immune	Resist	Weak
N/A	Physical, Corrosion, Metal, Wood, Fire, Water, Ailments.	Manslayer, Soul, Wind, Lightning, Light.
Level	Health Points	Special Points
30 (Tamer 16; Berserker 5; Alchemist 1; Runesmith 1; Gardener 3; Technomancer 3; Fisherman 1)	1480	615

Strength	Agility	Vitality	Skill
46	43	32	27
Magic	Intelligence	Charisma	Luck

31

27

39

27

Physical	Mind	Soul	Corrosion	Metal	Wood	Life	Support	Ailment
-----------------	-------------	-------------	------------------	--------------	-------------	-------------	----------------	----------------

Strong	-	Weak	Strong	Strong	Strong	-	-	Strong
--------	---	------	--------	--------	--------	---	---	--------

Fire	Water	Earth	Wind	Frost	Lightning	Light	Darkness	Mythic
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Strong	Strong	-	Weak	-	Weak	Weak	-	-
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Passive Perks

Active Perks

Monster Charmer III Warp Spasm I

Slaughterer I Jardin Secret I

Alchemy I Magitek

Monster Lair II Spell: Fire Rune

Runic II Spell: Ice Rune

Fishing I Fuel Technology

Monster Insight Greenhand I

Monster Cure I

One for All I

Spell: Venomous Rune

Spell: Corrosive Rune

"A brawler through and through." Vasi nodded to herself as she read. "You have excellent physical stats, especially in Strength and Agility, good Charisma, but relatively mediocre Intelligence, Luck and Skill."

"I'm surprised my Magic is now higher than these three," Basil said. "I was lagging behind in it."

His low Intelligence remained a sore spot for him, but he was surprised to see it catching up to his Luck and Skill. Maybe his situation wasn't so hopeless after all.

"It's still far too low for you to become a true spellcaster," Vasi pointed out. "Everyone in the party except for Buggy has better Magic than you."

"I don't need it." Basil crossed his arms. "We have a pretty balanced party already. Buggy is our main tank and frontliner. Plato is the flanker, the agile damage dealer. You're the flying magical artillery. Shellgirl is a long-range fighter and disruptor. Rosemarine is our healer and spawner."

Vasi chuckled. "I would say she's a dreadnaught first and healer second."

"Yeah, well, all of us have secondary focuses." Shellgirl's metamorphosis allowed her to draw the enemy's attention, Vasi could buff allies in a pinch, and Basil's Monster Cure allowed him to heal his team if needed. "Which leaves me. The Tamer and generalist."

"My suggestion stands, you should fill out Tamer first," Vasi said. "Afterwards though, I would suggest taking levels in Deathknight."

Basil squinted at her. She suggested that he take yet another class? "I thought specialization was the key to success?"

"It is, when done the right way." Vasi took a pose that reminded Basil of his high-school teachers. It felt slightly patronizing. "Berserker already gave you good melee abilities, but they don't synergize well with the rest of your build. I suggest taking levels in Deathknight because its Perks will bridge the Berserker levels with your Tamer side. It will empower your melee abilities and strengthen us."

"What about the classes I already took levels in?" Basil asked with skepticism. "Both Fisherman and Gardener should synergize well with Tamer."

"After much consideration, I honestly think you should abandon these two," Vasi replied. "Fisherman is exceptionally dangerous when capped, but its effectiveness heavily relies on the terrain. Unless we settle in a fishing village or trade our shell for a ship, its help will be situational at best."

"Exceptionally dangerous?" Basil snorted. "Fisherman?"

To his surprise, Vasi gave him a potent glare. "The Fisherman class is illegal in my home country and highly restricted almost everywhere in my world."

"You're pulling my leg."

"I'm not. Most of its Perks are so-so, but the capstone turns almost every fish in a large area into a bloodthirsty killing machine." Her scowl deepened. "Mad Fishermen wipe out more communities annually than demons, dragons, and fairy lords combined."

My God, she's serious. Basil searched her expression for any hint of a joke or mockery. He found none. *Take that, Aquaman.*

"At least, that's how the class works in my world," Vasi finished with a shrug. "We have no guarantee it will offer the same Perks on this one. Gardener will also be less effective now that we no longer have, well, a garden to harvest from."

"I thought about raising a greenhouse on the Steamobile's upper floor," Basil replied. "And we need more food."

"Even so, this class' effectiveness will be situational. I agree it will help us more than Fisherman, but unless you intend to return to the Guild periodically we'll need it less than a combat-oriented class. Or Alchemist and Technomancer, who should help us create useful items and improve our caravan. I can brew my own potions, but they'll never compare to what a specialized crafter class can make."

"So you say my Fisherman and Gardener levels are wasted?"

"No level is ever wasted," Vasi replied. "Perks and stat increases are always good to unlock new classes. I don't think you could have gained access to Deathknight without a Berserker's proficiency for example. But you should be wary of sunk cost fallacy, Basil. Taking a level in the 'wrong' class shouldn't encourage you to fill it out. Sometimes it's better to cut your losses and move on to a better choice."

Basil clenched his jaw. Her advice made sense on paper, but it sounded like a waste to him.

Then again, he didn't have to make a choice now. He still needed to fill out the Tamer class first before investing in others.

"What do you think of my other options?" Basil asked as he forwarded Vasi his other unlocked classes. "Anything you suggest?"

"Poisoner... Chef... Gambler... nothing that meshes well with your existing classes. Druid is good, but your average Magic and Intelligence will hamper it." Vasi frowned as she read. "Dragonknight?"

"It's a class specialized in fighting with or against dragons," Basil said. "I have one outside, and I declared war on an alien civilization full of them. It could fit me better than Deathknight."

"Maybe," Vasi conceded. "I can't tell, I do not know much about that one. You should consult Walter. He will certainly provide more information."

Oh, good point. What better class advisor to players than a hidden superboss? Walter offered help in exchange for a laptop to study and Basil could oblige him. It wouldn't be hard to find one in an abandoned city, while on the road to Bordeaux.

In the meantime, Basil would return to his crafting roots. His new *Jekyll & Stein* manual simply offered too many new options for him to pass on.

It was time to rebuild his potion stockpile.

Chapter 11: Man vs Wine

Walter Tye's shop was relatively crowded today.

More than ten clients strode through its shelves, each more sinister than the last: a golden, crowned skeleton sorcerer floating in the air through magic; some kind of Dracula cosplayer in black finery; a four-armed, archaic robot; and so many more. Basil and Vasi stayed clear of them all. Half of these visitors looked straight out of a horror movie and the rest minded their own business.

Besides, they had come for a delivery first and foremost.

"What a fascinating device." Sitting behind his counter with his dullahan bodyguard watching over him, Walter examined the laptop with the joy of a child opening a Christmas present. "A portable library machine... truly fascinating. I've heard that it can capture cat souls with pictures too."

"It's the other way around," Basil replied with amusement. "Cat pictures entrance viewers into giving up their souls."

"Mmm, sounds like an oversight to me. Still, your world's people are an ingenious lot. I would have loved to visit your civilization at its peak."

"I haven't seen you this curious since we discovered Nastrond, chief," Hagen mused.

"How can't I? This 'computer technology' presents a new field of science unknown to me." Walter offered Basil a nod of genuine gratefulness. "You have done well to bring me this."

"A deal is a deal," Basil replied with a shrug.

"A man of his word," Walter said with appreciation. "Good. The business world runs on trust. You will go far, Basil."

Quest: Forever Serpent's Errands I completed. *Your party earned 1500 Bonus exp (250 for you).*

Bordeaux had roughly been a two-hour car drive from Seignosse before the apocalypse. Unfortunately, the world's end shot down France's transport system. Roads suffered damage from monster attacks or lack of maintenance, forcing Basil's party to take detours. And for all of her might and determination, Rosemarine couldn't pull the Steamobile at his old Renault's speed.

The two-hour drive had swiftly transformed into a two-day one and the party stopped to scavenge supplies. Basil had found the laptop in an abandoned town's shop. It was relatively old as far as Dell wares went, but Walter looked happy with it all the same.

"I usually pay my suppliers in rubies or gold, but I doubt you're looking for money right now." Walter set the laptop aside. "What do you need? Spellbooks?"

"Maybe later," Vasi declined politely. "Our holomachine contains enough spells to keep me busy until Tier VI."

"Can it teach necromancy spells too?" Walter smiled when the witch nodded in affirmation. "Excellent. Then contact me once you reach Tier VII. I will lend you manuals to continue your progress. Congratulations on your successful ritual by the way."

"I will need to form a coven for any future transformation," Vasi replied before putting an elbow on Basil's shoulder. "My darling will assist me in my quest."

It said something about how comfortable the two had gotten with each other that Basil didn't repel Vasi's invasion of his personal space. "We're still one person short," he pointed out.

"Not really," Walter replied. "You can fill the gap in a coven by enslaving a hag's soul. If you don't mind the screams, it makes for an acceptable substitute."

He said that the way a normal person might comment about the weather.

"Come to think of it, I think I have an extra one in storage somewhere." Walter looked into his counter's shelves. "Where did I put that hag's soulstone?"

"Maybe in the attic with Thor's head?" Hagen suggested.

"Oh right, I forgot about it..." Walter turned to his disturbed customers. "If you give me a minute, I can fetch the soulstone for you."

"Thank you Walter, but we'll pass," Vasi said. Behind the politeness and fake smile, Basil could tell that the idea of using an enslaved soul as fuel for power unsettled her as much as him. "I would prefer a willing participant. More laughs, less pain."

"Suit yourself," Walter replied, taking the rejection in stride. "Anything else I can offer you?"

"I'm looking for alchemical components and information." Basil presented his *Jekyll & Stein* manual to the shopkeeper. "I'm trying to craft a potion of invisibility, but I'm missing some ingredients."

"Good book," Walter complimented them. "Sure, I will reward your delivery with reagents. What information do you seek?"

"Have you heard of the Deathknight and Dragonknight classes?" Basil asked him. "I've unlocked them both, but I don't know what Perks they possess."

"Deathknight?" Hagen chuckled darkly. At his side, Walter smiled ear to ear; an expression that Basil found *immensely* terrifying. "You've knocked on the right door."

"You unlocked it yourself?" Basil guessed. He should have expected it from a headless undead knight.

"Of course I did. It might work a bit differently in your world but I can teach you the ropes. And as the most chivalrous warrior to ever live, I'm also familiar with Dragonknights."

"All the brave warriors you stabbed in the back might disagree about the chivalrous part," Walter mused.

"Details, details," Hagen replied with a hand on his chest. "I would not be so bold as to call myself an expert at killing knights, but I've slain enough of them to learn their tricks. Do you have a dragon pet, Basil?"

"I have a giant flower lizard," Basil replied. "Does it count?"

"Can it fly?" Hagen asked.

"No."

"Oh." The headless knight sounded *deeply* disappointed. "A shame. Any dragon-type will help, but you gain more benefits from that class if you own a flying mount."

"A flying mount?" Vasi's eyes widened. "Are you suggesting that he try to ride a *dragon*?"

"Uh, yes?" Hagen sounded puzzled. "What about it?"

"I can count the number of dragonriders on one hand," Vasi replied. "It's already amazing that Basil managed to earn a dragon follower, but to ride it in battle... he would be pushing his luck. Those creatures are deeply proud and easily offended."

"Come on, they aren't gods. They're big lizards that like gold. Or magpies that breathe fire, depending on your point of view." Hagen shrugged his shoulders. "If they won't let you climb on their back, you beat them into submission like any horse."

Vasi covered her mouth in shock as if the headless knight had suggested killing the Pope. "Beat... beat a dragon into submission?"

"Yes. You don't do that in your world?" Hagen chuckled. "No wonder your dragons have behavioral issues if you pamper them."

"I feel like I encountered a culture clash," Basil noted as Vasi's face lost all color.

Walter interrupted the discussion. "What Hagen means to say is that dragons are far less of a threat in our world than yours, Vasi. Great wyrms are extremely rare, and many lesser breeds have been domesticated."

"Classes like Dragonknights are optimized to deal with the unruly ones," Hagen continued. "The level 5 Perk grants them the Dragonslayer effect with all melee weapons. If you haven't slaughtered dragons before, Basil, you will kill them by the dozens afterwards."

"Level 5?" Vasi tried to regain her composure, but this new information sent her back to square one. "That's early for such a powerful ability."

"Higher Dragonknight levels mostly focus on dragon-riding, breath attacks, and bypassing that unfair damage reduction all ancient wyrms possess." Hagen grunted. "Truly dangerous dragons often take less than fifteen percent damage from attacks. This de facto multiplies their health and makes them incredibly difficult to put down. And let's not talk about the critical hit and instant death immunities."

Fifteen percent damage?

Basil thought back of his fight with Steamslime. It had taken a lot of bombs and firepower to take down the snail-dragon; far more than opponents with a higher level like Apollyon and the Lalande Empire. Basil had blamed the beast's resilience on a high Vitality score and, well, him being a giant snail dragon, but the existence of damage reduction abilities explained it better.

Steamslime destroyed a city at level 20, so Basil shuddered to imagine what a level 50 dragon would be like. Yes, he would definitely invest in a class meant to slay them.

Blackcinders. The name echoed in his head. The astronauts' video indicated that at least one Unity dragon was active on the moon and Basil doubted she would stay there forever. *If she ever comes down, I'll be ready. The dark side of the moon will look like a happy place compared to what hell I'll welcome her with.*

Speaking of dragons, one of Walter's customers—the strange crowned skeleton from before—approached the counter with a serpent-shaped bottle of cologne.

"I have a question," the skeleton asked. "Does this dragonbane cologne work on godlike ones too?"

"It does, yes," Walter replied with an annoyed expression. Hagen chuckled darkly for a reason Basil couldn't fathom. "The potent smell of poverty and lead repels them. You will be satisfied or reimbursed."

"Good, I'll take it." The undead snapped his finger and a pile of colorful, skull-shaped gems appeared on the table. "Here's your payment."

"Thank you for your purchase, Mr. Furibon," Walter replied politely. "Always happy to do business with you."

"I can't wait to see the wyrm's face," the customer replied before vanishing with a maniacal chuckle.

"I..." Vasi cleared her throat. "I need to reassess some of my beliefs."

"You should," Hagen said. "Anyway, you'll never find a better dragon-hunting class than Dragonknight and its Perk will synergize well with Deathknight's ones. You can do no wrong with these two."

"Necromancy is the true path to freedom, Basil," Walter said with surprising passion. "Deathknight will grant you the greatest power in the world: mastery over death itself."

Charming...

"Can you write down these classes' Perks?" Basil asked with a frown. "That way I can see if they are truly a fit for me."

"With pleasure," Hagen replied. "The classes' abilities might differ in your world, but you'll have the gist of them."

"Thank you," Vasi said with a polite nod. "We are glad for your kind help."

"I'm always happy to support those who walk the path of necromancy." Walter sank in his chair, his gaze calculating. "I have another errand for you two, if you're up for it. The delivery will be more complicated than the last, but I will pay you handsomely for it."

"Sure," Basil replied. "You want a mobile phone next?"

"What's a phone?" Walter asked with a puzzled face.

"Oh, I've heard of them," Hagen said with enthusiasm. "They're metal birds that send letters instantly."

"We enjoy a good ghost postal service, so I will pass." Walter shrugged. "I will spare you the details, but the magical energy on which my world runs comes in a limited supply. My realm will slowly decline across centuries until one night, it shall shrink to nothingness."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Vasi said softly.

"Sounds like the heat death of the universe," Basil replied with a frown. "What can you do about it?"

A flash of disaste appeared on Walter's face. "You have seen the dead rise, Basil. If death can be overcome with little to no consequences, then is it truly inevitable? Or even necessary?"

"Point taken," Basil conceded, although he wasn't entirely sure about the 'no consequences' part. All the undead he had crossed paths with had either been enslaved by sorcerers or fueled by hatred. He couldn't call their existence anything but a half-life. "Have you found any solution?"

"Not yet," Walter admitted, "but your Trimurti System might hold the key to solving my conundrum. The incredible energy needed to transform your universe, to raise your dungeons, and create matter from nothing has to come from somewhere. This untapped power could save my world."

Vasi immediately guessed what was on his mind. "You want a neurotower."

"Yes," Walter confirmed. "Studying one of your dungeons' cores would let me figure out where their magical energy comes from."

"I actually have a theory that respects conservation of mass," Basil said. Walter squinted at him with interest. "A lot of matter is lost in the crafting process and disappears. I suspect it's transformed into energy to fuel dungeons. That or..."

The memory of that great and terrible eye looking down on Earth flashed through Basil's mind. "That, or they draw their power directly from the Trimurti."

Walter Tye observed him in silence for a few seconds, his eyes cold and unblinking. Basil was certain that the shopkeeper read his mind somehow. He felt Vasi's stare at his back too.

As promised, Basil had given the rest of his party an account of their Halloween discoveries on the way to Bordeaux. Vasi had taken the news surprisingly well, all things considered. Perhaps she had seen weirder things on her homeworld. Still, he could tell that knowing the entire world was held within a deity's palm had spooked her a bit.

"You are afraid," Walter whispered. "Of what you've seen."

"I am," Basil confessed. There was no shame in admitting. Anyone saying they weren't scared of a creature whose eye was bigger than the freaking *moon* was a goddamn liar. "And I'm scared of what it will do if Kalki dies."

Lovecraft said that man's oldest and greatest fear was that of the unknown. He was wrong.

Basil was scared specifically because he knew *exactly* what to expect. He would die, his friends would die, his entire civilization would die. All of mankind's history would end, its existence forgotten, its world blown away like dust to the wind.

And besides finding Kalki before he endangered himself, he could do nothing to prevent it.

He sensed Vasi's warm, comforting fingers on his arm. "Basil, don't feel down," she whispered. "We'll find him."

"I hope so," Basil replied without much enthusiasm. Tracking down Kalki would have been a hard task already without Dismaker Labs looking for him. He could only pray that they would meet again in Bordeaux.

"Basil." Walter Tye intertwined his fingers, his expression one of utter seriousness. "I am many centuries older than you. I will not pretend that with age comes wisdom, but I've gained a certain degree of perspective over my long years. Allow me to share with you an observation that, I believe, you will find all the more relevant in due time."

Basil's head perked up. The sheer intensity radiating from the man before him commanded his entire attention. Whatever Walter was about to reveal, he believed in it from the bottom of his heart.

"Our universe is full of powerful beings that like to present themselves as omnipotent and worthy of our worship," Walter explained. "They pretend, sometimes rightfully, that they are deities. That as mortal beings weaker than them, they are entitled to our veneration. But their power only comes from our perception of it. Any creature that *demand*s your respect without earning it is not worthy of *anything*. For this creature is *insecure*. It knows it is vulnerable, physically or emotionally, so it projects strength where it is lacking."

Basil struggled to imagine a creature larger than Jupiter having a weak point.

"That's where your imagination fails you," Walter said, all but confirming that he was indeed reading his customer's mind. "If we believe these entities are invincible, then they have defeated us in our souls. If we mortals think they can be beaten and overthrown... then we will inevitably find out a way to succeed. Remember that, Basil: no matter how powerful or overwhelming the danger ahead of us, there is *always* a path to victory. The road may require great sacrifices, it may be paved with blood and sweat; but if you have the strength of will to see it through, then even the gods will fold."

His words brimmed with such confidence... Basil shivered at hearing them. Walter Tye was no charismatic speaker, but his unshakeable belief infused each of his sentences. Basil could almost feel it. It was reassuring in a way.

When a Superboss believed he could survive the game, how could Basil argue against it?

"I hope you're right," Basil replied. "I'm skeptical... but I'll try to keep faith."

"Faith is a poor substitute for determination." Walter locked eyes with him. "Lend me the shell for a minute."

"The shell?" Did he mean Kalki's gift? "So you were reading my mind."

"The circumstances demanded it." If he felt sorry, Walter didn't show it. "*Please* lend me your shell."

Since he asked so nicely, Basil opened his inventory and selected the Conch Shell he received from Kalki. It surprised him that the personal inventory feature worked even across dimensional boundaries. Perhaps he carried the pocket dimension with himself somehow?

Walter examined the instrument carefully for a moment. He then traced a circled arrow symbol on its surface with his left index finger; somehow his nail left a black blood trail where it touched the shell.

"When you play a song with it, the Conch Shell will show you the direction of its previous owner," Walter explained as he returned the instrument to Basil. "This should help you on your quest to find the avatar."

"Thanks," Basil replied. He wasn't certain what to make of the man's generosity. "What's the range?"

"It will point the path as long as you share the same world," Walter replied. "This is not generosity, Basil. This is an investment. I cannot study a world bound to destroy itself, can I?"

Basil shrugged his shoulders. He should have seen it coming.

Walter proved to be a generous employer. Besides the class information and the Conch Shell upgrade, he also provided Basil with pouches full of alchemical reagents for the *Jekyll & Stein* recipes and notes on knight classes.

"Your theory about matter transformation is certainly plausible, but I would like to examine a neurotower server and confirm it to myself," Walter said before his customers could leave. "My research could help explain why your world was transported out of place... and hopefully, how to put it back in its proper place."

"The server will be protected by Crafter Encryption," Vasi warned. "I struggle to study the Unity's runetech because of similar protections."

Walter scoffed. "Crafter Encryption only affects individuals with a lower level than the crafter's. Unless their creator is already a god, then I am overqualified."

"Don't mind the chief's arrogance," Hagen commented lightly. "It's part of his charm."

"It's not arrogance when you can back it up," Walter countered.

"Pride before a fall," Basil and Hagen said almost at the same time; Basil lightly, Hagen somberly.

New Quest: Forever Serpent's Errand II

Recommended Level: 25.

Walter Tye's journey down the cat video rabbit hole continues. Further the cause of online necromancy by providing him a neurotower server!

Reward: 60,000 Bonus EXP.

Basil wasn't certain how he felt about handing a reality-altering device to someone as sinister as Walter Tye. The shopkeeper had acted fairly in his dealings with the party so far, but he remained a cold and dangerous creature.

Still, he was perhaps the only person short of Dismaker Labs' board capable of unlocking the neurotower's mysteries. Basil would cross that bridge when they reached it.

Basil and Vasi teleported back to Earth with their new gifts right as the sun started rising over the horizon. The group had stopped in an abandoned parking lot close to an empty village. Rosemarine rested on the pavement, her petals oriented at the shining dawn. Shellgirl took stock of scavenged supplies and Buggy melted metal plates onto the Steamobile to reinforce the armor. As for Plato, he should return from his scouting mission shortly.

We should be close to the Garonne river by now, Basil thought. Bordeaux will be right around the corner.

"Vasi, Partner, you're back!" Shellgirl welcomed them with a smile. "How was your shopping trip? Did you get a gift card?"

"Maybe next time," Basil teased her. Knowing Walter, he would have to sign it with his blood.

"I'm surprised you didn't come with us," Vasi said with a grin. "I thought you would enjoy pestering Walter for advice."

"I prefer to learn by experience, and our current business models are completely different. He caters to an exclusive clientele while Partner and I intend to service impoverished masses." Shellgirl's smile faltered. "That and... I didn't feel like it."

As the Mimic Booty's eyes turned to look up at the sun, Basil realized he wasn't the only one questioning his place in the universe. Shellgirl had always struck him as the smartest of dungeon-created monsters, the quickest to develop a personality and ethics of her own. Of course the astronaut video would affect her.

Buggy noticed Shellgirl's unease and immediately moved to cheer her up. "Hey, it's all right!" he said with enthusiasm. "It doesn't change anything."

"I will eat it one day," Rosemarine promised. Her tongue licked her fangs as she looked at the sun. "One day..."

"I know, I know," Shellgirl replied, though her tone implied otherwise. "It's just... I got an awesome new body and abilities, but I still feel small. If that makes sense."

"You're not small," Vasi reassured her. "You're a start-up. You need time to scale up."

Shellgirl chuckled weakly. "There's always bigger business out there though."

"I mean, even if that thing closes its hand, does it matter what we might die from?" Buggy asked. "We could end up swallowed by the earth, drowned in a swamp, slain by the Apocalypse Force, maybe even eaten by bigger monsters. There are so many ways to die at any time, so what's one more?"

Basil laughed.

His reaction drew everyone's attention. Buggy and Shellgirl looked at him in fear, Rosemarine with bloodthirst, and Vasi with curiosity.

"It's rare to hear you laugh," the witch noted. "A shame."

"Speak for yourself," Shellgirl said with terrified eyes. "He sounds like death itself!"

"Sorry..." Basil calmed himself. "It's just... you're completely right, Buggy."

The centimagma blinked in confusion. "I-I am?"

"I can't argue with your logic," Basil replied with a grin. "With everything in that damn world trying to kill us, what's one more danger?"

On the list of potential threats to his life, he would put universal annihilation right before Apollyon and after cancer.

"Here's my advice, Shellgirl," Vasi said. "Drink and forget about it."

"Will it help?" Shellgirl asked hopefully.

"Not the drinking part," Basil replied dryly. "The forget part, maybe."

"Killjoy," Vasi taunted him. "Where's your alcohol police badge?"

"In my inventory," Basil deadpanned back.

"Oh, can I see it?" Buggy asked naïvely.

Shellgirl nodded, a frown on her face. "Okaaaay... I'll try one piece of advice and see about the other."

Basil was about to chide her for even considering drinking on the job when Plato bolted into the parking lot. The cat breathed heavily on arrival, which immediately worried his owner.

"What's happening?" Basil asked with a frown. "Plato? Did you sense danger?"

"Ah... ah..." The cat caught his breath. "You won't guess who I smelled on my scouting."

Basil's heart skipped a beat. "Kalki?"

"No, your police girlfriend!" Plato sneered. "Her and her silly dogs!"

"Neria?" She was alive? The thought came as an *immense* relief to Basil. He feared she might have died after they lost contact. "Where?"

"A few minutes away up the wine river."

The wine river?

Guided by Plato, the group immediately traveled on foot towards the Garonne. The sky darkened as they approached the river. Sinister, dark purple particles floated among the clouds and tainted the entire horizon. The effect superficially resembled a dungeon's aurora, but more diffused. Basil likened the phenomenon to a drop of poison spreading into a sky blue sea.

A notification confirmed that something unnatural was at work in the region.

Dionysus-Orochi's [God-Field: Liber Pater] changed the field to [Shinto Bacchus].

- *[Mind], [Corrosion], [Water], [Earth], and [Mythic] elements are strengthened.*
- *[Fire], [Frost], and [Lightning] elements are weakened.*
- *Chances of inflicting the [Berserk], [Charm], [Drunk], and [Madness] ailments are doubled.*
- *Drinking alcohol will replenish HP/SP, and the [Drunk] ailment will buff up [Strength] and [Vitality].*

Dionysus? God-Field? Basil had a terrible terrible gut feeling upon reading these words, which a look at the Garonne only reinforced.

Larger than the l'Adour and taking its source in Spain, the river was almost synonymous with the Gironde French region. Bordeaux was located at its mouth and in ancient times drew its wealth from the trade it brought. The river made the land fertile enough for wine production.

But now, Bordeaux's people only had to take a sip to get drunk.

Basil stared speechlessly at the riverbank. The Garonne's waters had turned into a deep red wine streaked with white bubbles. An unnatural current carried dead fish away. The whole place stank of rot and alcohol.

"This..." Vasi put a hand on her mouth. "I love wine as much as the next gal, but this... this doesn't look safe to drink..."

"Is someone polluting the river?" Shellgirl asked with a scowl of anger. "Fools! I can't even swim in it safely!"

What the hell is going on here? Basil didn't even dare to touch the wine; it looked a little bit too much like blood to him. He glanced up the river. Whatever phenomenon affected the skies spread from distant Bordeaux. *Did a special dungeon pop up in the city?*

"Master Bohem!" a female voice called out his name, followed by barks of happiness. "It is you! It's really you!"

Basil turned at the other side of the riverbank. Two dogs looked at him from the other side: a doberman and a basque shepherd. Basil immediately recognized them.

The Elissalde Sisters' hounds of war.

"Girls!" Buggy snapped his mandibles in happiness, as if meeting up with old friends. "So glad to see you again!"

"I told you I smelled them," the doberman told her companion. "The cat's stench is unmistakable."

"Hey!" Plato complained. "It's you dogs who smell worse than the wine!"

"So big..." the basque shepherd whispered upon noticing Rosemarine.

"I killed a dinosaur!" Rosemarine replied proudly. "And I ate it!"

Basil sighed in relief. If the dogs were alive and well, then officer Elissalde should be too. "Is your mistress safe?" he asked them. "Is Kalki?"

"Mistress Neria is safe and sound!" The basque shepherd replied, her canine expression darkening. "But mistress Maya..."

"Your Kalki friend fled the city," the doberman barked. "They were after him."

Basil grit his teeth. Damn it, as he feared Kalki's visit to Bordeaux triggered a disaster of some kind. "They?"

"Those Metalolypus jerks!" The basque shepherd growled. "Traitors, all of them!"

"Metal Olympus," her fellow dog corrected him. "Their priests went berserk at the sight of your friend. They said he had to surrender to them immediately, or they would take him by force!"

Basil clenched his fists. Shit. He knew the Apocalypse Force was looking for Kalki, as was the Dismaker Labs' board. He should have expected other factions to know of his significance and try to claim him for themselves.

Letting him leave my house alone was a mistake, Basil cursed himself. *Damn it, I should have followed Kalki the moment I saw that Main Quest notification.*

"But the big human chief, General Leblanc, he's big inside and out!" the doberman shouted. "He told them to shove it and let your friend go!"

"Where?" Basil didn't know whether to feel relieved that Kalki escaped with his life or frustrated to have missed him. "Where did he go?"

"I don't know," the doberman apologized. "But Mistress Neria will!"

"We will lead you to her," the basque shepherd said. "She'll be so happy to see you!"

"She will." The doberman nodded ferociously. "We need your help to rescue mistress Maya! The city is in chaos!"

Basil didn't need to be a genius to put two and two together. "I suppose Metal Olympus didn't take the affront well?"

"They didn't," the doberman confirmed. "They were furious. They cursed us and then... and then..."

The hound glanced at the wine river and whined.

"They called one of their gods."

Chapter 12: Man vs Bridge

Bordeaux's right bank, or 'Rive Droite', was something of an aberration.

Although Bordeaux was one of France's largest and most developed cities, the right bank of the Garonne river was underdeveloped. Half-savage expanses of muddy tall grass and abandoned houses faced chic, luxurious docks shining from the left side. In the few times Basil had visited the city he often sat there, waiting for the Garonne's level to lower and reveal the wrecks of abandoned ships in its depths. At night, the streetlights gave Bordeaux an almost mystical feel as a horizon of artificial stars burst to life to illuminate the city.

Or at least, that was how Basil remembered it.

A thick red fog swallowed the left shore, covering its buildings and extinguishing its lights. Basil couldn't see any of Bordeaux's neoclassical buildings, nor either of its famous cathedral's twin towers. A dense, bloody mist obscured them all under a wretched purple sky.

Worst of all, the whole city stank of alcohol. The stench drove Basil mad.

"I know why my books call it the city of wine now," Shellgirl mused while pinching her slime nose. "But I thought it would smell better."

"Me too," Vasi replied with a frown as they followed Elissalde's dogs on foot.

"Boss, look!" Buggy pointed his antennae at a magnificent stone bridge surging from the red mist. Basil identified it as Bordeaux's 'Pont de Pierre' from its old-fashioned, imperial-style street lamps. It used to be one of the city's most beautiful monuments.

Whatever sorcery affected Bordeaux disfigured the bridge too. Sinister Shinto-like red archways appeared all over its length, surrounded by antiquity-style statues of Greek deities. Not only was the architectural mishmash absolutely *hideous*, but vines also infested the bridge's stones. The plants grew out of the wine river and slowly undermined the foundations.

Couldn't a so-called god pick up better architects?

The transformation effect eerily reminded Basil of a dungeon's terraforming. Yet this one, as far as he knew, was projected by an individual creature rather than a neurotower. If a monster could rewrite reality across such a large distance, what could a high-level one do? Summon meteors? Obscure the sun?

"Isn't one of the bridges missing?" Plato asked with a frown. "I remember two of them."

"General Leblanc ordered the bridge of Saint-Jean's destruction weeks ago," their doberman guide explained. "Sea serpents from the ocean damaged it beyond repair."

"Fools!" Bussy choked in indignation. As an amateur architect, the centimagma took the bridge's redesign personally. "The vines fragilize the foundations! What a crappy job! No respect for good masonry!"

"I'm afraid this is the least of our worries," a familiar voice echoed above them.

Basil raised his eyes. Two flying forms approached them from above: some kind of golden-feathered griffin the size of a small lion carrying two riders, and a certain plague doctor with wings.

Zachariel

Level 22 [Angel]

Party: Artzain Ahizpak.

Bordeaux's guardian angel had kept its post.

"Mister Zach!" Bussy snapped his mandibles in happiness. "I'm so glad to see you again!"

Basil smiled, doubly so when he identified one of the two people riding the griffin.

Neria Elissalde

Level 23 [Humanoid] (Guard 17/Gunslinger 6).

Party: Artzain Ahizpak.

"Officer!" Basil waved a hand at her. "Neria!"

"Basil! Is it really you?" Neria Elissalde froze upon noticing Rosemarine's colossal, lumbering body. "Oh my god, is that... is that your plant?"

"Hello, Miss!" Rosemarine's tongue emerged from her toothy maw, much to the policewoman's horror. "You look as delicious as ever!"

Aww, she had learned flattery!

"I..." Officer Elissalde cleared her throat, unsure how to react. "Thank you, I suppose."

Her griffin landed on the right bank alongside Zachariel, allowing Basil to examine the last member of this small trio: a child holding on to the griffin's mane.

The girl couldn't have been older than eight, with stark gray eyes and long black hair. She was a lovely child, though her choice of dress—a long, antiquity-styled Greek tunic—was quite eccentric. Something about her felt odd, although Basil couldn't put his fingers on it. She looked at the group with a blank face and a distant gaze, as if peering through them.

Nessia Marius (Nymphblooded)

Level 15 [Humanoid/Fairy] (Oracle of Dionysus-Ananke 10/Witch 3/Griffinrider 2)

Party: Artzain Ahizpak.

Witsy (Griffin)

Level 15 [Avian/Beast]

Party: Artzain Ahizpak.

An... an oracle of Dionysus? The same creature responsible for the fog? Basil was immediately wary of the girl, but he trusted Neria enough to provide an answer.

"Mmm..." Plato examined the griffin, sneering at the wings but appreciating the feline body. "I knew we cats had a love-hate relationship with birds, but to think one of my kindred would produce a mixed-race bastard..."

"I'm beautiful," the griffin argued with a childish voice. "Like a feathered candy!"

"Don't be a racist, Plato," Basil chided his cat. He approached the child and couldn't help but pat her on the head. In spite of his distrust, Basil always had a soft spot for kids. "Hello, little one. What's your name? I'm Basil."

"Nessia," she replied softly. "But you already knew that, didn't you?"

Neria, Nessia... There was a joke to be made here, but Basil was too happy to see Elissalde safe to comment. The girl was more perceptive than she looked, though that might be because of her relatively high level.

It saddens me to see someone her age with classes, Basil thought grimly. The Apocalypse spared no one.

"Is she another of your sisters?" Basil asked Neria. When her expression turned somber, he immediately realized he should have worded it better.

"No," Officer Elissalde shook her head as she climbed down from the griffin's back. "Nessia... how to say it..."

The little girl pointed a finger at the skies. "I fell from there."

Yet another displaced immigrant from a distant universe. They started to pop up everywhere lately.

"You should open a tourism agency," Basil told Shellgirl. "There's money to make in the business."

"Eh, too much hassle," she replied. "And is that how human children are made?"

"Yes, when a man and a woman love each other very much, a child falls from the skies," Vasi deadpanned.

"Can it happen between a hag and a human?" Buggy asked innocently. "I-I mean, out of curiosity..."

"Sir, it's good to see you again." Zachariel clenched Basil's hands, before immediately pulling back. "Did you wash them with holy water first?"

"Of course," Basil lied. The angel's eccentricities always brought a smile to his face. "Any progress on eradicating Coronatheism?"

"Ah, Sir, if only you knew the terrible state of the French's spiritual health! I blame years of faith privatization." Zachariel let out a long sigh of frustration. "I was making progress when this new plague of Greek Fever hit us."

"I'm so glad to see you all alive and well. You've all grown so much." Neria smiled warmly at Vasi. "You even recruited a new face."

"Vasilisa." Vasi introduced herself and shook the policewoman's hand. "But you can call me Vasi. Basil wouldn't shut up about you."

Neria chuckled and glanced at Basil. "Wouldn't he?"

"I mentioned you once or twice," Basil replied with stoicism. Officer Elissalde was a friend and nothing more. If Vasi hoped to tease him, she had failed.

Officer Elissalde smiled, but didn't comment on the subject further. "I admit I'm surprised to see you here at all, Basil. The last time we met you wouldn't leave your house for any reason."

"Yes, but then the house burned," Shellgirl summed it up with crude bluntness.

"It burned?" Neria covered her mouth. "My God, I'm so sorry to hear that..."

Basil glared at Shellgirl, who shrugged. He hated being pitied.

"It's a long story," he replied. "But let's just say I'm on something of a personal crusade against the fools and the wicked."

"Ah, I see... that would explain your level. I never saw anyone past twenty-five, and you're thirty now." Officer Elissalde frowned. She must have read his System information. "Wait, did you found a Guild?"

"How did you guess?"

"Homeowner Revenge Association," Neria replied with a deadpan look. "It's a dead giveaway."

Good. The world had to *understand* Basil's message. "I'm happy to see you alive, officer," he said. "Honestly I worried you had perished after we lost contact."

"It was a close call," Officer Elissalde admitted with a sigh. "If Nessia didn't guide us to safety, we would still be looking for a way out of the fog."

Basil frowned at the child. Although she appeared outwardly normal, he couldn't shake the feeling that she appeared far too calm for her age and current situation. "Why would an oracle of the 'god,'" the word felt bitter in Basil's mouth, "help you escape its fog?"

Little Nessia held his gaze with bravery. "I came to free the god. He called me from beyond the gate."

"To free him?" Vasi asked with a frown. "I do not understand, is he sealed?"

"This Dionysus is not himself," the oracle argued. "He can't control his actions. When the fog appeared, he warned me to flee."

This Dionysus? Her words made little sense to Basil, but they seemed clear to Vasi.

"I see," the witch said with a nod. "You are an oracle from your world's Dionysus. Another version of him."

As little Nessia nodded in confirmation, Basil realized he hated the multiverse. *Hated* it.

"Is that the reason for the Orochi bit?" Basil pointed a thumb at the Shinto archways sprouting on the distant bridge. "The only Orochi I know of is a Japanese game boss."

"I cannot tell if the two are related." Officer Elissalde scowled. "But from what I've seen, this Dionysus differs quite a bit from the traditional imagery."

"He is in pain," Little Nessia whispered. "I can feel it. A poison clouds his mind and torments his soul. His screams for help guided me to this place. He's sick, I tell you."

"He looks pretty powerful for a sick god," Plato snickered, his eyes set on the fog clouding the other bank. "He turned an entire city into his litter."

The child pouted in annoyance. "I mean what I say. He's not himself."

"Well, the real Dionysus didn't have Shinto gates around," Basil conceded. And that Orochi bit sounded a bit suspicious to him. From what he remembered, it referred to a snake monster of some kind. "You came alone to a foreign world just to free a god from... what, madness? Forgive me if I'm skeptical."

The girl glared at him. "I came with Witsy and dad's guards."

"That's right." Her griffin nodded with pride. "I'm her talons!"

Her father had guards? She must have been born into wealth. That explained her strange confidence for someone her age. Rich brats were always more headstrong and entitled than the norm in Basil's experience. Too much spoiling, too soon.

"Nessia came to Bordeaux with quite the large escort," Officer Elissalde confirmed, "but they were trapped inside the fog like all the others. The mist interferes with electronic communications and those who wander inside don't come out. It's why I could no longer contact you with the radio."

"The city is crawling with soldiers, sir," Zachariel explained. "They just can't find each other and coordinate."

"General Leblanc is somewhere inside, and..." Officer Elissalde looked away, her dogs whining at her sides. "Maya too."

No wonder she looked unhappy. She had already lost a commanding officer, and now her sister's life might be in jeopardy.

"Sorry guys, but why are you making a deal out of this 'Dionysus'?" Shellgirl asked with a confused look. As a recently born monster, she knew nothing of him. "Is he some kind of big shot?"

"He was a god of wine worshiped by the Greek civilization," Basil explained with a frown. "But I thought you needed to reach level 100 to become a deity. Shouldn't the Incursion Level Barrier prevent his kind from appearing?"

For once, the System offered him a cryptic answer.

No Overgod has been selected yet. No candidate for the throne is available.

So either this Dionysus wasn't a god at all, or there was a difference between a normal—the very term made Basil confused—deity and an Overgod.

"Are we sure this is the real Dionysus?" Basil struggled to accept it. "And not just a dungeon-summoned monster impersonating him?"

"I can't tell," Officer Elissalde replied. "He claims to be a god at least, and his power speaks for itself."

"He is Dionysus," Little Nessia argued. "I'm sure of it. I can feel it."

"Does it matter?" Plato asked in annoyance. "All this talk makes me want to puke. Let's slice his throat and be done with it."

"Slice his throat?" Little Nessia whitened in horror. "You want to *kill* him?"

Zachariel immediately came to her assistance. "As an angel of science, I recommend trying to heal him first. If he truly suffers from a sickness of the soul, we should at least attempt a spiritual operation. Perhaps a holy waterboarding session would clear his mind."

"As a former student in pharmacovigilance, I'm tempted to agree," Basil said. "But your would-be 'patient' has enough firepower to turn an entire city and its rivers into a frat boy's nightmare. Too many lives are at stake."

"Let me try," Little Nessia insisted with surprising confidence. "What do you have to lose?"

"All of our lives and then some," Basil replied bluntly. After what happened to Orcine and Kuikui, he wouldn't take chances in battle.

"Yo, can we debate this later?" Plato cut in. "First the hippie, then the drunk."

Good point. Basil ignored Little Nessia's glare and focused on Officer Elissalde next. "What happened to Kalki?"

"I showed him the server you recovered," Officer Elissalde said. "As you suspected, it triggered... a flashback, I suppose?"

"A flash of insight," Zachariel argued. "That was no memory."

"How can you be sure?" Vasi asked with a frown.

"Because this man does not suffer from amnesia, Miss Yaga. He simply did not exist until a few months earlier." Zachariel's words captured the group's attention. "I examined this Kalki's spiritual health and, while it was excellent, he showed no sign of brain damage of any kind. Instead, I suspect he came into being like most monsters."

"Makes sense," Basil said. If he was indeed Vishnu's avatar, he probably didn't exist before the Apocalypse. "What did he see?"

"It was hard to make sense out of what he said," Neria admitted. "From what I understood, he saw the place where the servers were created."

"He saw the neurotowers' factory?" Now *that* was interesting. If Basil could figure out how neurotowers were made, he could perhaps identify a killswitch.

"Or so we assume," Neria said with a sigh. "We were making headways on his case when Metal Olympus turned on us. We didn't anticipate a betrayal from them. General Leblanc was about to sign an alliance treaty with their faction to retake France when your friend's presence revealed their true colors. At least Kalki managed to get away in time."

"Where did that hippie flee to?" Plato asked.

"To the UNESCO HQ in Paris. He thought the place would hold the answers he sought. He's probably halfway there as we speak."

Basil gritted his teeth in disappointment. Even with the Conch Shell to show his party the path ahead, Kalki had a large head start on them. Basil figured that his bird mount also moved far faster than Rosemarine could too.

"You want to go after him?" Officer Elissalde asked. "I won't stop you, Basil, but... I would *really* appreciate your help right now."

"And you have it," Basil replied. Catching up to Kalki was a top priority, but he couldn't abandon a friend in need. A man stuck to his principles or he was no man at all. "What's this so-called god's level?"

"I don't know." Neria chewed her lip. "But he's far, *far* stronger than Steamslime for sure. And he has soldiers under his control. Monsters and humans."

"Don't kill him!" Little Nessia insisted. "I told you, he's not himself."

"Alright." Basil glanced down at the child. He was trying to be patient with her considering her age, but he wouldn't mince his words. "What's your suggestion then? That we talk it out with him? Do you have a cure ready if things go south?"

As he expected, Little Nessia chewed her lip in annoyance and didn't answer. She had no solution to provide.

Yeah, I'm not going to jeopardize such a dangerous fight for a child's delusions, Basil thought. For all I know she misinterpreted the entire situation.

"We could at least try to capture him, sir," Zachariel argued, putting special emphasis on the *try*.

"I doubt he will come out to fight us at all," Vasi pointed out. "This fog offers him a perfect smokescreen."

"He might," Shellgirl countered. "If we make the right bet. He came for Kalki, right? Can't we lie and say we have him? He'll fall for it if we use the Conch Shell as bait."

"We need better proof," Basil replied, until an idea struck him like lightning. He turned his head in Vasi's direction and swiftly read her status information. "Unless..."

The witch frowned back at him. "What's on your mind, handsome?"

"If I remember well, one of your new spells is called Glamor," Basil said. "Does it work as the name suggests?"

"It creates an illusion allowing me to pass as any humanoid creature of my choice." Vasi immediately caught on. "Ah, I see what you want to try. But my spell is too weak to fake a System ID. Any divination spell will reveal the truth."

"Mmm..." Basil summoned his *Jekyll & Stein* book from his inventory. "What if..."

He skipped through the pages and quickly found the entry he was looking for.

Mr. Hyde's Play Jekyll recipe

Family: Potion (Consumable)

Quality: Variable.

Effect: Allows the drinker to fake his System information for a set of time (based on quality) per milliliter consumed.

Created by Mr. Hyde to play pranks on his other side, this potion will temporarily allow you to fake your System information to outsiders. Mostly used by underage people to access nightclubs. Keep away from children.

Perfect. With the Conch Shell to provide a fake smell, the group could credibly force a confrontation on favorable terrain.

"We have the ingredients for an invisibility potion too," Basil muttered to himself. "Mmm..."

"Basil, just to be clear..." Neria shifted in place uncomfortably. "You want to fight a *pagan god*?"

"I only respect one god." Basil glared at the red fog. "And his name is *Jesus Fucking Christ*."

Bringing down pagan idols was his duty as a Christian, and Basil had become frighteningly good at burning monsters.

"I've never eaten a god before," Rosemarine whispered with glee. Her slimy tongue licked her fangs hungrily. "I hope he tastes like honey."

Officer Elissalde appeared spooked. "You're set on it..."

"We killed a snail-dragon from outer space," Basil replied with confidence. "We'll just have to hit this one harder. An ambush may be our only shot at defeating him and freeing your sister."

His confidence swayed Officer Elissalde a little. "... I suppose."

"Don't kill him," Little Nessia whispered in defeat. She knew she was outvoted. "Please."

Basil sighed. "Fine, we'll try to settle it peacefully and get to the bottom of this... sickness, whatever you call it. But if I feel that it puts *any* of us in danger, we'll fight to kill with no hesitation. It's him or us."

"It's a plan I can get behind," Officer Elissalde said. Little Nessia nodded slowly; it was the best deal she would get. "Alright, I'm with you."

"Us too," her dogs spoke as one. "We'll help you, Master Bohem, Mistress Neria!"

"Me too," Little Nessia suggested. "Witsy and I can heal."

"Hell no." Basil wouldn't hear of it. "You and your bird stay behind. You're both benched."

"I'm sorry, Nessia, but I'm with him on this one," Officer Elissalde said, much to the little girl's anger. "You should stay behind."

"I'm level fifteen," Little Nessia argued with childish pride.

"You're half my level and a third of my age," Basil shot back with a tone that brooked no argument. From what the System told him, even the dogs were five levels higher than Little Nessia. They would pull their weight, whereas the kid might die from any stray shot. "No way I'm letting an eight-year-old child into a warzone."

The girl crossed her arms in annoyance and grumbled to herself. "I'm nine..."

"She could actually help us at no danger to herself." Vasi put a hand on her waist, her lips curling into a wide smile. "She's a witch and my Hag Coven Perk doesn't require distance."

Basil raised an eyebrow. "You want to add her to the party and activate the coven feature?"

"It will be easy with the Guild's interlocked parties system," Vasi argued. She put her hands on Little Nessia's shoulders. "Come on... look at her face... please..."

"I could register my party with your Guild," Neria proposed with a warm smile. "That way you could benefit from some of my Perks."

"Mmm..." Basil examined Little Nessia. Both the child and Vasi looked up at him with big doe-eyes. Although Basil's heart of stone remained unmoved, he didn't see why he would deny the request. Little Nessia was no monster, so she would survive even if he were to perish in battle. "So long as she stays far, far at the rear."

"Sure," Little Nessia replied. Her tone made Basil unsure whether she was dutifully obeying or lying to his face, but a deal was a deal.

You have recruited the [Artzain Ahizpak] Party into your Guild!

You switched the Rosemarine Eglantine de la Barthe and Nessia Marius Party members.

Congratulations, you formed a coven with Nessia Marius and Vasilisa Yaga. You receive a +30% bonus to crafting potions and magical items and the cost of casting spells is halved. Members of your coven can cast the following Witchcraft coven spells if they possess the required spellcasting tiers: [Witch Ladder] (Tier I), [Evil Eye] (Tier II), [Witch Ball] (Tier III),

[Bruxa Murder] (Tier IV), **[Zduhać Projection]** (Tier V), **[Magonia]** (Tier VI), **[Grand Hex]** (Tier VII), **[Call the Drude]** (Tier VIII), **[Grimalkin Gate]** (Tier IX), **[Walpurgis Night]** (Tier X).

"Aww..." Rosemarine complained. "Not again."

"It's just one time," Basil promised as he examined the new Coven spells that Vasi could cast. Witch Ladder summoned, well, a ladder from nothing, and Witch Ball created an item capable of repelling evil ghosts and spirits.

Evil Eye though debuffed Luck for multiple foes and Bruxa Murder...

"You won't like this spell, Plato," Basil mused. "At all."

The cat groaned. "It involves birds, doesn't it? No, don't tell me. I don't want to know."

"Suit yourself." Basil glanced at his team. "Alright guys, I have a plan. But to make sure we'll pull it off correctly... we'll practice it first."

No more improvisation.

A few hours later, the group stood in the middle of Bordeaux's bridge. Neither the light of the moon nor the stars pierced through the purple aura obscuring the skies. At least the street lamps still worked.

How long must we wait? Basil wondered as he glared at the fog with his halberd in hand. Neria Elissalde, her dogs, Shellgirl, and Buggy formed a defensive perimeter around him. The rest of his allies were either waiting in ambush or staying at the rear. Though in Plato's case, one could say that he's hiding in plain sight...

As for Vasi, she knelt at Buggy's feet. A veil of sorcery disguised her as Kalki. The trick was vividly effective; having seen the man himself, the witch mimicked his appearance to perfection. She even faked struggling against the ropes holding her hands and the cloth piece gagging her. She was a natural actress.

"They're watching," a voice whispered.

"Ah!" Basil turned his head in the voice's direction with his halberd raised for the kill. A ghostly apparition of Little Nessia appeared at his side, ethereal and translucent. "What's this?"

"Is it Halloween again?" Shellgirl asked in confusion.

"I'm alive," the little girl replied. "It's an Oracle ability."

"Well, don't spook me like that again," Basil chided her. "I almost cut you in half."

"You would have failed," the child replied as a matter of fact.

Not even ten and already a smartass.

"She's right, Boss," Buggy said, his antennae raised in alarm. "I sense someone approaching from the other side."

Neria Elissalde cocked her rifle. The officer came equipped with riot gear, a plexiglass shield, and other firearms attached to her belt. "A messenger."

Indeed, a woman emerged from the fog alone dressed in a white robe and red, traditional Japanese pants. Thanks to his extensive video game culture, Basil immediately identified the outfit as that of a Miko, a Japanese priestess. A serpent mask covered her face except for long black hair. She was unarmed, yet showed no fear as she stepped onto the bridge.

Here comes the Mouth of Sauron, Basil thought. Why the hell would a Greek god use a Japanese-themed priestess? Something doesn't add up here.

Janine Mazel

Level 20 [Humanoid] (Priest of Dionysus-Orochi 11/Brawler 9).

Faction: Metal Olympus.

Basil couldn't help but scoff at the French name. She was a cosplayer!

"Have you mortals finally seen reason?" the masked woman rasped. She stopped under the shadow of a Shinto archway covering the bridge. Greek statues observed her from both sides of the bridge. "Relinquish him."

Straight to business.

"Summon your boss first," Basil ordered. "I wanna talk to him first."

The woman snorted arrogantly. "Or what?"

"Or his head will roll over the floor." Basil raised his halberd right above 'Kalki's' neck. The fiery rune empowering it faltered a little because of the field's effect, but the blade remained as sharp as ever. "Maybe I'll feed him to my Centimagma. I haven't decided yet."

"Hail Emperor Vegan!" Buggy shouted, trying his best villain impersonation. It left much to be appreciated, but his monstrous appearance made up for his lack of a good script. "Fry the meatbags!"

Although he couldn't see the woman's expression under her mask, Basil noticed her freeze with apprehension. If she was worried for his safety, then the potion managed to fool her scans. Vasi's muffled screams and struggle against her bindings added a little touch of urgency to the scene.

"I think you're under the misconception that this man is my gift. You're wrong." Basil pointed his halberd at the messenger. "He's my *hostage*, which means you'll play by my rules."

"Fool," the woman rasped. "You do not know who he is."

"He's Vishnu's avatar," Basil replied. This time, the messenger flinched. *Gotcha*. "Wanna see how he bleeds?"

"Then you know the world will die with him," the priestess pointed out. Officer Elissalde turned her head in Basil's direction, her face hidden behind her helmet.

Oh right, he had forgotten to mention that detail.

"Beats me," Basil shrugged. "We'll just move to another planet."

"You're bluffing," the messenger replied.

Basil took a step forward.

He walked up all the way to the priestess, who immediately adopted a boxing stance. Buggy moved behind 'Kalki' and threatened the hostage with his mandibles.

"Look at me, you little shit. Look at me in the eyes." Basil stopped in front of the messenger and glared at her. "In the eyes."

Two black eyes stared at him from behind the snake mask.

"I'm Basil Jean-François Bohén. I'm Bulgarian." Basil smiled arrogantly and whispered into her ear. "I can do whatever the **fuck** I want."

Such moments made Basil glad that he was a blue-eyed blonde. The references wrote themselves.

Whatever the case, his impression was spot on. The priestess' gaze wavered as he kept staring at her, unblinking, unmoving.

"Why would you do that?" she whispered in shock.

"Because..." Buggy roared and did his best mad beast impersonation. "We're *evil!*"

He delivered the corny line with such passion that Basil immediately forgave him.

"Your boss has five minutes of my time," Basil warned the priestess with a sinister wink. "And I'm baaaaaad at math."

He didn't need to wait that long.

"Stay back," the priestess asked. She joined her hands and whispered some kind of prayer to herself. "I... I will call my master."

"Try anything suspicious and the Indian immigrant gets it," Basil said as he returned to his starting spot.

He had barely taken a few steps when he noticed an invisible pressure in the air. A small weight fell on his shoulders and the stench of alcohol from the wine river grew stronger. Buggy's antennae pointed at the fog in alarm.

Something was approaching from within the mist.

"He's screaming," Little Nessia whispered.

"I don't hear anything," Basil replied. Neria raised her rifle and the rest of the party prepared for a fight.

"On the inside." Her voice dripped with disgust. "He's begging us for help."

The priestess knelt as her master floated out of the mist.

The... thing that emerged from the red fog didn't match any artist's vision of Dionysus. In fact, it barely looked human at all. The creature was roughly four meters tall, a naked colossus of a humanoid with a bodybuilder's muscles. His skin was covered in pale purple scales lined with gold. His feet and a black tail floated above the ground, as if the mere act of walking was beneath him. A white mask covered the upper half of his face underneath short silver hair and a golden laurel crown. Two eyeless serpents surged from his shoulders like a second pair of arms.

One of them coiled around a captive Maya Elissalde and lifted her above the ground. Neria's sister was unconscious, her face beaten bloody. The officer raised her rifle, but didn't dare shoot. It would spell her death.

The pressure that monster gave off... It felt eerily similar to Apollyon's. An aura of pure malice and danger.

At least now Basil knew where the Orochi part of the name came from.

"You have done well to bring the avatar to me, mortals." Two voices echoed at once out of the creature's many mouths. One raspy like a snake's hiss, the other human and masculine. Two yellow eyes shone like the stars behind his mask. "You shall be duly rewarded."

Basil heard the words, but barely paid attention to them. A feeling of familiarity washed over him, as if he had heard one of the voices before. He struggled to recognize it... until he remembered a certain video.

No way in hell. Basil stared at the creature in shock. *Could it be?*

"You will be akin to gods among men," Anton Maxwell had told his board on the apocalypse's eve. "Free to shape the world as you see fit."

And he had delivered.

Chapter 13: Man vs Cheat

"Maya!" Officer Elissalde raised her rifle at the reptilian abomination facing them. "Release her at once!"

"Did you take me for a fool, Elissalde?" 'Dionysus'—or rather, the man pretending to be him—smiled ear to ear. His teeth were fangs and his tongue forked. "Do you think any loose end is beneath my notice? When you escaped my fog with that child's help, I knew you would come back with army reinforcements and prepared accordingly."

The serpent head coiling around the unconscious Maya Elissalde opened its mouth. Fangs surged right above the hostage's head, ready to bite it off at the first warning.

"Still, to think you would bring me the Preserver... we might be able to make a fair deal after all," 'Dionysus' said. "How about this? The Preserver's avatar for your sister's life,"

Neria's handle on her rifle wavered. She was considering the shot, but the threat to her sister's life stayed her hand. Her dogs growled and barked in anger. Buggy tensed up next to Nessia's projection, ready for battle. Shellgirl and 'Kalki' both glanced at Basil, waiting for a signal of any kind.

He didn't say a thing. His mind struggled to make sense out of the situation, and even the System wouldn't help.

Dionysus-Orochi's [Divine Vessel] blocked your [Monster Insight].

"Partner," Shellgirl whispered. "Do you want me to negotiate an exchange? I can do it, you know."

Basil remained silent. His hand tightened on his halberd's shaft with a mix of incomprehension and cold-blooded fury. If he had identified the voice correctly... then one of the five people single-handedly responsible for this entire mess stood before him. Basil needed to confirm the creature's identity, and if he had guessed right...

Then there would be blood all over the shop.

"I wouldn't wait too long if I were you," the reptilian abomination taunted them. "My three mouths consume indiscriminately. Food and flesh and wine. This body turns even the most hideous taste into blissful pleasure. It just feels... *right*."

This time, Basil opened his mouth to speak. "I didn't know you were a closet cannibal, Mr. Tamura."

The name echoed across the bridge, carried by the wind.

It was a gamble. Basil knew little of the man beside his name and involvement in Dismaker Labs. Yet he had a sharp ear and memorized the voices of his tormentors.

The brief flash of shock in the monster's eyes was unmistakable.

No fucking way, Basil thought as most of his allies looked at him in confusion. None of their stares felt as heavy as the so-called god's. Basil held his gaze while trying not to show emotion.

"Mr. Tamura?" Neria asked in confusion. 'Dionysus' briefly glanced at her and then back at Basil. His face remained undecipherable under that silly mask of his.

"Is that what you traded your corporate suit for?" Basil taunted the false god. "Scales and a tail? If you ask me, you've been shortchanged."

"Who are you?" the false Dionysus rasped with two voices at once. Basil's words had shaken him. "My Logs indicate you destroyed a dungeon and conquered another... that you fought an incarnation of Apollyon too. But you have no ties to our organization. So *who* are you?"

"You're smart Mr. Tamura, figure it out," Basil snorted. He put emphasis on the name to better destabilize him. Throw him off his game. "I'm the one looking for answers here and you'll give them."

After a short silence, the fake god smiled arrogantly. "It sounds strange to hear my name spoken again after so long... by a *gaijin* of all people."

I knew it. Basil had guessed correctly. *The question is: what the hell happened?*

"Partner, what's happening?" Shellgirl asked in confusion. "Do you know this guy?"

"He's a member of Dismaker Labs' board of directors." Basil pointed his halberd at the false Dionysus. "A human pretending to be a god."

"A... a member of the board?" Officer Elissalde looked back and forth between Basil and 'Dionysus.' "I don't understand."

"She knows nothing?" 'Dionysus' scoffed and locked eyes with Basil. "I see. You were the one who organized this meeting, not this woman. You are the one who captured the avatar to force this confrontation. What purpose do you seek?"

"I want the truth," Basil lied. He hadn't expected such an opportunity to fall on his lap, but he wouldn't miss it. "I have a lot of questions and I want answers. And if you won't provide them..."

He pointed his halberd at the disguised Vasi, who faked struggling against her bindings.

"He gets it," Basil threatened.

"You went through the trouble of capturing the Preserver and bringing him to me to satisfy your curiosity?" The false Dionysus chuckled to himself. "I must admit, I admire your spirit. Most young men of your age would rather play video games rather than seek enlightenment."

Each word coming out of his mouth makes me want to punch him harder, Basil thought. Still, he couldn't keep this up for long. The elixir hiding Vasi's System information from sight suffered from a short time limit... albeit not as short as that of the invisibility potions. "I told your servant that you had five minutes of my time Mr. Tamura. Don't waste them."

The invisible pressure on Basil's back worsened. A vile aura of malicious power radiated from the false Dionysus. Shellgirl covered her mouth and Neria's dogs whined at the oppressive aura coming off him. Dionysus' priestess took a step back in fear as the bridge trembled beneath their feet...

Yet Basil held strong. He remembered Walter's words: that a true god would have nothing to prove to lesser men. This walking handbag tried to intimidate him because he felt vulnerable; because as far as he knew, Basil was the one holding the world's fate at his blade's tip.

"Do not push your luck, boy," the false deity warned. His snake heads snapped at Basil threateningly. "We are not equals, not by a long shot. Do not presume to command me. I wield more power than you can fathom."

Basil sneered. If that was true, he would have seen through Vasi's simple illusion.

"The girl and the truth against the avatar's life," Basil said, holding his ground. "That's my last offer. Take it or shove it up Shiva's ass."

The false god locked eyes with Basil for long, agonizing seconds. His gaze radiated malice and cold-blooded cruelty. This man had killed many... yet when Basil refused to fold, he realized a simple truth.

Basil Bohen didn't take shit from *anyone*.

"Very well." The pressure radiating from 'Dionysus' lessened, although it didn't completely go away. "Honesty will be a suitable reward for your perseverance."

"My lord?" his priestess asked in confusion.

"Quiet," her false god replied. She didn't dare interrupt him again. "What do you want to know?"

"Release the hostage first," Basil ordered.

"I think not. I would be a poor negotiator if I renounced my leverage so easily. You will have to release the avatar at the same time, and I doubt our discussion will remain afterward."

"He's got a point," Shellgirl said with a sigh.

"Not helping," Basil replied. He hadn't expected the handbag to actually follow through with the exchange, but at least he tried. Basil was certain a fight would break out the moment he surrendered 'Kalki' anyway. "Fine. Then stop hiding your true self. Tell them all who you really are."

"You want a proper introduction?" The false Dionysus laughed. "Very well. No more pretenses."

He extended his arms and revealed the truth.

"I am Shinzō Tamura," the false deity declared for all to hear. "Former Chief Financial Officer of Dismaker Labs, former chairman of Tamura Zانبatsu, and currently... a god of the New World."

"Shinzō Tamura?" Officer Elissalde recognized the name. "The gambling mogul?"

Oh right, the Tamura Pachinko! Basil kicked himself for not recognizing the name. His father always wasted money on those stupid slot machines. If anything, that only made Basil dislike this man even more.

"Gambling?" Tamura mused. His priestess looked up at her master in shock and denial, but he ignored her utterly. "I owned so much more than casinos. Fitness centers, arcades, even cars... The prime minister once called me the Vampire of Tokyo, because I siphoned money from all of Nippon's industries as if it was blood."

"You know, I would have loved to exchange business tips," Shellgirl commented. "But considering your methods, I don't think we share the same ethics."

"You don't say," Basil deadpanned.

Nessia's projection looked up at the false god in utter confusion. "You are... you are not Dionysus?"

"I am a Player like you, girl." Tamura's scales shone under the glow of the bridge's lamp lights. "Though obviously, my avatar is far more... *optimized* than yours. An 'early adopter privilege,' if you would like. You play heroes, I play a god."

"I knew it!" Buggy snapped his mandibles. "You're a big phony!"

"I am not pretending to be a god, bug. I *am* one." The false deity put a hand on his reptilian chest. "This body is divine... though the previous owner is no longer in control, I'll confess. It is my will that drives this vehicle now."

"You are a parasite." Nessia's projection growled in anger and disgust. "You are the disease I sensed."

Tamura sneered at her. "Quiet, half-breed child. I shan't be mocked by the likes of you. This body's previous owner wasted his potential on wine and sex. I shall make better use of it than he ever could."

"I... I don't get it," Neria whispered in confusion. "You are... a human soul in the body of a god?"

"Gods and spirits are different from us creatures of flesh," Tamura replied. "They are beings of raw thought and magic, infinitely malleable. Human beliefs and sacrifices can influence their nature, as did our summoning programs. Creating this avatar for my soul was simply a matter of finding the right... calibrations."

Nessia's comparison was appropriate. This man was like a parasite, a brain-disease having taken over a god's mind and transformed it into an abomination.

"Between us, I did not want Dionysus as my host," Tamura confessed. "I wished to become the great Susano-o, lord of the storms and master of Nippon. But we lacked the data required to summon a functional avatar, so I had to settle for a young Greek god instead."

"And the snake parts?" Basil asked. The two snake heads hissed at him. "You spliced up with reptile DNA, Jurassic Park-style?"

"I admit full responsibility for this mishap," Tamura confessed. "I insisted that Anton incorporate the data we collected on Susano-o into my avatar anyway. Alas, the well's waters were tainted. Lesser gods are like spirits. They draw their substance from the myths about them. The essence that came through belonged to the Yamata-no-Orochi, the great serpent that Susano-o once vanquished and made a part of his legend. I suppose this is punishment for my greed. As they say, those who chase after two rabbits will not even catch one."

"I wondered where the 'Metal' part of Metal Olympus came from, but now I understand." Basil squinted at this... this twisted chimera. "Deus ex machina. Gods from the machine. And I assume your colleagues make up the rest of your pantheon."

"Mayhaps..." Tamura scoffed.

Basil took it as a yes. Good. Now he knew where to look to cross names off his kill list.

"Still, I am happy with the result." Tamura raised a scaled arm and examined it with rapturous attention. "It's better than anything I expected. Such power, such vitality... ah, it feels so good to walk again."

"Release him." Little Nessia glared at Tamura with burning anger. "Release Dionysus. He's in unimaginable pain. You're *hurting* him."

"So what?" Tamura looked down on her. "Yes, I hear my host's pleas in the depths of my soul. Like background noise, I've stopped paying attention. In time, his words will become my thoughts. His malleable essence slowly morphs to fit my desires, my soul... this is *my* life now."

Basil tried to imagine what his host suffered through. Becoming a prisoner in his own body, his mind overwritten by a foreign presence, violated physically and mentally... and then vanishing while someone else carried on with his face and name.

Basil didn't know much about Dionysus besides the fundamentals, except that Greek gods were jerks in general, but he didn't wish this kind of fate on anyone. Not even a pagan god. Death would have been kinder.

Shellgirl glanced at Nessia's projection and whispered into her ear. Basil's sharp ears were close enough to hear. "Is there any way to free him?"

"I think... only one." Little Nessia chewed her lip angrily. "He's begging for it inside."

Death. The god inside wished for death. That made things easier to swallow for Basil, though only a little.

"I still don't understand how you could pull it off," Neria said. She kept her rifle pointed at the false god, but waited for Basil's signal. She understood now was the perfect time to gain information. "How could you transform the entire world? How could you reshape all of reality?"

"You foolish woman, do you think we created all of this from nothing?" Tamura waved a hand at the fog covering Bordeaux and the darkness spreading in the skies. "Even such marvels as the computers you take for granted demand rare ore extracted from the earth. Our technology harnessed forces that were already there."

Basil remembered the description of Prayer spells, back when he inspected Dax's cathedral. "I've read books implying that prayers always had power," he said.

"Miracles once existed, yes." Tamura nodded with his human head. "What they lacked in modern times was the energy required to fuel their effects. Although they fled to other planes as this world's magic rarified in ancient times, gods once walked among us, unseen and unknowable. Some slumbered deep underground like fossils, waiting to be reawakened. Others had to be cast down to Earth with the right summoning program."

The false god then glanced at the disguised Vasi.

"And then, of course, there are Overgods like the Trimurti, who need no worship and whose power knows no bounds," he said. "It took us great effort to gain those threes' attention and summon them to this plane."

"How did you do that?" Shellgirl asked with a frown. "I don't get it. You said this planet didn't have magic before. So how could you summon this handsome, delightful boy without it?"

Tamura seemed to find the wording funny, for he laughed to himself. Yet the malicious edge in his voice sent shivers down Basil's spine.

"Have you ever wondered," the false god asked softly, "why you gain power from killing?"

Basil's blood went cold. "What do you mean?"

"You must have noticed by now, Mr. Bohem," Tamura said upon noticing his unease. "The Quests you receive, aren't they all about death or creating better tools of war? About calling more pigs to the slaughter? Why would our System provide these incentives? Where do you think experience points come from?"

Basil clenched his jaw. He remembered all the undead people he slew coming back for his head on Halloween. Their existence had proved the existence of the soul, that something remained of the living even beyond death.

Basil could see the implications of the false god's words, and he didn't like them one bit.

"Speak clearly," he ordered.

"I already have," Tamura replied mockingly. "If you can't see the truth on the walls, then you are wasting my time."

"Where's Anton Maxwell?" Neria pointed her rifle at Tamura's human head. The false god moved his hostage in the path as a human shield. "Where. Is. *He?*"

"I do not know," Tamura replied with a shrug.

"Lies."

"You question my words, woman?" The false god grunted in genuine anger. "Our association came to an end. Only Ashok is still in contact with Maxwell as far as I know, and I do not care what either of them do. I will contact them again once the avatar is in my hands, but that's it."

Having been floating slightly above the ground so far, Shinzō Tamura landed on the bridge with aristocratic grace. Yet his face was marred with anger, and his eyes set on Vasi.

"I tire of this standoff," he warned. "Do you have another question, or will we make the hostage exchange at last?"

Basil could tell that the false god had reached the end of his patience... and the potion's effects would soon wear off anyway. Yet he had one last question on his mind, one that wouldn't stop bugging him.

"Why?"

Tamura glanced at him in confusion. "Why?"

"Why? Why the hell?!" Basil waved his halberd at the fog covering Bordeaux, at the devastation the System had left in his wake. "Why did you do all of this? Because you wanted power? You wrecked the planet so you could call yourself a god? Are you so hollow inside?"

The false deity crossed his arms. His gaze remained full of anger, yet to Basil's surprise, he noticed a hint of bitterness in it.

"Have you ever been sick, young man?" Tamura asked, his twin voices surprisingly low and deep. "Have you been bedridden by fever, helpless and weak?"

Basil frowned. "I have."

"Now imagine living like this for *years*." The man's reptilian lips twisted into a sneer of distaste. "Trapped in a wheelchair when you could once run. Gasping for bottled air when you could once dive in the Pacific's deepest abysses. Feeling your mind slip away when other men once honored your foresight. Needing diapers from servants who once trembled at the mere mention of your name. Watching powerlessly as your ungrateful children fight over your inheritance like vultures over a corpse. Imagine being treated as dead while you still live."

Basil flinched as if punched in the face. He remembered René's last months, the despair and bitterness he felt as the cancer prevented him from even moving from his bed. The Old Man had never said anything when Basil brought him his meals, but his adopted son always knew how much he hated being catered for instead of doing things himself. That feeling of helplessness had killed René as much as the disease.

"I can imagine," Basil whispered.

"You cannot, and be thankful for it." The old geezer shook his head angrily. Words flowed out of his mouth like a river of filth out of an old, aging mountain. "Aging is dreadful agony beyond description. I couldn't even take solace in the future. None of my heirs were worthy of my empire. They were spoiled, self-centered brats, all of them. They tried to flatter me in the hope I would make them my sole heir, saying I should retire in peace, but I wasn't blind. They would rather party on yachts and sell my legacy to these cryptocurrency frauds rather than honor our family. Wealth corrupted their hearts like worms in an apple."

Okay, that hit close to home. Although the man in front of him was a mass murderer and a shitbag, Basil couldn't help but feel a little compassion for him. He had already seen René go through the exact same torment. Even though one was a rich oligarch and the other a retiree living in the woods, age struck all without regard for their net worth.

Some things don't change, Basil thought grimly. Whichever side of the world, some children simply didn't appreciate the sacrifices their parents made for them. Only demons would sell their father's cherished company to crypto bros.

In the end though, the Old Man had made peace with his fate. He had accepted his demise with dignity and gifted his remaining possession to Basil, who had stood by his side when his own flesh and blood wouldn't.

"My heart was filled with despair as the long shadow of death grew close. I wept in shame. I prayed to the Kami of my ancestors for a solution... And then that..." Tamura breathed in relief. "That *man* came along."

Yet Tamura had chosen a different path.

"Anton Maxwell was a genius," he said. "A man who could do so many things. Yes, I knew he was an *akuma*, a wicked soul, but he offered me my heart's desire. A new life and eternal youth. Health and strength! When he showed me his laboratory, when he presented to me the wonders he had created... I realized I would no longer need to pray to the gods for mercy. I was destined to *become* one."

"You killed millions for it," Neria accused him angrily. She clearly felt none of Basil's sympathy.

"So what?" Tamura replied with utter contempt. "Where others enjoyed sex and booze and vacations, I spent my days studying and working. I toiled for seventy years without complaining. I deserve this new life."

"Deserve?!"

Basil turned his head at Buggy. The centimagma steamed with anger, literally. Vapors rose from his body and smoke came out of his mouth. "Buggy?"

"You deserve nothing!" Buggy snarled angrily. His eyes burned with rage. "You're a cheater and a fraud!"

Tamura's body once again radiated potent malice. The air choked from the pressure of his hateful glare. "You *dare*?"

Buggy dared. "You're a thief and a cheat! All of us, we fought to get where we are! We killed and lost and kept going, but you... you didn't *earn* this power! You stole it from someone else, and worst of all, you pretend it was yours by right! You sicken me!"

Basil had yet to remember seeing Buggy ever so angry. Even the house's destruction hadn't triggered that kind of reaction. But it made sense. The centimagma took pride in getting stronger. To hear Tamura's self-indulgent rant probably hit all of his buttons.

"Boss, I swear, just give me the signal..." Buggy snapped his mandibles angrily. "I'll tear his head off!"

"Just try," the false Dionysus replied smugly. Venom oozed from his snakes' fangs, and his priestess adopted a fighting stance. "Reel in your pet Mr. Bohen, before I squash him where he stands."

*On one hand, he is just an old geezer with the power of a god, Basil thought, but on the other hand, he is an old geezer with the **power of a god**.*

Buggy was right, Tamura didn't earn his power. This gave the party the edge. Perhaps Tamura's borrowed body possessed great powers, but control did not equal mastery. Whereas Basil's group fought tooth and nail to reach their current level of power, the oligarch literally paid to win. The mere fact Tamura could be fooled by a simple illusion showed that he was nowhere near as powerful as he pretended to be. Basil's party trumped him in experience, cunning, and determination.

Would that be enough?

Whatever the case, Buggy was right. This man deserved nothing but scorn. No matter his circumstances, he willingly stole another person's life and murdered millions more. Basil couldn't allow his feelings to cloud his judgment.

"Couldn't you just accept death with dignity?" Basil glared at Tamura, at this corporate thief. "Pass on the torch to someone and simply let the world run its proper course?"

"Accepting death with dignity?" Tamura laughed scornfully. "Only a weakling would say that."

And like that, he pressed the René button.

Whatever sympathy Basil held for the man vanished from his heart. He had projected René's plight on this fake god without realizing that he was an utter *asshole*. Of course the two were different. Besides the sheer difference in wealth, René was a noble person; even if he had been rich and powerful enough to seek an alternative, he would never have condemned millions to a gruesome death for a new lease on life.

The Old Man would have accepted his demise with dignity because he was brave enough to. Something which the likes of Tamura would never understand.

Shellgirl sent Basil a brief, but instant gaze. Less than a minute left before the potions' expiration.

Basil took a long, deep breath.

"I'm going to cut your serpent balls," he told Shinzō Tamura, his voice barely louder than a whisper. "And shove them down your throat."

The false god scoffed. "What—"

Basil was running at him by the time Tamura finished his word.

He crossed the gap between them in the blink of an eye, halberd raised for the kill. The priestess reacted before her master, who clearly hadn't expected such a brazen attack; Tamura had no combat instincts to speak of.

Still, the bastard moved quickly.

"Thiasus," Tamura said, his eyes shining with a red glow. Puffs of smoke started popping up all over the bridge.

Dionysus-Orochi spawned reinforcements!

Basil focused on the task at hand. The priestess moved in their path, fists raised to strike. He pushed her to the side with a swing of his halberd and kept going.

Tamura's snake head started coiling around his hostage and its maw opened for a killing blow. Neria shot it first with her rifle, the bullet pushing back the serpent. Tamura raised a hand...

And screamed in pain as a needle-thin blade cut through the back of his skull and came out through his right eye. Purple blood erupted from the wound, revealing a shape standing on his shoulders.

A certain invisible cat asserted his dominance with a fearsome war cry. "Dwarf panther to the face!"

The distraction was brief, but enough. Basil swung his halberd and cut the snake holding Maya Elissalde in one swift slice. The severed head fell onto the ground alongside its hostage.

"And then, I swear it on the Virgin Mary..." Basil gritted his teeth in fury as reptilian blood covered his face. He heard Buggy roaring and rushing after him to join the fray, while Vasi undid her bindings and Shellgirl shouted something. "I'll go full Spanish Inquisition on your entire pantheon!"

A System notification popped up right as an explosion rocked the bridge.

New Main Quest: Flipping the Board!

Recommended Level: 80+.

You don't like the cards you've been dealt with, so you've decided to flip the board? The System will hold you true to your vow! Defeat all five members of Dismaker Labs' board of directors, Anton Maxwell included, and prove you don't need to pay to win!

Reward: 24,000,000 EXP + God Card.

Challenge accepted.

Chapter 14: Man vs Fraud

Practice made perfect.

Chopping heads was almost second nature to Basil by now. No sooner did Maya Elissalde fall to the ground than he charged at Tamura to finish him off. Plato repeatedly stabbed the false god in the back of his head, granting Basil an opening.

"Kick his ass, Partner!" Shellgirl shouted from the rear. "Cut him down like my prices!"

Shellgirl's [Motivate] buffed your accuracy and critical hits chances for five minutes.

With pleasure.

Endowed with new strength, Basil struck Tamura with a vertical slice. His halberd cut through his shoulder and reached as low as the breast before being stopped by the false god's steel-strong bones.

Critical hit! Supereffective hit!

He's vulnerable to fire, Basil guessed. His weapon's metal parts barely cut through the false god's scales, but the flames produced by its Fire Rune incinerated the flesh underneath. Veins full of caustic purple blood poured boiling out of the wound. I should have brought a bottle of White Phosphorus.

Still, Tamura's body was unnaturally resilient. Did he have damage reduction of some kind?

Tamura's remaining snake head hissed and lunged at Basil the moment he removed his weapon for a second strike. He barely had time to dodge with a backstep. The reptile's fangs hit the bridge with enough strength to shatter the stone.

An arrow surged at Basil's head from his right side, forcing him to deflect the projectile. The priestess from before immediately attempted to flank him, her fists moving at incredible speed. Neria bull-rushed her and tossed her back with a push of her shield.

After dodging another projectile, Basil took a second to survey the chaotic melee. Tamura had summoned monsters all around the bridge: four gaunt satyr archers with pallid, diseased skin and bows of blackened wood stood atop the bridge's railing. On the ground, two maddened female humanoids with fearsome fangs surrounded the disguised Vasi and Shellgirl. The latter had clouded herself in a cloak of water; her new Rainmantle Perk.

Fell Satyr

Level 18 [Demon/Beast]

Faction: Metal Olympus.

Maenad

Level 24 [Fairy]

Faction: Metal Olympus.

"Over here!" Little Nessia's projection said, trying to catch the archers' attention and distract them. In the meantime, Neria's Basque shepherd howled to buff everyone.

[Brave Howl] buffed your Strength and Magic for five minutes!

Bugsy unleashed his fiery breath at the Maenads to keep them away from the disguised Vasi. The witch undid her bindings and removed the gag around her mouth to better cast spells. As for Neria's doberman, she ran after her mistress to help her.

Unfortunately, the melee's chaos gave Tamura enough time to recover. His remaining serpent head lunged at the invisible Plato and managed to pinpoint his position. The blow caused the cat to become visible again, right as his tiny body was sent flying beyond the bridge and into the river.

"Plato!" Basil snarled in panic. "Zach, catch him!"

"On it, sir!" a voice called from above.

Basil's other hidden allies revealed themselves. Zachariel dived down from the sky to rescue Plato and waves spread from the wine Garonne as Rosemarine emerged from its depths. The tropidrake rose on her back legs and used the others to hold on to the bridge. She swiped a satyr off the bridge and attempted to squash another. The ground trembled from the blow.

Basil trusted his party to follow the battle strategy and focused on Tamura. Summoning his handgun from the inventory, he fired a volley at the false god while closing the gap between them. Bullets pierced the monster's scales and drew corrosive blood. The field weakened the projectiles' power, but they proved deadly nonetheless.

Supereffective hit!

Fire and frost. An idea crossed Basil's mind. Of course Shinzō Tamura's busted God-Field Perk created an advantageous terrain for him! It strengthened his powers and surely weakened the elements he was weak against!

By a simple deduction, Tamura feared Fire, Frost, and Lightning.

"Thiasus!" Tamura's eyes shone and a new squad of satyrs appeared between Basil and him. His halberd cut them left and right, but their presence prevented him from catching up to the false god. "You there."

"My lord?" a satyr asked.

Tamura's remaining snake head bit his follower and swallowed him whole.

Basil halted his assault in shock at the sight. Tamura's wounds healed in the span of seconds. His skull regenerated from Plato's stab holes and his second snake head regrew like a hydra.

Dionysus-Orochi's [Sin: Gluttony] Perk healed his HP/SP!

"Killing your own followers?" Basil spat as he cleaved a satyr's head open. "Despicable to the end!"

"A hand that wavers cannot hope to rule," Tamura replied coldly. Basil was starting to wonder if the man's children might have good reason to despise him. "Bacchanal Mists!"

Tamura inhaled sharply and breathed out a pinkish fog. The cloud traveled across the bridge, carrying the sweet smell of grapes. Basil covered his mouth, yet he immediately felt weaker after inhaling the mist.

All buffs and magical effects disrupted! [Drunk] ailment resisted!

The mist did more than weaken Basil. It also stripped Vasi of her disguise. The witch regained her true appearance right when she blasted a satyr archer with a fireball, revealing the deception for all to see. Little Nessia's projection was instantly dispelled. Rosemarine stumbled as if intoxicated, and as for Maya Elissalde...

"Maya? May—" Neria choked in surprise as her sister's body transformed into a maenad. The humanoid monster leaped at the surprised officer, her claws cracking her riot shield. Tamura's priestess immediately used the opportunity to kick her in the chest, making her stumble.

A fake? Basil thought in annoyance. Strange minds thought alike. Tamura didn't intend to negotiate in good faith either.

"Mistress Neria!" Behind Basil, Neria's Doberman rushed to her ally's help. The dog leaped at the priestess and forced her to the ground. The beast's fangs closed on the woman's throat, tearing it out.

Tamura's lips curled into a snarl upon seeing Vasi's true face. "You tricked me!"

"So did you," Basil replied as he finished off the last of the satyrs in his path. "The pot calling the kettle black."

"Fool, now I have no reason to hold back." Tamura floated above the bridge, light gathering in the mouths of his two pet serpents. "Saké Breath!"

Remembering his battle with Steamslime, Basil immediately ducked to the side. "Everybody get down!"

Tamura's snake heads fired twin blasts across the bridge. Translucent, pressurized alcohol surged out of the maws at supersonic speed. Droplets cut through stone like paper.

Basil managed to dodge the twin streams of destruction by moving to the bridge's edge, but not all of his allies were as quick. Neria avoided the attack and Buggy burrowed into the bridge to escape the strike, but the back legs of Elissalde's Doberman were vaporized by the stream alongside Tamura's priestess. Shellgirl lifted her shell to protect Vasi and the Basque shepherd from the Saké breath, and surprisingly, it held firm. Basil thanked God for her new Water immunity.

Unfortunately, the attack had damaged the bridge. Basil could feel it shake under his feet. A few more attacks like this and the whole structure might collapse.

"Mistress..." the Doberman whined, her back legs severed at the knees. The poor dog crawled as blood poured out of her wounds. "It hurts..."

"Healer!" Basil shouted before he could even stand up. Unfortunately, Zach hadn't reappeared yet and Rosemarine remained dizzy from the mist. Refusing to lose another ally in battle, Basil rushed to the Doberman's side and summoned a healing potion from his inventory. "Here."

No more Kuikuis on his watch.

"Thiasus," Tamura said as Basil poured the healing potion down the Doberman's throat. A team of maenads and satyrs materialized around the bridge to replace the dead.

Damn it, he was trying to overwhelm them through sheer numbers. "Shellgirl, Vasi!" Basil shouted. "Round them up!"

"Evil Eye," the witch replied. The shadow of a colossal eye appeared above her head, its baleful glare cursing Tamura's army.

All enemies will have their Luck debuffed for five minutes!

"Come at my wares, bastards!" Shellgirl opened her shell. The gold within glowed like the heart of the sun. "Look upon my wealth and despair! Discord Booty!"

The fires of greed burned in the eyes of many satyrs, their minds overtaken by the Madness ailment. The Luck debuff and Field effect drastically reduced their chances of resisting Shellgirl's magic.

All of the satyrs failed to shrug off the effect.

"Mine!" one of them snarled before shooting at a maenad. "Mine!"

To Tamura's horror, his low-level satyrs started fighting each other. The stronger Maenads remained unaffected, but Shellgirl had a weapon for them too.

"Draw Aggro! Draw Aggro!" Shellgirl targeted the Maenads with the Berserk ailment. "Ah, I'm sure you can't even dent my shell!"

The maenads hissed in anger and charged at her, their eyes bloody with fury. Shellgirl retreated inside her shell and her enemies' claws broke upon its surface. A few remained too maddened to focus on her and turned to attack Vasi instead.

"Bodyguard: Vasi," Neria whispered as she regained her footing. Her Basque shepherd immediately started buffing her with howls. The officer teleported across the battlefield as a maenad threatened to tear the witch apart. Her cracked shield stopped all incoming attacks, protecting the frail spellcaster.

Perfect. Shellgirl focused enemy fire on herself while she remained safely within her shell. Rainmantle's regenerative properties would keep her alive under the onslaught. As for Officer Elissalde, her bodyguard Perk—inherited from her Guard class—would allow her to teleport around the battlefield to protect her frailer allies.

"Stop this!" Tamura grunted. Yet his minions refused to obey him. They left the path clear for Basil to take a shot at their master. "Heed my words!"

"Your field is working against you," Basil taunted Tamura. The Doberman's knee wounds had closed, though her legs didn't grow back. "Stay away until Zachariel returns."

"I'm sorry, Master Bohem..." the poor animal said. "Let me help... Brave Howl!"

[Brave Howl] buffed your Strength and Magic for five minutes!

Basil opened fire at the false god with his handgun, the bullets drawing blood from the waist down.

"Where is my sister?" Neria snarled as she pushed back a maenad. "Where is she?!"

"I told you." Tamura smirked cruelly. By now he floated five meters above the bridge, his snake heads shielding him from Basil's bullets. "My three mouths consume with distinction... and this body turns the most hideous crimes into pleasure."

Basil couldn't see Neria's face behind her helmet, but her knees weakened at the cruel words.

"Don't listen to him, he's trying to destabilize you!" Vasi shouted at her bodyguard. "Hasten!"

Neria's body seemed to distort as the buff took effect. She quickly recovered from her shock and opened fire with her rifles at the maenads without breaking a sweat. The policewoman moved as fast as her own bullets, blocking attacks with her shield and retaliating with rifle shots in the same breath.

Since they could deal with the respawning minions, Basil would lead the assault on the boss. "Bugsy, Rosemarine, with me! He's vulnerable to fire!"

"I'm coming, Boss!" Buggy emerged from his hiding spot and crawled after Basil. "Agility Up!"

Basil expected Rosemarine to say as much, but to his surprise, his favorite tropidrake remained silent. He looked up at her in confusion. "Rosemarine?"

The tropidrake wavered from left to right like an uprooted tree.

"Mister, I feel..." Rosemarine belched. Her eyes rolled uncontrollably and her legs struggled to keep her standing straight. "I feel..."

God, please no, Basil prayed. Tamura's mist had affected her in the worst possible way.

Rosemarine is [Drunk]! Her [Strength] and [Vitality] are buffed!

"I feel groovy!" Rosemarine roared, hands raised up in the air.

I hate ailments, Basil thought as Rosemarine slammed the bridge.

As he worried, the weakened structure faltered from the constant stress. Lamp lights fell into the wine river, alongside Neria's Basque shepherd and a Shinto archway. Buggy himself almost fell overboard and was barely hanging by a vine growing out of the stone.

"Rosemarine, calm down!" Basil tried to talk his dearest plant out of her drunken frenzy, to no avail. She kept hitting the bridge as if it were a drum, the shockwaves preventing Basil from aiming at Tamura. Worse, the false god was charging up another breath attack. "Rosemarine, bridges aren't pianos! Stop it!"

"Mister, can you feel the beats?!" Rosemarine's rhythm was primal, frenetic. "They hit hard, Mister!"

Thankfully, Zachariel chose this moment to reappear. He flew up from the Garonne and above the bridge, holding a whining Basque shepherd in one hand and a frightened Plato in the other. Considering his wine-drenched fur, the cat had suffered an unwelcome dive into the river.

"Let thy spirit be mended!" Zachariel's wings glowed with holy light. His aura shone upon Rosemarine, dispelling the cloud of underage drinking that clouded her mind.

Rosemarine's [Drunk] ailment has been lifted!

"Mister?" Rosemarine froze with her hands in the air. "Mister? I feel thirsty."

"It's okay, Rosemarine," Basil reassured her. He pointed his handgun at Tamura. "Let's blow him out of the skies."

"Yes, Mister!" Rosemarine raised a hand and attempted to swipe Tamura like a fly.

Unfortunately, the false god turned one of his snake heads at her and the other at Zachariel. Two streams of Saké poured out of them. One blasted Rosemarine and tossed her back into the Garonne river in a catastrophic fall. Zachariel dodged the other by zigzagging in the skies.

Vasi, who could spellcast uninterrupted under Neria and Shellgirl's protection, raised a hand at the false god. "Bruxa Murder!"

A cloud of smoke popped out of her hand, which swiftly assembled into a murder of bloodthirsty crows. The birds flocked to Tamura as Basil riddled him with bullets. The crows assaulted the false god from all sides, biting through his scales and leaving scar marks everywhere.

Having run out of bullets, Basil tossed his handgun aside. He threw his halberd at the flying Tamura like a flying axe with both hands.

Basil knew his weapon would connect before he even threw it. Apollyon had constantly moved around the battlefield in their battle, but Tamura kept floating in the same spot. The old man didn't have the presence of mind to stay a mobile target at all times. The birds fully distracted him, so he focused entirely on them.

Tamura took the halberd straight to the face. The blade split his skull, shattered his mask, and showered him with blood. He fell onto the damaged bridge close to Basil's position.

Amateur, Basil thought as he activated his Pèth cloak and swiftly transformed into a mighty werebear. *No battle instincts to speak of.*

Tamura had powerful abilities at his disposal, yet his tactics were simplistic and straightforward. If he had the presence of mind to simply blow up the bridge and let the river drown the party for him, he would have already won. Instead, he kept spamming the same abilities with little regard for tactics.

But then again, the old psycho had probably never fought once in his life. His high-level summons could handle most foes.

Tamura's snake heads tore apart the crows as he landed on crumbled stone, only for Basil to immediately lunge at the false god. He stomped the man's head with his bear paws, bit his throat, and mauled him savagely. His fangs and claws tore off scales after scales.

Yet even with a halberd stuck in his face, Tamura still breathed.

"Curse your cheat Field effect," Basil grumbled as he pummeled the false god into the pavement. The stones cracked under his onslaught, a Shinto archway crumbling close to his location. "If you didn't weaken my weapon, this would already—"

Tamura's serpent heads bit Basil in the shoulders, making him roar in pain. His fur and enhanced werebear body softened the blow, but not by much.

[Poison] ailment resisted.

"You should be honored to have pushed me this far, Mr. Bohem," Tamura rasped as he pushed Basil back. His broken mask revealed the bleeding, reptilian face underneath. "But you are no match for this avatar."

"If I had a nickel for everyone who told me that, I would be wealthier than you," Basil taunted him back. He bit one of the snake heads in an attempt to tear it off.

"But I will be the last." Tamura's eyes shone with purple light. "Slaughter your allies! Dionysian Mystery!"

A red veil covered Basil's mind and blinded his eyes with fury.

***[Berserk]** ailment! **[Dionysian Mystery]** will buff Physical damage by 30% and let it pierce Physical Resistance as long as you remain in madness's throes!*

Everyone on the bridge turned into faceless goblins as Basil's heart burned in his chest. Unyielding rage and undying hate possessed him. His thoughts were no longer his.

"You pathetic failure of a son," said his mother's voice, flowing out of a police goblin's mouth. "Homeless, aimless, powerless. I'm ashamed of giving birth to you."

The world became a blur, all voices silenced by Basil's own roar. He wanted to tell that critter to shut up, but beast noises came out of his mouth.

He would silence it alright, with claws and fangs and death!

Abandoning the snake goblin he was mauling before, Basil recklessly charged at the greatest concentration of enemies. The police goblin who dared disrespect him was tossed backwards with a mighty blow. A goblin puppy bit him in the ankle, so he kicked it back.

"You screwed-up again, son," a shellfish goblin said with his father's voice. Another critter with a hat cast a spell on Basil, but he was too pissed to care. "Thought you could be better than me? Look at you. I hid in a bottle, you hid in a house! Blaming everyone but yourself for your failures to make it big!"

"Shut up!" Basil managed to snarl through his frothing mouth. He smashed the shell goblin again and again, yet she somehow weathered all his attacks. He bit and clawed and stomped, yet she wouldn't stop mocking him with his own father's voice. "Shut up!"

"A crusader? Don't make me laugh. If you had what it takes to help people, you would have gotten your ass out of your sofa years ago. Your old man's kindness was wasted on you."

A cat goblin leaped on his back and tried to whisper more insults in Basil's ear. So the werebear swiped the critter off his back and slammed it against the pavement to silence him. Even watching the warm blood pour out of the goblin's wounds didn't calm him. He raised a foot and prepared to stomp the corpse to oblivion.

"Let thy spirit be mended!"

A holy light dispelled the wrathful cloud over Basil's mind.

When he regained his sanity, Plato lay limp at his feet.

Basil froze in shock as he struggled to process the sight around him: Neria on the ground, her shield broken next to her unconscious Basque shepherd; her maimed doberman whining in fear at her side; Shellgirl's shell, covered in claw marks; Raphael's hand on his back; and worst of all, Plato's small body struggling to breathe at his feet.

A System notification appeared, as if to taunt Basil over his terrible mistake.

Plato the Cait Sith lost one life. Six of them remain.

"Plato!" Basil stared at his cat in utter horror. His mind acted on autopilot. "Monster Cure!"

The werebeast transformation didn't negate his Perks, but the healing light barely closed a few of Plato's wounds. The cat had some ribs sticking out of his fur.

"Monster Cure!" Basil cast again. Damn it, did he... did he... "Neria, is she okay? Is she..."

"It's all right, sir, I will take care of the wounded," Zachariel said. The angel immediately applied a hand to Plato, a holy halo covering the cat. "The others need your help."

"He's right, Partner," Shellgirl said as she emerged from her hideout. To Basil's shock, she looked neither wounded nor furious with him. A veil of water quickly washed away the claw marks on her shell. "Look!"

Basil slowly turned his head.

Vasi and Buggy were raining fire at Tamura. The former struggled to dodge a serpent head strike and the latter coiled around another. As for Rosemarine, she was slowly emerging back from the wine Garonne, dizzy and wounded.

Basil's eyes set on Tamura. The bastard had removed the halberd from his head.

He was *smiling* to himself.

The fury came back in full force, and Basil didn't need to go berserk this time.

"Wreck him!" Shellgirl shouted.

Shellgirl's [Motivate] buffed your accuracy and critical hits chances for five minutes.

Basil roared and charged back into the fray. He ran on four legs like a real bear, frothing at the mouth. In an instant, he had crossed the length of the bridge. Vasi had the wisdom to jump out of his path, but Tamura didn't see him coming quickly enough.

The false god's eyes widened in shock. "Oh—"

Basil tackled him before he could finish his sentence. His claws closed on Tamura's back and lifted him above the ground.

"Gaia's Ven—AH!" Tamura hissed in pain as Basil tightened his grip.

"I'll break you in two," Basil rasped in a low, low voice. "Like a chocolate bar."

With one snake head immobilized by Buggy, Tamura used the other to bite Basil's throat. The fangs closed on his neck, but the werebear didn't even feel it.

Fury was one hell of a painkiller.

Harming Basil's pets and friends was horrendous enough, but making him do the deed? He wouldn't forgive it! If anything, the blood flowing from his neck only made Basil squeeze his prey tighter. He felt scales and bones bend under his pressure.

"You'll die if you don't release me! We'll both perish!" Tamura panicked. His gaze morphed into an expression of utter fear. He raised his hands to push the werebear back, to no avail. "Let go of me!"

"Buggy," Vasi said, a magical flame burning in her palm. "Pull."

The centimagma moved back with one of Tamura's snakeheads still in the throes of his mandibles. Like a man quartered, the false god was pulled into two directions. Vasi joined in the fun by blasting the serpent biting Basil's throat with a stream of fire, cutting it off.

Within seconds, Buggy ripped out the other and left Tamura defenseless.

"Don't like my bear hug, asshole?" Basil rasped. His throat hurt and he felt blood dripping inside, but he didn't lighten his grip. "I thought your children didn't give you enough? I'm giving you the love they never did. You should be happy about it."

"Tele..." the false god struggled to form words. "Tele... po..."

Crack!

Critical hit!

Tamura's back broke before Basil's resolve. His body snapped in half like a kitkat bar, both halves falling at the werebear's feet in a shower of corrupted blood. It melted with Basil's own as it dripped down his throat.

"My body... can't... teleport... what is happening..." Tamura crawled on the ground, unable to fly away. Buggy, Basil, and Vasi formed a circle around him, while Rosemarine's shadow loomed above them all. "How can this be... this body... it can't lose..."

"I told you, you were shortchanged." Basil immediately found a proper way to execute Tamura: the same way he killed his victims. "Rosemarine."

His tropidrake looked at him with curious eyes.

"Snack time," Basil confirmed.

Rosemarine remained speechless for a few seconds. The tropidrake's tongue stuck out of her maw. Her eyes blinked in confusion. Basil always forbade her to eat humans and although it hurt him to say it, Tamura was still one under that reptilian shell.

But since he considered himself a god allowed to dine on his fellow man, he didn't deserve any special treatment.

Upon realizing that he was serious, Rosemarine became outright giddy. "Finally! Thank you so much, Mister!"

"You..." Tamura looked up at death's jaws with fear and despair. "You'll let... a beast... eat me?"

"Her mouth too consumes indiscriminately," Basil taunted him as Rosemarine opened her maw wide. "You shouldn't have made me hit my cat."

"I'll... I'll pay you! Billions! Anything!" Tamura's horror turned to spite as his prayers fell on deaf ears. "Curse you, Anton! You lied to me! Curse—"

Rosemarine grabbed both halves of Tamura with her hand and stuffed them into her mouth.

Basil watched with dark satisfaction as the tropidrake chewed a god's flesh, grinding bones and scales under her fangs. Then she swallowed Tamura whole, scoffed as the corpse traveled down her throat, and belched in triumph. The purple sky cackled with lightning as if to echo Tamura's death and the dark energy clouds slowly started to dissipate.

Congratulations! Your party received 645,000 EXP (56,500 for you). You gained 3 levels (total 33).

Congratulations! Rosemarine absorbed the [Essence of Dionysus]! Rosemarine unlocked a unique metamorphosis (Minimum level required: 64)!

In the end, Shinzō Tamura did not die with dignity.

Chapter 15: Man vs General

Tamura's Field effect faded away with his death.

The sky was cleared of the sinister aurora that once infested it. The red mist covering Bordeaux slowly faded away, revealing neo-classical buildings and a cathedral's towers. The vines and Shinto archways crumbled to dust into the Garonne, whose wine current slowly returned to its natural state as a river of water.

The curse of Bordeaux had been lifted. Yet Basil couldn't find it in himself to rest yet. His skin itched even after returning to human form and healing from his wounds.

"You're sure he won't eat my Rosemarine from within?" he asked Little Nessia. The young oracle and her griffin had landed on the bridge after the battle. Now they examined Rosemarine with Zachariel, to make sure Tamura wouldn't return in any way.

"I do not detect any hint of demonic possession, sir," Zachariel insisted. "Though I do notice that your dragon is way overdue for a baptism shot."

"I feel warm inside, Mister," Rosemarine rejoiced.

"The god is free," Little Nessia added. "I don't feel him inside your plant. His spirit was cleansed and returned to the heavens, but he left a little of himself behind."

"Like what, a grape?" Basil asked. Would his dear tropidrake transform into a vineyard dragon? "I don't want her to start drinking so soon. She's not even one year old."

"This was a gift," Little Nessia insisted. "It would be rude to refuse it."

"Sir, I'm afraid I know no way to remove the essence anyway," Zachariel said. "There is no indication that it might affect her negatively either. If it does, it won't do so until she reaches the level required for metamorphosis... which is a long time away."

After considering the arguments, Basil conceded the angel's point. His team struggled greatly to reach level thirty and Rosemarine wouldn't transform until they reached twice that number. It might take years for her to reach that threshold, if at all.

As for Tamura... he indeed appeared to be dead for good in spite of his best efforts to avoid his fate.

Tamura couldn't teleport away, although he was a faction's core member. This had come as a surprise to both Basil and the old dickhead himself. *Is there a limit on in-battle teleportation or... was he blocked from fleeing?*

Basil reread his Guild's guidelines in the Logs. As he remembered, a Boss or Guildmaster could deny a member's teleportation back to a dungeon base. This implied someone higher than Tamura in the Metal Olympus hierarchy knowingly sabotaged him.

That kind of backstabbing disgusted Basil, although it didn't surprise him. The board's executives formed an alliance of convenience; if one of them hoped to become Earth's new Overgod, it made sense to get rid of potential rivals whenever possible. That, or Anton Maxwell was cleaning up loose ends.

Basil had the feeling he could exploit this information later. It was bound to sow distrust among Metal Olympus.

Basil surveyed the area. Neria and her dogs stood in front of the dissipating fog with anxious faces, as if afraid of who or what would emerge from it. Zachariel healed their wounds, although he couldn't regrow the maimed doberman's missing legs; something in the Saké Breath attack interfered with his abilities. The rest of the party formed a defensive perimeter in case any of Tamura's monsters survived their master's destruction.

And then there was Plato. Basil's cat licked his fur as if he hadn't died minutes ago. His wounds had healed, and he seemed more concerned about the wine sticking to his fur than the fact Basil killed him.

The memory of his body laying on the ground, weak and bloodied... it chilled Basil to the bone.

Plato sensed his owner's guilty gaze and looked up at him in confusion. "What?"

"I am so, so sorry," Basil apologized. "Plato, I—"

His cat cut him off before he could finish. "You want to make up for your heinous, treacherous deed?"

Basil closed his mouth and slowly nodded.

"Then pick me up."

Which Basil did. The cat felt light and fragile in his hands.

"Now pet me behind the ears."

Basil obeyed. He scratched Plato's head as if his life depended on it.

"Do that every day for the rest of your pitiful life," Plato purred. "And I'll forgive you."

"That's..." Basil squinted. "That's it?"

"Oh yes, since you asked, you must rub my belly twice a day and thrice on week-ends. But no more than a minute each time. I'll count."

"Plato, I *killed* you." There, Basil had said it. "I... slammed you against the pavement."

"It's my third death," Plato replied with a shrug. "The reaper was scary the first two times, but I'm used to it by now. Like a vet appointment."

"But you don't have a limitless amount of lives." Didn't he realize the seriousness of the situation? "That lost life might be the one to make a difference down the line."

"Basil, you sound like an old bachelor planning for early retirement." His cat looked up at him with his big, beautiful yellow eyes. "What happens happens. Maybe it's the last life I'll ever lose. Then I'll die of old age at a venerable twenty and revive young again."

"Plato, how can you be so..." Basil frowned in utter confusion. He hadn't expected this kind of reaction. "So chill with it?"

"Because I'm your best friend, Basil," Plato replied with a deep, serious tone. "I have seen you in the worst positions imaginable. Being mind-controlled by a Jurassic Park cosplayer is a new low, but I don't hold it against you. You're human. It's in your nature to fuck up."

Basil squinted at his best friend. "I'm not sure how I'm supposed to take that."

"With grace and dignity," Plato mocked him. "Just like that time I peed in your bed."

Basil wished he hadn't been reminded of that particular disaster, but Plato's response lifted a weight off his shoulders. He valued his cat's friendship above all else.

"I know you're blaming yourself, but it wasn't you." Plato locked eyes with his companion. "Like the poison that killed Kuikui and the fire that burned our house, the fault lies with our enemies and not our inability to prevent it. If you have to blame someone, blame *them*."

"I could have—"

"I could have become king of dogs with 'coulds' and 'ifs'," Plato interrupted him. "Don't overthink it. It happened, you learned a lesson, and now you'll take the correct course of action."

"Which is?"

"Please don't transform into a werebear in battle again." Plato shuddered in dread. "I'll never look at Winnie the Pooh the same way ever again."

"I..." Basil cleared his throat. "I'll try, but I make no promises."

His cat nodded and purred in his arms. Knowing Plato, it meant that he considered the matter settled. Basil felt a little guilty still, but his friend's carefreeness cheered him up a bit.

"Guys!" Buggy shouted. "Someone's coming from the other side!"

Basil immediately assigned his new levels... just in case.

Tamer level 17, 18 & 19 Stat Gains: +1 STR, +3 AGI, +2 VIT, +1 SKI, +1 MAG, +3 INT, +3 CHA, +2 LCK. You earned 70 HP and 45 SP.

Monster Cure II (Active): 50 SP, [Support], [Life]. The tamer heals a medium amount of HP for all monster members of his party (HP recovered: (Tamer Levels+MAG) x 2); the Tamer and other Players do not benefit from the healing, but the effect applies regardless of distance. Additionally, the spell will heal status ailments affecting the targets. This replaces Monster Cure I.

One for All II: you can now summon all monsters in your party at once instead of one at a time, though you must pay 1 SP x level of the target monster for each individual you are trying to summon. This upgrades One for All I.

[Monster Cure II] and [One for All II] will apply to your entire Guild.

Congratulations, you are one level away from capping the **[Tamer]** class (20 Levels max). Once you've capped a class, you can no longer gain levels in it; but in exchange, you will receive a powerful capstone ability.

One more level and Basil would have to consider what next class to invest in next. Deathknight, Dragonknight, Runesmith, Alchemist, Gardener or Fisherman? He needed to examine Hagen's notes on the first two as soon as possible. And One for All II... if Basil hadn't misread, then he could potentially summon his entire Guild at once if he spent enough SP.

Come to think of it, how was it that he gained experience from killing Tamura at all? Rosemarine had been temporarily added to the Aztain Ahizpa party rather than Basil's own to make place for Nessia, and she was the one to deliver the coup de grâce.

A Guild's parties are interlocked. If multiple parties from a Guild participate in a battle, the experience is shared between all members even if they didn't land the killing blow.

Excellent. That kind of setup prevented internal warfare in the organization. Still, Basil wondered why he wasn't made aware of that feature when he created the *Homeowner Revenge Association*.

Your Intelligence—

"Don't you dare to finish this sentence."

—wasn't high enough to obtain this information beforehand.

Goddamnit.

Basil looked at Bordeaux as a shadowy form emerged from the clearing fog. The half-crumbled bridge trembled at its approach. The tip of a cannon pierced through the mist atop a mighty Leclerc tank, followed by a dozen armored soldiers on foot. They warily raised their rifles at Basil's group, especially the non-humanoid members of the party, but thankfully didn't open fire.

"What kind of automaton is this?" Little Nessia asked, a finger pointed at the tank. "I've never seen anything like it."

Her gesture caused a few soldiers to tense up and point their weapons at her. Basil immediately dropped Plato on the ground, much to the cat's chagrin, and prepared to summon his halberd in case things went sour.

"It's all right!" one of the soldiers said, a woman. Basil recognized her voice before she even removed her helmet. "They're friends!"

Officer Elissalde beamed with joy upon recognizing her sister. "Maya!"

"Sister!" Maya Elissalde rushed to embrace her sibling. Her dogs howled in support. "Thank God you're alright!"

Basil breathed in relief. A part of him suspected Maya Elissalde survived—if her class worked like his Tamer one, her dogs would have perished with her—but the doubt remained. That dickhead Tamura couldn't follow through with his bluff.

The tank stopped a few meters away and an old man emerged from inside. Dressed in a white military uniform covered in medals, he reminded Basil of Ed Harris; albeit ten years older and with a graying beard. A kepi sat comfortably atop a receding hairline. Yet in spite of heavy signs of aging, his blue eyes remained spry and alert. They glanced at each member of Basil's group, swiftly assessing them. He smiled warmly within seconds, having correctly guessed that they were allies.

General Richard-Philippe Leblanc

Level 26 [Humanoid] (General 10/Pilot 10/Tanklord 6)

Guild: European Liberation Front (High Command).

Finally, Basil thought. Now he could complain about the misuse of his taxes to the proper authority!

"General." Neria gave him a military salute. "I'm glad to see you alive and well."

"Our apologies for the delay, Brigadier," the general said with a grandfatherly voice. "It is difficult to drive a tank in wine fog. We kept running in circles within it."

Basil watched on in silence, trying to assess the general's character. He appeared strangely relaxed for a military leader. Basil expected him to come with a stick up his ass, maybe a whole broom.

"What's the situation, Brigadier?" the general asked Officer Elissalde, a little less warmly than before. "Report."

"The Bohens and my team neutralized Dionysus," Neria explained. "He's dead."

"My gurgling are his ghost's screams," Rosemarine whispered. Soldiers pointed their weapons at her in response, but the general only chuckled.

"Truly? Then you have my thanks. I hope he did not taste too bitter." General Leblanc glanced at Basil. "You are the Tamer boy from Bulgaria, are you not? I have heard about your exploits."

"The good ones I hope," Basil deadpanned.

"I have yet to hear of the bad ones. Did you truly shout '*witness me Saint-George*' before slaying a dragon?"

Basil squinted at Neria, who cleared her throat. "I was asked to write an extensive report," she defended herself.

"I admit I laughed upon reading that part," the general said with a charming grin. "Though I assume battling a god probably tops that particular story."

"Handsome," Vasi whispered into Basil's ear. "The flash drive."

"Oh, right." Basil cleared his throat. "General, I have an important delivery for you straight from the ISS."

"The ISS?" The general frowned, but seemed to take Basil at his word. "Come to my office then. We can discuss it in a warmer place."

"Hey, what about us?" Ever the opportunist, Shellgirl immediately tried to negotiate a payout. "We rescued your city, you owe us a reward!"

"Shellgirl, shush," Vasi whispered. She looked at the tank warily.

The general took the remark in stride. "Of course, I will discuss your compensation with your leader. Brigadier Elissalde, see that our guests are granted accommodations for their stay."

Maya Elissalde glanced at Rosemarine. "We don't have a bedroom big enough for her."

"A hangar will have to do," her sister replied with a sigh.

"We owe you a great debt for your help, young man," General Leblanc told Basil. "You can relax now. You are among friends."

"You better negotiate with a knife in your mouth, Partner," Shellgirl said with a grin. "I didn't get pummeled by a dozen drunkards to leave empty-handed."

Basil relaxed a little. Although he would never admit it out loud, a part of him did miss a friendly neighborly human civilization...

"No seriously, what kind of automaton is this?" Little Nessia chewed her lip in childish frustration as everyone ignored her. "I am a princess! Somebody answers me or I'll tell my dad!"

Basil spent an hour in the general's office alone with the man.

Although located in the middle of Bordeaux's heavily fortified air force military base, the room reminded him more of a headmaster's lair than a general's redoubt. The white walls were covered in various photos representing lakes, pine forests observed from above, and wild birds instead of medals or diplomas. The only things referencing the air force were a French flag and a painting representing a group of young pilots dating from 2021. Basil assumed they must have been the last graduating class of the local French Air Force. He wondered how many had survived the Apocalypse so far.

The office had only one window, which the general warily closed before beginning the interview. The door was locked, and two steaming cups of coffee awaited on the general's mahogany desk next to a phone. General Leblanc had offered Basil snacks, but he had politely refused.

He only fed on vegetables, Vasi's pastries, and the flesh of his enemies.

The interview was surprisingly cordial. The general invited Basil to sit on a chair and then asked questions calmly without raising his tone. He occasionally wrote down notes on a paper sheet, but spent most of his time listening in respectful silence. Basil had expected him to freak out upon seeing Captain Valentino's video, but his eyebrows barely furrowed. The man had either nerves of steel or one hell of a poker face.

General Leblanc asked precise questions about the Apocalypse Force, Walter Tye, the elves, and the flash drive found in the Soyuz. Basil answered honestly and delivered his findings. He even forwarded the general the video of Dismaker Labs' final board meeting through the Logs feature.

"This is worrying." General Leblanc joined his hands, his expression was thoughtful. "And hard to believe."

"But you don't seem all that surprised," Basil noted with a frown.

"Our astronomers noticed multiple anomalies in the cosmic microwave background, solar rays, and movements of celestial objects. Strange as it sounds, the possibility that Earth had been teleported to another dimension was seriously considered at one point." The general shook his head. "Still, to imagine Earth in the palm of a god's hand... and a Hindu one at that... It stretches credibility."

"A Greek god besieged your city for days," Basil bluntly pointed out. "You can believe in an European deity but not in an Asian one?"

"I do not believe, I think. But I concede your point." The general leaned back in his chair. "We'll analyze the flash drive to see if its files match your tale. Considering the services you've done for us, I'll take you at your word for now, but I'll need proof before acting up on it. I'll require the camera too."

"You can make copies." Basil held the general's gaze. The man sounded honest, but he remained a member of the French establishment. Basil distrusted them on principle, and their poor track record at dealing with the Apocalypse so far didn't help their case. "I'm okay with cooperating, but I ain't one of your soldiers. I intend to go after Kalki on my own after we're finished here, and I might need these videos later."

Basil expected the general to argue. Instead, he simply gave him a short nod. "I figured as much. Very well, my crafters will make copies and return the original to you."

"What happened with Kalki?" Basil changed the subject. He wondered if the general knew more than Neria on the matter.

"Your friend had to flee Metal Olympus in a hurry after we refused to hand him over... though I suppose I should call them Dismaker Labs now." The general's lips curled in anger. "To think I almost formed an alliance with the very people who put us all in this mess..."

"On the bright side, we know where to look now," Basil replied. "If they stick to the Greek theme, we'll just have to knock over Mount Olympus."

His response amused General Leblanc. "According to my sources, Metal Olympus' headquarters are actually located in Athens. We don't have the means to launch a campaign to Greece yet, but I'll have our intelligence division keep an eye on it. I'll also grant you access to the files we gathered on Dismaker Labs' board of directors. Perhaps it will shed more light on your confrontation with Tamura."

Basil accepted the gift with gracefulness. "I'd be thankful."

General Leblanc let out a heavy sigh. "If I had known about your friend's importance, I wouldn't have allowed him to leave Bordeaux unsupervised."

"You would have jailed him instead?" Basil deadpanned.

"Jailed?" General Leblanc raised an eyebrow. "Who do you take me for, young man?"

"A politician."

"Aren't we all? Politics means 'affairs of the city.' Anyone involved in the life of a community is a politician and should aspire to be. Those who don't participate in the public debate will suffer others' decisions in silence." The general smiled thinly. "I see. You believe that because I command this place, I must be a self-serving rascal only interested in my personal power and lining my pockets. A bit reductive, don't you think?"

"Let's just say I don't have good experience with authority figures." Both in France and Bulgaria. "But go on, what would you have done with Kalki? I'm curious."

"Nothing. I would have offered him bodyguards and asked for his cooperation in solving the current crisis. If your tale is true, he might be the key to returning our world to normal."

Basil crossed his arms. "Do you think the world *can* return to normal, general?"

"I must," he replied. "Or at least a new normal that mankind can live with."

Basil didn't quite agree with him. He knew mankind would survive the crisis if it adapted, but he doubted things would ever stabilize. The board's words came to mind. *They'll spin the wheel of death until an Overgod is selected.*

The general rose from his seat and moved to his window. He looked through it, hands behind his back. The morning sun shone high in the sky above *Rafale* planes lined up on a gray runway.

"The Soyuz you saw," he said without looking at Basil. "The monster inside survived atmospheric reentry undamaged according to your report. Do you think others might possess the same resilience?"

"Probably," Basil admitted. "Once you claim a dungeon, you can command the monsters it spawns. If I were an evil dragon alien, I would rain down soldiers from the skies upon my enemies."

The general raised his chin. His voice deepened. "You must know that France is one of the few countries with a nuclear arsenal."

Basil tensed up. "What about it?"

"It is common policy to have nuclear submarines with inter-continental ballistic capabilities patrolling the Atlantic," the general explained. "Dungeons are rare across the sea, so one of them returned safely to Bordeaux with its cargo untouched."

It took Basil's mind a moment to process what the general was implying. When it did, he all but jumped out of his seat. "You have *nukes*?"

"We have a stockpile of nuclear and experimental neutron warheads with long-range offensive capabilities."

Yes, he had nukes.

"Considering your experience with dungeons and the Unity so far, young man..." General Leblanc marked a short pause. "Would you recommend that we blow up the ISS?"

"Is this a joke?" Basil blinked. "Are you serious, General?"

"Let me rephrase it." The man looked over his shoulder. "Considering your experience with dungeons and the Unity so far, should we, in your opinion, target the ISS with a nuclear warhead and blow it the fuck up?"

Were they truly discussing whether or not to launch a nuke in space? That discussion wouldn't have looked out of place in a video game or a Michael Bay movie.

"General." Basil cleared his throat. "With all due respect, I don't think I'm the best counsel on the matter."

"On the contrary, you have conquered a dungeon and destroyed another, so you've observed both sides of the process closely." The general shook his head. "I will not make a decision until after we analyze the flash drive, but your input would be appreciated."

God be merciful, the man was completely serious.

Basil fidgeted in his seat. He hadn't even considered the possibility of blowing the entire ISS up from the ground. Now that the possibility was on the table...

Basil thought back to what Walter said about halting Incursions, of what he had seen the Unity achieve in Dax, and his battle at Château Muloup. The place recovered from a full-on assault within minutes.

"General, I think you should blow up all the dungeons you can't take over or don't need," Basil said after a moment of consideration. "The fewer of them, the more a new Incursion is delayed. Now that the Unity controls the station, I'm sure they'll use it against us somehow down the line. However..."

"Everything before a 'but' or a 'however' does not count, young man."

"But I'm not sure a nuke will be enough," Basil admitted. "Dungeons self-repair in minutes. You might fail to blow up the ISS or cause the station to crash down on Earth and spawn monsters there."

"That's what I feared," the general grumbled. "We have the means to shoot down the ISS if needed, but I'm afraid of the potential consequences. Blasting that dungeon might cause monsters to rain down from space or worse."

"What about the moon?" Basil asked. "The Unity is building a freaking James Bond villain base up there. I think we'll be fine Fat Manning the reptilians."

Much to Basil's sorrow, the general denied his brilliant plan. "First of all, our missiles can't reach that far," he explained. "Second, the Unity possesses space-faring capabilities. It's not unlikely to imagine that their base has countermeasures against bombardments."

"It's exactly why you should hit them before they complete their preparations," Basil argued. "It could be your only chance. Can't your crafters figure something out?"

"Mayhaps. I'll consult them and have our astronomers track the Unity's progress." The general sat back in his chair. "At this point, we don't have the means to interfere with their lunar operations."

Basil clenched his jaw, but he didn't have any better plan to offer.

Unless...

"What about the neurotowers?" Basil asked. "I lent your army one."

General Leblanc chuckled at the 'lent' part. "You want to bring it to your... magician friend, is that it? Do you trust him?"

"No," Basil admitted. Walter Tye struck him as a reliable and pragmatic man, but one without a conscience. "But I trust his expertise."

The General remained silent for a moment, his expression indecipherable. Basil was certain he considered the pros and cons of offering this piece of dangerous technology to a foreign sorcerer.

"I'll agree under one condition," he finally said. "I want one of my representatives to have access to this shop between worlds. To track progress on the device."

From his response, Basil guessed his crafters hadn't made any progress on cracking down the server's secrets. The general had precious few options left.

"I can't guarantee anything," Basil replied. It was up to Walter whether or not anyone could access his pocket dimensions. "And it'll have to be Neria."

She was the only one he trusted. He knew she would behave in Tye's shop and avoid pissing him off.

"I accept," the general replied. "Finally... please keep most of what you told me today to yourself. The ISS, the hand, your friend's importance."

Here it was. The reason why Basil struggled to trust officials. They always thought they knew better than everyone else.

"People deserve to know what's up there," Basil argued.

"Do you intend to scream it out atop Bordeaux cathedral?" The general asked with a scoff. "Inform the whole city at once?"

"No," Basil replied with a frown. Largely because he didn't see the point. "But I will tell the truth if I think it's relevant. I won't shut up because it's easier that way."

"Neither will I." General Leblanc locked eyes with Basil. "Do you know how many people took refuge in Bordeaux since the government crumbled?"

Basil frowned. "If you're trying to pull my heartstrings—"

"To be honest, I do not know the exact number myself yet. A census is underway, but I can already imagine the results." The general sighed. "Thousands? Millions? We faced a few looters here and there, but for the most part, our citizens have shown surprising solidarity. Do you know why?"

"No, but I'm sure you'll tell me."

"Because they believe we can come back from all of this. That we can turn things around. That we'll keep them safe. That one day, their children will be able to grow without the threat of a monster eating them." The general marked a short pause. "When people stop believing in a better future, Basil, no community can survive. Families put their own safety first over their neighbors. It's the war of all against all, with everyone out for themselves. The worst of mankind crawls out of the woods to reveal their true, ugly self."

Basil fidgeted in his chair. The image of Lalande and his group immediately came to mind.

"The people of France have already gone through many terrible ordeals," the General lectured him. "They have seen the very rules of physics overturned. Their cities are in shambles. Food is scarce and evil is everywhere. Their willpower is like a bowstring. Too much pressure and it'll break. I'm afraid discovering Earth is no longer in its place and that our existence is bound to a single man's life will be one stress test too many."

"I could take it," Basil replied gruffly. "So can they."

"Yes, you could take it," the general conceded. "Because you already went through great distress in the past. I can see it in your eyes. But not everyone had the benefit of hardships toughening them up. For many, this is their first and greatest crisis; it might very well be their last. Do you think a young you, naïve and foolish, could take everything at once? Could you see your home destroyed, your people killed, your civilization crumbling, your world abducted, and not... *break?*"

Basil gritted his teeth, but kept his mouth shut. His silence was an answer in itself.

"I am not asking you to 'cover-up' the truth," the general whispered. "I'm asking you to wait for the right moment. We will tell them the truth, but after our people have time to breathe. To get used to a world that has gone mad."

"They'll learn the truth anyway," Basil replied with cynicism. "The Apocalypse Force and the Unity must know. Someone will spill the beans. If you let them take the initiative, it'll make them gain more followers."

"Which is why we will reveal the truth ourselves at the right time. Besides, word of your friend's cosmic importance might cause other factions to target him. The fewer people are aware of his true nature for now, the safer he will be."

Basil grumbled, but conceded the point. Too many factions already knew about Kalki and some nihilistic psycho might get the wrong idea.

"Okay, I'll keep quiet for now," Basil agreed. "But if you don't walk your talk..."

"You have my word," General Leblanc replied. "I am not one to fold under pressure, as Metal Olympus could tell."

"Why didn't you surrender Kalki to them?" The question had bugged Basil for a while. "From what I understand, you wanted to form an alliance with them to retake France."

"I did," the general conceded. "Until they wanted me to surrender your friend without trial nor due process, that is."

"A single life compared to a faction's might," Basil pointed out. "Many others would have gladly made the deal in your position. Why didn't you?"

General Leblanc leaned back against his chair. He appeared lost in his thoughts for a few seconds, as if remembering days that had long passed.

"My father was a gendarme who committed heinous crimes during the German occupation," he confessed with a sad, sorrowful tone. "On the 16th of July 1942, he helped round up thousands of Jews in the Vél d'Hiv stadium, parents and children alike. Less than a hundred came back alive from the death camps."

Basil held his tongue. The man's voice brimmed with guilt and shame.

"I spent my entire childhood being called a collaborator's son," the general explained. "A single idea has always driven my military career: to wash France's sullied honor and make sure this kind of horror will never happen again on my watch."

The emotion in his voice was too deep to be faked. "I see..."

"Sometimes we are tempted to abandon our principles in the name of pragmatism and safety. There is no greater mistake. It is our values that drive us and make our life worth living. We must stand resolute in the face of evil, not only for ourselves, but for generations who will look back on our actions. For they will carry either our shame or our pride."

The man brimmed with charisma. Basil half-expected him to declare 'and this is why you must vote for me' at the end of his speech. He did not.

He's not that bad, Basil thought with a kernel of respect. And he did let Kalki flee at tremendous risk to himself. Basil owed him one.

The Apocalypse unveiled the worst of humanity... and its best.

"You have family back home?" The general changed the subject. "You are far away from Bulgaria, young man."

"My mother lives back home," Basil confirmed. "We're... estranged."

General Leblanc didn't ask for details on that front, for which Basil was thankful. "What's her name? Perhaps my contacts in eastern Europe will have heard of her."

"I doubt that," Basil replied. His mother was a maid and shopkeeper, not a fighter. If anything, she had likely perished on the apocalypse's first day. "Her name is Aleksandra Olga Bohem."

"A kind name," the man said softly. "I will keep an ear out for any mention of her."

"You might as well look for a needle in a haystack," Basil pointed out.

"Perhaps, but it costs us nothing to ask. Do not be so quick to give up on your own kin."

Basil crossed his arms and changed the subject. The words he heard while under the Berserk ailment still haunted him. "You said you have contacts in Eastern Europe? How?"

"We are not the U.S. military, but the countries of Europe have powerful fighting forces all across the continent. Some of them survived the Apocalypse."

Basil wasn't too confident about Bulgaria's army, since the post-Soviet governments downsized it after joining NATO. Still, Bulgarians were a proud people. Even if the military failed, militias would fight back against monsters invading their lands. The forests would make it easy to hide and strike in the night.

"Over the last months, I have been steadily trying to contact these forces and integrate them under a single command as per NATO protocols," General Leblanc explained. "I dare say we're on the right path. We're overhauling our doctrine to take the System into account. Trying combined-arms parties, adapting our command structure to Guild features, and so many other things..."

"Did you hear anything from Sofia?" Basil asked. He hadn't heard anything from his homeland since the apocalypse. Now that he had lost the house, perhaps he should visit it after finding Kalki.

"I admit Bulgaria wasn't too high on my list of importance, but I will keep you informed," the man replied. "Your ability to tame monsters also makes me thoughtful. If there is an alternative to constant warfare with them.... I might need to explore it."

"I know for sure you can breed dinosaurs with chickens," Basil thought it wise to mention.

The general chuckled. "Perhaps we should trade our horses for a pack of tyrannosauruses."

"You should." A soldier with a sense of humor? Basil thought they were an extinct species. "Are we done for the day, General?"

"We are, for now." General Leblanc cleared his throat. "But I would like to talk to you again later. Since your group intends to travel to Paris to pursue the avatar, you'll need supplies and support. I can offer you these."

"Like food and ammo?"

"Intel too. We have established friendly contact with other communities in the north of France, who will offer shelter and guidance. Our armories are open to you too." The general smiled. "I understand you fight well with your halberd, but I have the feeling you will find our flamethrowers, gatling guns, and AK-47s most appealing."

"Flamethrowers?" Basil's heart skipped a beat. "You would lend me one? I told you, I'm not interested in joining the army."

"I would have called it madness once," General Leblanc conceded. "But I didn't think dragons existed six months ago and you have one pulling your carriage. Your victories, however you earn them, are mankind's victory. I'll send other squads after Kalki to hedge my bets... but I'll grant you all the support you need to prevail."

Basil couldn't help but smirk. "Careful, general. You're starting to make me like France."

"*Slava na Bŭlgariya*," Leblanc replied with a smile and a surprisingly good Bulgarian imitation. "Now go take a rest. You look like shit."

After respectfully saluting the general, Basil left the office and closed the door behind him. He found Vasi waiting for him outside under a glamor that had disguised her horns and whitened her skin.

"How did it go?" she asked.

"I'm glad not all of my taxpayer money was wasted," Basil replied. The meeting went much better than he expected. "I might even cautiously say it was wisely invested."

Vasi chuckled. "Good to know. They offered us quarters for the night at a hotel near their 'airport,' whatever that means. With real beds."

"Is that where the others went?"

"Plato wanted to question Zachariel about his 'agnostic cancer' and the others went along." Her smile faltered a bit. "The soldiers wouldn't let the others close to the base either. They're still wary of monsters."

Ah, that explained the glamor. "Were you worried about me?"

"I was," she admitted softly. "What happened at the bridge weighs on your mind. I can see it clearly."

Was that so obvious? Basil thought about his mother. So many issues he never had the chance to settle with her, and now... now it might be far too late for that.

"It wasn't your fault," Vasi reassured him. "It was the snake's. No one else."

"You're wrong." Basil bit his tongue, but decided to be honest. Vasi made for a good listener. "When I go Berserk, I don't hear anyone. Instead, mental voices do their best to push all my buttons. They open old wounds and then salt them."

"I didn't know." Vasi scowled. "That's awful."

"Yeah, but that means the anger and rage comes from my own heart." Basil's teeth grit in frustration. "The Berserk ailment pulls out what's already simmering beneath the surface. I ain't got any excuse for not handling my own shit."

"Basil, everyone has issues they try to bury in a mind closet," Vasi replied. "Does any of these demons involve anger at your cat?"

"Well, he does wake me up too early for breakfast," Basil joked.

"But did you ever want to hurt him?"

"No." The response came immediately. "Never."

"Because that wasn't all of you back then." Vasi shook her head. "The magic didn't bring out the worst of your person; it canceled the best of it. Yes, maybe your anger came from your heart. But it doesn't define you, no more than a finger rules a hand. It's part of a whole. I don't like my new horns, but I have to live with them all the same. You'll have to live with your anger too. It's a part of you."

"Even the emotional shit?"

"Anger is a normal reaction to the feeling of having our boundaries violated," Vasi replied. "Sometimes it clouds your judgment... and sometimes, it gives you the strength to defend what you care about. That's no excuse not to work on your issues if you feel the need to, but between us, your zeal is half the reason I find you so charming."

Basil laughed. "You do?"

"Of course," she teased him. "You are a passionate man, Mr. Bohem. Yes, sometimes you go overboard, but I find your excesses entertaining. Even inspiring."

"I do my best," Basil replied. His heart felt lighter in his chest. "And I find you quite charming myself, Vasi."

"Thank you," the witch replied. Her warm smile caused blood to flush to Basil's head.

...

Oh, and to hell with it.

"Vasi?" Basil asked.

"Yes?"

"Wanna visit Bordeaux together? I know a few good spots. You'll love them."

"With pleasure," she replied. "Shellgirl wanted to do some shopping with the locals too. It should be fun."

"No, I meant..." Basil cleared his throat. "Just the two of us."

Vasi observed him in silence for a moment, her expression unreadable. Basil held his breath. Did he overstep? He thought he had read the signals she sent him correctly, but perhaps he had mistaken her light flirting for something more serious...

"Are you asking me out on a date, Basil Bohem?" she teased with a grin. "A *romantic* date?"

"Yes," he replied bluntly. "If you want."

They had been dancing around the subject for a while. Basil thought he might as well bite that bullet. He wasn't sure how it would turn out, but at least they would clarify where each of them stood.

Basil liked Vasi. She was fun to hang out with, and unless he had misread her, she was interested in him too. He didn't want to take it too seriously in case their flirting led nowhere, but after what they went through together, Basil felt right in asking her out.

Vasi let out a long, long sigh. Basil briefly worried that she would let him down gently, but instead, she put a hand on her waist and smiled at him.

"About time you took the hint, you dense bear of a man," Vasi said. "Very well, handsome. I accept your offer."

Chapter 16: Man vs Date

After the battle, Zachariel offered the party a full check-up.

Bugsy marveled at his clinic's architecture. The angel had refurbished a church into a hospital, one with doors large enough to let Rosemarine through. The building's vast interior had been changed into a large convalescence ward where hundreds of wounded humans slept in clean white beds. Winged angelic nurses took care of them under the gaze of human statues. The sweet smell of potions boiling in cauldrons and alchemical vials covered the choking stench of blood. The equipment gathered under this place's roof put the Boss' old lab to shame.

Still, as much as the place impressed him, the patients made Bugsy uneasy. He had expected acclaim for saving the city, but the humans instead looked at the party with distrust at best and terror at worst. Soldiers with firearms escorted the group and watched Rosemarine carefully, as if half-expecting her to devour the wounded. The slight clicks in their weapons told Bugsy that a few of them wouldn't hesitate to fire upon the party with little provocation.

The Centimagma didn't fear a battle—he could probably slaughter everyone present on his own—but the lack of gratitude wounded him. Could they build a fence in the party's honor at the minimum? Or a chicken coop?

Maybe Shellgirl is negotiating for one with the human leader? Bugsy wondered. The merchant was missing, alongside Vasi and Basil. *Or... are they having a threesome behind closed doors?*

Bugsy's body began to heat up as he imagined the scene in his mind. He felt the strong urge to write down a literary version of his fantasy for future generations. He had already written one for the *Major Chicken* cartoon, where the title character took young Sergeant Chick under his wing... in more ways than one.

Bugsy missed Kuikui. The libidinous raptor had inspired so many chapters.

The centimagma managed to calm himself when Zachariel glanced at him in confusion. He would keep the truth a secret for now; the world wasn't advanced enough to *understand* his vision yet.

"I didn't know there were so many angels around," Bugsy changed the subject as a winged nurse flew past him. Her syringe was almost as large as her leg.

"The local priests recruited extensively after I introduced them to the angel insurance call ritual," Zachariel replied as he flipped through a report's pages. "They managed to summon my entire department."

"Oh nice," Bugsy commented. "How is it going?"

"Results are mixed," Zachariel admitted. "Our healthcare insurance conversion rate is at a record ten percent, but a third of our patients mysteriously convert to Buddhism after a stay in

our clinic. A further third undergo a post-operative crisis of faith. The for-profit nature of our services seems to leave them disappointed."

Bugsy wondered why. "You should ask Shellgirl," he recommended. "I'm sure she'll find a way to restore your image."

"Don't worry, we are already working on an aggressive marketing campaign. Our new motto is *'You can't put a price on heaven.'*" Zachariel examined his newest patient. "How do you feel, Mr. Plato?"

"What will it be, doc?" Plato asked anxiously. The cat lay on a bed, right next to Mylène the Doberman. "Good news? Bad news? Last news?"

The angel gave him a thumbs up. "Mr. Plato, I am proud to say your agnostic cancer is almost entirely gone."

"Oh, great," Plato said with relief. "No metastasis detected?"

"None," Zachariel confirmed. "I've done this job since the good ol' inquisition days and I've rarely seen such a speedy recovery. Have you undergone convent chemotherapy since our last meeting?"

"I have been reevaluating my beliefs since Halloween," Plato admitted. "And my place in the universe too."

"Ah, a spiritual awakening treatment." Zachariel reread his document. "That explains the high levels of existential cholesterol. I would survey them if I were you. Contact me if you show any symptoms of doomsaying or apocalyptic visions."

"What about me, Zachariel?" Mylène the Doberman asked. Her back legs hadn't regrown yet. "Will I ever walk again?"

Zachariel's clear embarrassment saddened Bugsy. "Rosemarine?" the centimagma asked. Her head overshadowed the bed. "Can you help?"

"Beware my light that burns the skies!" she replied proudly. Her petals glowed as bright as radiant sunlight. "Sunbath!"

Rosemarine showered Mylène with her radiance, causing a few soldiers to protect their eyes or raise their weapons at her. Yet when the tropidrake's light faded away, the doberman remained amputated.

"Awww, it's not working..." Rosemarine apologized sincerely. "I'm sorry."

"I'm afraid I see no way to regenerate your legs naturally yet, Mylène," Zachariel admitted. "We will have to commission puppet implants from a Puppeteer class or homunculus cloned limbs until we figure out a solution."

"But you said your angelic magic could regrow limbs!" Mylène complained.

"It should... or at least it did on Outremonde." Zachariel shook his head in shame. "My belief at the time was that the field effect produced by our late pagan god—may he burn in Happyland—interfered with your recovery. Yet I still cannot regenerate your legs afterward. I blame this System's unusually harsh restrictions on healing."

"Restrictions?" Bugsy squinted in confusion. "There are restrictions on healing?"

"My healing Perks and those of my angelic colleagues work much less well here than in Outremonde," Zachariel explained. "Your Trimurti System is unusually harsh on the wounded. If we do not regenerate maimed limbs quickly enough, patients suffer from maximum HP reductions and can no longer regrow them naturally. We had no such restriction on Outremonde. I could regrow severed legs years after the amputation."

"Death rules supreme," Rosemarine chirped.

To Bugsy's surprise, Zachariel nodded in confirmation. "Our working theory is that the Trimurti System makes life harder for Players and monsters by design. We suspect this is to maximize casualties."

"Makes sense," Plato mumbled. "Whenever I die, I return barely hanging to life. Another blow and I'm dead again."

"I admit your Guild features interest me, especially the hidden Perk unlock and Lair mechanics," Zachariel said. "I could improve my clinic further by adding passive regenerative properties or enhancing healing spells. This might allow us to work around this System's limitations."

"Why don't you stay with us, Mr. Zachariel?" Bugsy asked with enthusiasm. "All your angel friends could heal people better with the Boss' help!"

"Unfortunately, the possibility of Mr. Bohen's death slaying all our healers makes that proposal risky," Zachariel replied. "It is worth examining though."

Mylène whined in sadness. "Mistress Maya and mistress Neria won't love me anymore... I'm useless."

"Are you kidding?" Bugsy tried to cheer her up. "Of course they'll still love you! You're their friend!"

"Y-you think so?"

"As much as I hate to say it, you dogs have a way to stick to humans like glue," Plato reassured her in his own gruff way.

"Neria and Maya booked a visit per day," Zachariel said. "You are an esteemed member of our party, Mylène. Do not worry. We will do all we can to restore your health, spiritual and physical. Once we have replacement body parts ready, you'll be back in the field in no time."

"I'm..." the doberman started to cry a little. "I'm so glad... I can still help them..."

Bugsy's Tremorsense noticed Shellgirl's approach before her shouts reached his ears. "Guys, guys!" The slimy merchant barged into the clinic with big yellow eyes. "Big news! Big news!"

"Quiet!" Zachariel chided her. "We have patients here!"

"You won't believe it," Shellgirl said as she gathered her breath. "Basil and Vasi are shopping. *Together.*"

"So?" Plato asked, unimpressed.

"So when I asked to come, my dear Vasi refused!" Shellgirl grinned. "Because it's a date! He finally asked her out!"

The party members stared at her in shocked silence.

It didn't last long. For a certain prophet felt himself vindicated in his belief, and he would not remain quiet anymore.

"YES!" Bugsy's squeal of victory caused all angels in the vicinity to glare at him. He didn't care. They couldn't silence the truth! "I KNEW IT! I KNEW IT! I FELT THE VIBES!"

"Quiet!" Zachariel snapped.

"Basil? Our Basil?" Plato asked in disbelief. "Asking a girl on a date? Has he been possessed?"

"I know, unbelievable!" Shellgirl nodded frantically. "After he gave me such a pounding last time too. He had his paws all over me. To imagine his hands all over my Vasi now... I shudder to imagine how it will go."

"A demon witch and a would-be paladin..." Zachariel scratched the back of his head. "I give her a fifty percent chance of having his redemption in eight to nine months, give or take. Or she'll give him a Fallen STD, which is always a risk if they have unprotected relationships."

"I hope she will make Mister happy," Rosemarine said without any hint of sarcasm. "I wish them a bloody honeymoon."

Then they'll hold hands and make eggs, Bugsy thought frantically. They'll have children! Children who will call me Uncle Bugsy! Uncle Bugsy! And then I'll spoil them, and together we'll build a whole new fence around a bigger house!

Doubt swiftly seized the centimagma's heart.

"What if the date doesn't go well?" Buggy muttered to himself. Panic filled his mind as his dream turned into a nightmare. "What if they don't hold hands? What if there's no chemistry and they can't produce an egg? What if I don't become an uncle?!"

"That's not how dating works," Plato said with a deadpan look.

"It's how it *must* work!" Buggy protested. He had played the minion dating sims on Steamslime's holomachine. He *knew* how relationships worked. "The future is *Vasil* and nothing else!"

"Vasil?" Shellgirl scoffed. "That's a cute couple brand."

"I will believe it when I see it." Plato leaped off his bed with a determined stare. "Let's peep."

Over a year had passed since Vasi last visited a human city, and never one as large as Bordeaux.

Her homeland, the Winter Kingdoms, owed its name to its fragmented political situation. Petty kings, dragons, and fairy warlords squabbled over isolated villages separated by vast expanses of frosty icelands. The largest city Vasi ever visited numbered little more than ten thousand inhabitants.

Bordeaux had ten times that number at first glance, if not more. The streets bustled with animation and lines of humans waited for the army to deliver them rations. Soldiers with swords and firearms surveyed checkpoints at each crossroads, but security was relatively lax. Basil only had to show them a card handed to him by the military to go through them. None of the soldiers appeared capable of seeing through Vasi's glamor spell either; or if they could they didn't mention it.

Earth's architecture contrasted greatly with what Vasi had grown accustomed to on Outremonde. Charming stone buildings formed tightly-packed streets crossed by paved roads, where the Winter Kingdoms used wood and earthwork. Sometimes she noticed a few of those metal carriages called 'cars' driving through the city's maze of twists and turns, but most locals used their feet to walk around. It astonished her that so few humans could fly.

"What's this?" Vasi raised a finger at a strange metal serpent traveling on rails. She glimpsed a hundred humans inside its transparent innards.

"A tramway," Basil explained. Much like Vasi herself, he had dressed normally for the occasion. This was only a first friendly date, so both of them approached it with a degree of casual detachment. "It's a vehicle that travels all across the city."

"What an interesting golem," Vasi noted. The ingenuity of local humans astonished her. Walter Tye was right; entirely new fields of technology awaited visitors to Earth.

"Do you want to try it?" Basil suggested.

"I'll pass." Vasi was curious by nature, but she disliked large gatherings. "I'm surprised nobody uses brooms to fly around."

"Why, that's common in your world?" Basil asked with a smirk.

"Pray never to encounter a broom traffic jam," Vasi replied with a chuckle of her own.

Basil guided her to a large street bordered by cute houses of stone. Vasi noticed shops everywhere she looked. Shoemakers, street vendors, jewelry sellers, alchemists... a good half of the establishments were closed for rationing purposes, especially the restaurants, yet dozens of humans walked around with bags full of supplies. Sweet and exotic smells flooded her nostrils.

"This is Sainte-Catherine Street," Basil told her. "The largest commercial street in Europe, or so I was told."

"Is it always this busy?" Vasi had never seen so many merchants gathering in one place.

"It's far, far calmer than usual," Basil replied with a sad smile. "Though I expected worse."

Vasi nodded and waited for him to make a gesture. Instead, Basil took a step forward, before looking over his shoulder in confusion. "What?" he asked in confusion.

"You're supposed to offer me your arm," Vasi reminded him. Although usually charming, she could also find his obliviousness grating.

"Uh, sure." Basil followed through with her suggestion and Vasi put her arm around his own. "If you want."

"I know your opinion on chivalry," Vasi commented with a frown. "But don't they teach you manners in your world?"

"It's old-fashioned," he replied with a scoff. "Boys and girls usually hold hands around here."

"I think it's a bit early for that." Next date maybe. If this one went well.

Thankfully, Basil managed to find his inner knight. "Would flowers make up for my offense, M'lady?"

"Only if they're pretty." A few men glanced at Vasi as they walked by, much to her amusement. Men. Always the same. A good part of why Basil excited her was that he had actually been a challenge.

That, and the fact he didn't seem half as much interested in her looks as in her personality. Vasi had had enough flings in her youth to grow sick of short-lived relationships. With danger everywhere, she was looking for a reliable and down-to-earth boyfriend she could count on. Basil fit the bill perfectly. Just the right balance of affection and practicality.

The two walked along the street at a steady pace without stopping. Vasi observed the wares on display, from strange technological devices she didn't recognize to would-be alchemists presenting low-grade potions on stands. Mismatched adventurers' parties haggled over prices.

"I expected more damage," Basil said. A few of the houses showed claw marks, but little more. "Looks like very few monsters made their way to the city center."

"You have the embryo of an adventurer economy developing too," Vasi noted. A stand even offered clothing made of dinosaur skin, much like the armor her soon-to-be-boyfriend wore. "Your people are getting used to their new life."

It didn't surprise her. Humans were ingenious and resilient. They could bounce back from anything. They would make use of their new class-related advantages and rebuild their society around them.

"Yeah." Basil's expression soured for some reason, though he changed the subject before Vasi could pester him further. "I gotta ask, why are you a Demon/Fairy type?"

"Why, you won't date a mixed race child?" Vasi teased him.

Basil shrugged. "It's your actions that matter, not where you come from."

"Good," Vasi replied. "I admit I thought you had racist leanings after the mermaid fiasco."

"I'm not fish-sexual, no. Or a furry for that matter."

"You know I will grow hooves with my next metamorphosis?" Vasi laughed at his shocked face. "Oh my, you'll believe anything I say. It's so funny."

"Hey, I watched my houseplant turn into a flower-Godzilla," Basil defended himself. "But seriously, what's next on your program?"

"Mmm, good question." Vasi playfully put a finger on her lips. "Next time I'll probably have to stick to either the demon or fairy half of my ancestry. Demon witch or evil queen of the fair folk... such a tough choice..."

"I vote for the second," Basil said. "And you still haven't answered my question."

"Oh, you know how it goes: when a demon and a hag love each other very much, they sacrifice virgins on an altar, burn a village and then ferociously make love atop a mountain of corpses."

"Were you truly born that way?" Basil's eyes widened in horror. "Wait, is your father Satan?"

Vasi didn't know what the term meant, but she found his reaction amusing all the same. "I was kidding. My father was some minor demon prince who had a brief fling with my mom... his name was Braniño II or something. I never knew him. He didn't stick around for my birth."

"Oh." Basil coughed in embarrassment. "I'm sorry to hear that."

He was as smooth as a porcupine. "It's nothing. I'm over it."

"And you never cared to learn more?"

"Why should I? If he couldn't be bothered to raise me then I was better off without him." Vasi chuckled. "Way to dodge daddy issues, you'll agree."

"Yeah." Basil snorted. "I guess it's better to have no father at all than a bad one."

Vasi winced at the bitterness in his tone. "It's your father's voice that you hear under the Berserk ailment, isn't it?"

"Him and Mom," Basil admitted. "The first was an irresponsible drunk and the second considers me a good-for-nothing disappointment."

"I see..." Vasi sighed. "It's one thing we have in common."

Basil's arm tightened around her own. He looked at her and chewed his lips. "I don't wanna make you uncomfortable."

"It's all right," Vasi reassured him. "I'm a grown-up. I'm over it."

"You aren't," he said bluntly. "I can sense it in your voice."

How perceptive. Basil Bohen could be surprisingly sharp when he wanted to.

"I was always something of a wild child, always causing mischief and breaking the rules." Vasi still messed with paladins out of habit in her adult years. "Mom wanted me to study at Scholomance, but I preferred to learn by myself. She never forgave me for it."

"Scholomance?" Basil asked with a frown. "Sounds familiar, but..."

"It's a school for dark magic in my world. My mother always said I needed a degree to succeed in the field, but I thought it didn't justify the tuition fees."

That, and one student out of ten ended up sacrificed by the end of the curriculum. Vasi was never keen to take such odds.

"A diploma is a piece of paper," Basil commented with a sneer. "People worshiped them like fetishes before the Apocalypse. Yes, a degree is sometimes useful, but it won't earn you a job nor respect anymore."

"I figured as much. I would rather study for its own sake than to satisfy someone else's expectations. Even my mother's."

Vasi thought she would have ended up as a disappointment anyway. Her mother was the greatest hag to ever live, and Vasi was her seventh daughter. The runt at the end. Although her mother cared for her children in her own way, she was a strict parent with high expectations that Vasi could never hope to meet.

Basil opened his mouth to say something, when a voice called out his name.

"Basil?" Vasi and her companion glanced at a wooden stand overflowing with flowers. A balding man in his thirties stood behind it, his eyes wide with shock. "Basil, is that you?"

"Ben?" Basil smiled in genuine joy. Vasi assumed he knew the shopkeeper. "Man, you're alive?"

"My god, Basil Childbreaker!" The man laughed. "It's been years!"

"Don't call me that." Basil blushed in embarrassment, as a few locals looked at him in shock. "You make it sound like something else!"

Vasi raised an eyebrow in curiosity. "Childbreaker?"

"It's a long story," he replied with a scowl.

"I want to hear it," Vasi insisted mischievously. She could tell this tale would make her laugh.

"Who's this sweet lady?" The shopkeeper smiled at her. His grin lacked any lust whatsoever. "Name's Ben. You're Basil's girlfriend?"

"I'm his wife," Vasi joked.

She heard a strange noise behind her, as fleeting as the wind. When the witch turned her head to look, she didn't see anything.

"His wife?" The shopkeeper whistled at Basil. "No way... you're married?"

"She's not my wife," Basil replied with a straight face. "She's messing with you."

The shopkeeper glanced at their intertwined arms with skepticism. "Yeah, right..."

"I'm Vasi," Vasi introduced herself with a bright smile. "Do you know each other?"

"Know him? The man is one of the best *Board & Conquest* players I've ever met! I watched him climb over a throne of player tears and broken dreams." The shopkeeper stared at Basil with nostalgia. "Good times..."

"Do you still sell miniatures?" Basil asked him.

"To whom? Nobody's got money to play B&C nowadays with monsters running around. At best Tacticians can use them to buff allies, but that class is incredibly rare. Nah, I'm a Gardener now."

Basil chuckled. "You too?"

"I mean, everybody needs fresh food, right?" The shopkeeper presented his wares. Vasi didn't notice any vegetables or fruit among his products, though it did include rare flowers and medicinal plants. "But I make most of my money from selling crafting material."

"Do you still use the euro around here?" Basil asked.

"Yeah, General Leblanc employs Bankers and Merchants to stabilize the economy. They mint their own euro coins now, but you can exchange old paper bills for the new one. I'm not sure if money will be worth much outside of the region, but at least it lets me buy equipment." The shopkeeper grinned. "Are you staying in Bordeaux for a while, B? I could show you the ropes around here."

"I'm just passing through," Basil admitted. "My party must travel north to find someone."

"Ah." The shopkeeper didn't hide his disappointment. "Well, would you have time to drop by before leaving? Play a B&C match for old times' sake? I still have my miniatures at home and my nephew needs a good lesson at it. Can't wait to see if the Childbreaker's still got it."

"Stop calling me that," Basil pleaded.

"Come on, now you have to tell me," Vasi said with a smirk.

"You won't stop pestering me until I do, will you?"

"No."

Basil sighed and surrendered. "At one point, I was heavily into a game called *Board & Conquest*. Since I was too poor to afford the miniatures, Ben lent me his own. I played competitions, and there was that twelve-year old brat I wanted to punch so hard—"

Vasi laughed at his wording. "This story begins well."

"He was a spoiled child with an OP army paid for by his parents," Basil continued. His mannerisms changed, like a man lost in his own little world. "A pure fire giant swarm beatdown army, the kind that costs tens of thousands of euros to field. Nobody could beat him in a local competition until I found a solution. I used suicide dwarf-trench tactics to stunlock him until I curse-sniped his generals with undead archers."

"We still call his strategy the Bulgarian Jihad to this day," the shopkeeper said with a smirk.

Vasi pretended to understand their jargon by nodding politely. "I see, I see... what then?"

"I defeated the brat and he cried before the entire audience," Basil said with a groan. "Although I won fairly, they booed me and called me a villain. Somebody shouted 'Childbreaker' and the name caught on."

"You did good," the shopkeeper said. "The sooner children are used to bitter disappointment, the better they'll get used to work."

The story brought a smile to Vasi's lips. "Why didn't you go easy on him?"

"Never." Basil's eyes burned with pride and passion. "I've *never* thrown a B&C game."

"You could have gone pro, you know," the shopkeeper commented.

"I tried at one point," Basil admitted. "Didn't pan out."

"It didn't pay well?" Vasi guessed. She remembered Basil mentioning money problems in his youth.

"It did, but you need good money to buy the best miniatures," Basil explained. "Since you must get new ones with each edition, you need a steady stream of cash to stay competitive."

"So to make it a high-paying job, you need to already have a high-paying job?" Vasi rolled her eyes. "Sounds pretty absurd to me."

"Pretty much why I abandoned the idea." Basil smiled at the shopkeeper. "But yeah Ben, I would gladly catch up over a game. Still the same old address?"

"Yep," the shopkeeper replied with a nod. "I won't hold you and your lady much longer."

"Actually, I was looking for a flower and I still have pre-apocalypse euros on me." Basil searched under his cloak and brought out paper bills. "How much for twenty euros?"

"For you, pal? Anything." The shopkeeper waved a hand at his wares. "I've got roses, muguet, magical stuff..."

Basil pointed a finger at a plant. "How much for that one?"

Vasi raised an eyebrow in confusion, as did the shopkeeper. "Hemlock?" he asked.

"Yes," Basil confirmed with a nod. "I'll take it."

"Uh, okay." The shopkeeper put the hemlock in a bouquet and handed it to Basil after giving him back his change. "Here you go."

"Thanks, Ben. See you later." Basil guided Vasi away from the stand and to the bank of the Garonne river. They walked along a promenade before sitting on a bench to watch the river. This time, he offered her the bouquet. "Here is your gift, M'lady."

"A poisoned one," Vasi commented at the unusual choice. "Should I see a hidden message behind this, handsome?"

"Didn't you need a hemlock for your witch brew experiments?" Basil asked with a frown. "I thought you were looking for that plant before the house burned down?"

"I... I did, yes." Vasi's heart skipped a beat. "You remembered that detail?"

"I did." Basil cleared his throat. "I shouldn't have?"

"Oh, no, I'm glad for it. It surprised me, that's all." Vasi had only mentioned hemlock once, so it astonished her that he remembered it at all. "That's sweet of you."

"You're welcome." He smiled sheepishly. Basil Bohem was never as cute as when he was embarrassed; which was why Vasi teased him so much. "I believed you might like it more than a rose you would throw out after a day."

"You were right." Although Vasi was more pleased by the fact he had paid enough attention to her to personalize his gift than the plant in itself. "You do know me well."

"Don't ask me to buy you alcohol though."

"Won't you?" Vasi put a finger on his chin seductively. "Even for a sweet kiss?"

"No," he replied with amusement. "But..."

"But?"

"I might change my mind about the bear thing," he admitted with a grin. "So long as you don't ask me to dance."

"Sorry," she apologized with a giggle. "My country has bears everywhere. I can't resist the urge to cuddle them."

"It's fine, I forgive you." After a moment of hesitation, Basil found the courage to put his arm around her shoulder. Vasi let him do it and nested her head against his chest. They settled into a comfortable posture, and their view of the river was quite the spectacle.

"Nice sight," Vasi commented. "You were right, you do know good spots."

"Enjoying the date so far?" he asked her.

"I am," Vasi replied. "Enough that you've earned a second one."

"I'm glad." His lips curled into the most beautiful smile Vasi had yet seen. "I have a good feeling about this."

"Me too."

And to prove it, Vasi kissed him on the cheek.

His skin was warm to the touch, and his face flushed red like a tomato. Not to be outdone, he countered her surprise attack with one of his own. His lips kissed her left cheek lightly and sent an electric jolt down her spine.

It was official.

Vasilisa Yaga had a boyfriend.

Once again, she heard that strange noise behind them; stronger, louder. Basil noticed it too and looked over his shoulder. He squinted, raised a hand in the air... and closed his fingers on a rounded shape.

"Goddamnit, Buggy." Vasi recognized Plato's voice, although she couldn't see him anywhere. "Couldn't you stay silent?"

"I'm sorry..." Buggy's voice echoed with the wind. Floating drops of water appeared behind the bench and fell on the walkway. "They're so beautiful together..."

"Partner," Shellgirl's voice said, coming from nowhere. "You ain't fondling my breast for free."

Vasi's eyes widened, and then squinted after putting two and two together. Basil's jaw clenched. "Zachariel?" he asked as his hand closed on something pointy. "Et tu, Zachariel?!"

"I'm sorry, sir," the invisible angel replied weakly. "I was press-ganged."

"Liar," Shellgirl said. "It was your idea to use the potions."

"It was to protect his virtue from succubi," Zachariel defended himself. "I have guardian angel training."

"Do you think invisibility potions grow on trees?" Basil grit his teeth in anger. "Are you all present?"

"Everyone," Plato admitted. To his credit, he sounded a little ashamed.

Although infuriated at them for ruining a perfect romantic moment, Vasi couldn't suppress her curiosity. "Even Rosemarine?"

"I'm here!" A rumbling noise echoed behind the couple and the walkway trembled. "I didn't eat anyone this time!"

"How..." Vasi frowned in confusion. How did she slip on the walkway? She was a giant dragon, for Dice's sake! "How did you manage to stay undetected?"

After a short silence, Vasi felt the tropidrake breathing down her neck.

"I tiptoed," she whispered sinisterly.

End of Arc III

Chapter 17: Man vs Baguette

In a great forest, an army of elves stood their ground against overwhelming odds.

A terrible army of bloodthirsty dwarves surrounded them from all sides. Cruel axe-wielders progressed through the woods as terrible war machines bombarded the battlefield. Flames spread to roast the elves alive. They fought valiantly to protect their last commander, a mage queen, but alas, their time was up. There would be no mercy from the invading army.

At long last, dwarves would rule the world!

"Can't you go easy on me, Basil?" Vasi asked as she pulled her elf swordmasters miniatures back. A good chunk of her territory had turned into fire tiles from the bombardment, which passively weakened her units. "This is my first time playing, you know?"

"Haven't I told you that I'm a feminist?" Basil asked with a competitive grin. "I don't pull punches with girls... and especially not at *Board & Conquest*."

"What about pulling your punches with your girlfriend?" Vasi advanced her elf archers on his flank. "It's only our second date."

Girlfriend. The word made Basil look up from the large board between them and at Vasi herself. The witch looked quite cute when frowning in utter concentration. Although she hid it well, he could tell she was as competitive as he was deep down. They had things in common than Basil imagined. It felt... nice.

Still, he hadn't considered this B&C match a second date. Not in the least because almost the whole party watched it.

Due to Rosemarine's size, the group had been afforded a hangar in Bordeaux's airport by the army. The tropidrake slouched next to a customized airbus modified with turrets and watched the game with rapturous attention. She was quieter than Buggy, whose happy noises distracted Basil more than once. As for Plato, he slept on a cushion without a care in the world next to a pile of miniatures. Ben had been kind enough to 'lend' Basil extra stocks of them upon learning his team had slain the false Dionysus and saved the city. Basil appreciated the gesture. These miniatures would have cost thousands of euros before the apocalypse and it would help kill the monotony of the long journey ahead.

The army didn't dispatch anyone inside the hangar. The thick metal walls isolated them from the noise of planes outside, affording the party a degree of privacy. From what Basil had gathered, the army used crafters to repurpose civilian planes for military use. Since the countryside was full of dangerous monsters, air travel might be the safest method to link up isolated European cities.

Basil took it as a good sign. Mankind was starting to adapt to the apocalypse after surviving the initial shock.

"I was going easy on you." Basil could have won five turns ago by investing resources to summon *Derro King Blutgang*, but he had sworn off playing five-star units until Vasi could master the game. "But since you seem to have a natural grasp on it, I can't afford to play nice."

"Thank you." Vasi summoned three elf wizards reinforcements at her left fort and sniped a war machine from afar. "Ah! Take that!"

"Good try," Basil conceded.

"How about we spice it up for the next match?" Vasi suggested with a coy grin. "Each time someone loses a commander, they must remove a piece of clothing."

"You've more than mine," Basil pointed out, trying to ignore Bugsy's excited noises. "And don't give him ideas!"

"I'm sorry, boss..." Bugsy breathed heavily. Tears of magma rained down from his eyes. "I'm just so happy for you two..."

"And that's not a *no*," Vasi mused as she fortified her right flank. "I end my turn."

"I'll think about your proposal," Basil replied evasively. He knew Vasi was just teasing him, but the idea of betting pieces of clothes made him uncomfortable.

"Think about what?" Shellgirl's voice echoed in the hangar. Basil looked up from the board to see his teammate return alongside Little Nessia, her griffin, and a pair of bodyguards. The latter two were dressed in Greek-style hoplite armor. Their hands wielded spears and shields, their faces hidden behind masked helmets.

"What's your world like, Nessia?" Basil asked. Considering she was an oracle of Dionysus and her bodyguards' attire, he was starting to wonder if their population was made of ancient Greece cosplayers.

"The Sunsea?" the little girl asked with a raised eyebrow. "It's wet."

"Oh good, another place we won't visit," Plato grumbled on his cushion. "*Ever.*"

"Personally, I'm excited," Shellgirl said. "A gal like me is always wet."

"Most of Gaia has been submerged under Pontus since the Anthropomachia, when most of the old gods perished," Little Nessia said with a beaming smile. "My homeland, Histria, is the most beautiful island in the world. You would love it."

Gaia and Pontus... although Basil knew little of ancient Greek religion, he remembered the name as that of the earth and sea deities. It seemed her world had been heavily influenced by Greek mythology somehow.

"The old gods died?" Rosemarine asked with curiosity. Aww, she was interested in foreign cultures! "Did they taste good?"

Little Nessia winced, as if Rosemarine's remark had woken up disturbing memories. "No," she said with a grim face. "No, they did not."

Basil wisely decided not to press her further. The subject clearly made her uncomfortable for an obscure reason.

Her words gave him food for thought though. Walter's shop included relics from Norse mythology and his world was seemingly inspired by it from what Basil had gathered from their discussions. Could it be that all mythologies were associated with a specific dimension? Would Aztec gods invade Earth next?

"Anyway guys, look at what I bought today on the market!" Shellgirl unstored two items from her inventory: a small portable TV and a DVD collector's box whose picture showed an infamous avian warrior and his crew facing the viewers. Basil gasped in shock at the sight.

"No way!" Buggy squealed in surprise and happiness. "*Major Chicken DVDs!*"

"And a portable TV to watch them!" Shellgirl showcased her wares with pride. "We can finish the season on the road!"

"Shellgirl, you have my utmost respect," Basil said, his voice brimming with gravitas. "What Apollyon took from us, you have returned with honor."

"Come on, it's nothing." Shellgirl grinned. "But I wouldn't mind a larger share of the loot next time as a reward."

"You will get your due," Basil promised as Buggy carefully grabbed the holy DVDs with his tiny legs. At long last, the artifact had been returned to its proper place.

Little Nessia, unaware of the true significance of the historic event unfolding before her eyes, looked at the board with interest. "Oh, what is this? A game?"

"*Board & Conquest*," Basil confirmed. "It's a strategy game."

"I love those," Little Nessia said with a bright smile. "Aunt Julia used to teach me how to play board games. Can I join?"

"Sure, you can have up to four players," Basil explained. The board was thirty tiles long and wide, enough to house an enormous amount of troops. "You can join a party midway through, but with only one commander and one resource point."

"Like an Incursion?" Little Nessia asked with big wide eyes. The more she looked at the board and miniatures, the more they fascinated her.

"Uh, somewhat." Basil gave her a dressing down of the rules. "B&C high-level tournaments usually involve teams of two. Two frontliners, and two back-ups who must choose the right place and moment when to deploy their reinforcements. Some choose to immediately summon the back-up army to seize an early lead, while others stay in reserve to pull off flanking maneuvers on the enemy army."

"If you're a starting player, you begin with a set of five commanders and three resource points," Vasi continued. "If all your commanders are defeated, your army loses. Additionally, you can conquer forts and seize supplies to increase your resource pool. This helps you put more miniatures into play."

"You're sure this is your first match?" Basil teased her.

"I have a good memory," his girlfriend replied.

"I want to try." Little Nessia raised a hand to grab a dwarf berserker figurine. "Can I play—"

She stopped like a deer in headlights upon seeing Basil's glare.

Nessia's griffin hissed back and her bodyguards pointed their spears at him. Basil ignored them. When it came to B&C figurines, he was like a man possessed by a dragon's greed. Still, he calmed himself upon realizing he was glaring murderously at a child.

"Please do not touch my dwarf figurines," Basil asked with a smile. Yes, a big wide smile would calm everyone down. "I would kill for them."

Upon sensing disturbed gazes staring at his back, Basil Bohen realized that he should have worded his sentence better.

Little Nessia pulled her hand back, but her surprise was swiftly replaced with a competitive spirit. In her eyes, Basil saw a kindred spirit; a vicious beast that slumbered in an innocent heart and only came out when challenged to a PvP game. Little Nessia glared back at him, pulled up her sleeves, grabbed the Aesir and valkyrie figurines from the pile, and sat right next to Vasi.

"Game on, old man," she told Basil with the cold determination of a bloodthirsty conqueror.

Basil glared back, his heart filled with a resolute desire to win. Air distorted around the board from the sheer intensity of the tension between the players. "You've messed with the wrong Bulgarian, petulant child."

And to prove it, he immediately sacrificed five resource points to summon *Derro King Blutgang*.

No more babysitting.

Nessia didn't pull punches either. After being told the basics of the game, she immediately deployed her Aesir army on Basil's left flank. Although the dwarves still held the advantage, Vasi's position was no longer hopeless.

"So, Nessia," Vasi said as her new ally observed the board with ungodly focus. "What are your plans? We're leaving for Paris today."

"I know, I talked to your general," she replied. "I've come to say goodbye."

"You're not coming with us?" Buggy asked in disappointment. "Shucks."

"Can't you stay in the party a little longer?" Vasi implored her. "I would like to keep my Coven ability."

"No!" Rosemarine, who had switched parties to leave a spot for Nessia, slapped her tail against the ground with a low growl. The shake caused a few miniatures to fall off the board, forcing Basil to scramble them back in place. Nessia's guards raised their weapons at the tropidrake, but their mistress stopped them with a hand. "I'm always the one switching parties to make room for someone else! I've had enough!"

"But we're all in the same Guild," Vasi argued. "Come on, it's like being one big party."

"No." Rosemarine set her foot down. "I'm in Mister's party, now and forever! He needs me!"

"Aww, Rosemarine, you'll always be a pillar of this party," Basil reassured her. He petted his tropidrake on the leaf-scales, causing her to giggle. "Of course you'll stay if that's your wish."

"I'll eat everyone who threatens you, Mister," she said warmly. "And their little dogs too."

"Good girl," Plato mumbled.

"But..." Vasi crossed her arms in disappointment. "My Coven spells..."

"I'm sorry," Nessia apologized as she deployed her valkyries on the mountain part of the board. "I know my dad. If I don't return home soon, he'll send an army to pick me up. But I promised the general I would talk to him to secure his side of the Incursion portal. Dad won't let any monster through."

"Oh, is your father a big-shot king?" Shellgirl asked. "I've read about those! They're rich, right?"

"Somewhat," Little Nessia replied evasively. Basil could tell she wasn't telling them the whole story, but he respected her privacy. "The barrier is weakening, so we'll cross the newest portal soon. The one near this city will lead to the Sunsea."

Basil bristled. "You think a new Incursion will happen soon?"

"How can you tell?" Vasi asked with a frown.

"My Oracle Perks told me." Little Nessia gave Basil a smug smile. "I've high Intelligence too."

The smug brat...

Vasi's amused smirk indicated she had read his mind. "I date him for his Charisma," she told Nessia with a giggle. "And the Vitality too."

It took all of Basil's willpower to keep his dignity and not say a word. He swore within his heart to let neither the elves nor Aesirs survive today's battle. His dwarves would slaughter them to the last soldier and paint the board red with blood.

"The next Incursion will happen soon," Little Nessia said. "I can feel it. I will return home then."

"How soon?" Basil pressed her on. The more information he could gather on the event, the better.

"I can't tell exactly. Weeks?" Little Nessia shrugged. "Soon. I promised the general I would tell him in advance, but I can't make predictions until a few days before."

Wonderful. Basil had hoped for a little relief after the Halloween event, but by now he was used to the world picking on him. "What else can we expect?"

When Little Nessia's expression darkened, Basil realized the worst was yet to come.

"I hear bugs gnashing their teeth at the barrier," she whispered. "A big one leads the swarm, hateful and vile. It will eat its way into your world."

Basil glanced up at Vasi, and then at the rest of his party. Even Plato looked back at him with a determined gaze. The same thought had crossed all of their minds.

Estrid the elf mentioned that Apollyon was the weakest of the Horsemen. He had the lowest level of the Apocalypse Force's leaders... and thus he was the one most likely to get through the barrier. It wasn't hard to make the connection with Nessia's words.

Apollyon would enter Earth on the next Incursion.

Most would have shuddered at the thought. But not Basil and his party. The Horseman of Famine had wronged them a great deal, and they had all sworn revenge on him.

"Good," Basil said as he deployed his dwarf war machines. "I'll bring insecticide."

Basil won the game as expected, though he struggled more than expected as well. He had the slight suspicion that Little Nessia's Oracle abilities gave her the ability to predict his moves to a point. It didn't make up for the experience and lack of resources to summon high-level units, but it made the match a close call.

Basil questioned Little Nessia during the match. Although she couldn't pinpoint the date of the next IncurSION, her Oracle Perks granted her a degree of awareness of which worlds would align with Earth during the event. Her native Sunsea was connected to the Bordeaux region, while the portal to whatever hellscape Apollyon would crawl out would open in the north.

Basil had the sneaking suspicion that the breach would be located close to Paris. After all, it was the worst possible outcome in a post-apocalypse world; and hence the most probable one.

I'm really tired of this bullshit, Basil thought grimly as his team moved to the hangar holding the Steamobile. General Leblanc's crafters were almost finished outfitting its top with a howitzer and reinforcing the wheels. By now the vehicle looked closer to a giant tank than the mechanical shell it started as.

As promised, the general's men also gave away a small portion of their armory to the team. Shellgirl whistled as she examined a weapon case filled to the brim with rifles. "Nice..."

"Yeah, very nice," Basil said in appreciation. The other crates included a flamethrower, four shotguns, pistols, four machine guns, and even a grenade launcher. All of them showed hints of being refined with runes and other magic. He grabbed a gun to better read its stats. On a closer look, it appeared bulkier than a normal handgun, and the barrel was rectangular rather than circular.

Plasma Pistol

Family: Weapon (Firearm).

Quality: B.

Power: + 14 SKI.

Crit: +10 %

Accuracy: 100%

Effect 1: Light Rune: Inflicts an additional 20% [Light] damage.

Effect 2: Inexhaustible: the plasma pistol generates its own projectiles at a rate of one bolt per minute (for a maximum reserve of 24).

Effect 3: [Unused].

The standard sci-fi weapon, cheap, reliable, and so easy to use that even a toddler can pull off a headshot with it (and they do).

"Forget the handgun," Basil said with a grin. "Plasma pistol is my new sidearm."

"Is there any gun big enough for me?" Rosemarine asked. "I miss the smell of gunpowder so much..."

"Not yet," Officer Elissalde said as she entered the hangar alongside Zachariel. General Leblanc closed the march alongside two armored soldiers with heavy weaponry. Bordeaux's leader carried a long black briefcase in his right hand. "But we're working on one adapted to your morphology. It should be completed in three days."

"We don't have three days," Basil said, causing Rosemarine to whine. "I'm sorry. Kalki can't wait."

"I agree," General Leblanc said. His face was paler than usual. "It's better that you leave as soon as possible. We've found a method to transfer supplies across long-distances, so we will send you the weapons as you travel."

"You don't look well, general," Basil noticed.

The general clenched his jaw. "Our science team confirmed your space story from the data gathered on the flash drive. I've shared the information with Major Elissalde, considering she will be our liaison with you."

"It's..." Neria straightened up. "A lot to swallow."

"Tell me about it," Plato commented. "First time with existential dread, huh?"

"It's all right," Zachariel said with enthusiasm. "Our catechism therapy has a roughly seventy percent rate of curing the symptoms."

"I have no time for dread," the general replied with a frown. "I take solace in the fact that if it was possible to transport Earth into an enclosed space, then there's no reason to believe the process can't be reversed somehow. The data in the flashdrive also included satellite pictures of Earth, which will prove invaluable in future campaigns."

"But there's cause for concern," Neria said. "According to astronomers, the ISS' trajectory is changing."

Basil groaned. He had expected something like this. "How much?"

"It still remains in orbit above Earth, but we suspect the Unity intends to make it fly over specific areas," General Leblanc explained. "Most probably for the purpose of bombarding them from space."

"Like Bordeaux?" Basil asked with a frown.

"We can't say yet. If it does threaten us, we will blow it out of the skies."

"Why not blow it up now?" Vasi asked with a frown. "Why wait?"

"Besides the fact that this could result in the ISS crashing down on Earth with unforeseen consequences, I suspect they do not intend to bombard us specifically. As sad as it sounds, we

do not meaningfully threaten the Unity yet." The general smiled. "The Apocalypse Force though..."

"You want them to fight each other?" Basil guessed.

"Considering the forces we are facing, encouraging our enemies to bleed each other out might be our only chance of beating them both in the long run."

It was a good strategy on paper, but Basil found it risky. "The more one side kills, the stronger they get."

"Actually, that's only half true," the general replied much to Basil's surprise. "No matter how many soldiers or monsters they slay, the Unity's machines do not seem to gain levels."

"We suspect their goal is to keep levels low to maintain the barrier and prevent stronger foes from appearing," Neria said. "They'll instead flood the world with low-level machines and slowly establish control over its resources."

"In short," General Leblanc summarized it. "Where the Apocalypse Force behaves like a band of marauders, the Unity is an empire. They favor territory control over pillage and power progression. If their interest is in keeping levels low, then they will prioritize targeting the Apocalypse Force. We'll leave them to bombard our mutual foes from orbit if they wish, wait for the right opportunity, and then strike."

Basil could only hope the general knew what he was doing. Then again, Leblanc had more knowledge of military strategy than just board games. Perhaps a better option would present itself to him in the future.

"We'll keep you informed of how the situation evolves over time," General Leblanc said. "Zachariel and Major Elissalde will remain part of your Guild but stay here in Bordeaux. The System should allow you to communicate without interruption, unlike military radio, and the Guild inventory system will let us send you supplies."

"Wait, Major?" Basil glanced at Neria. "You've been promoted?"

"Promoted, that's one way to put it." She smiled in embarrassment. "I was in the police, not the army. I've skipped so many steps."

"That's great!" Buggy said with his usual enthusiasm, before frowning in confusion. "But uh, I don't see any change. Where are the signs of metamorphosis?"

"We are reorganizing our armed forces by taking into account police and civilian auxiliaries," General Leblanc explained, ignoring Buggy's comment. "You have more than earned this grade, Elissalde. Major Grange himself recommended you before his untimely demise."

Officer Elissalde made a military salute, though her expression betrayed a hint of sorrow for her lost comrade. "I will honor his trust in me... and yours, General,"

"I do not doubt it."

"Shame though." Vasi glanced at Zachariel. "We would benefit from more healers."

"That's the neat thing," the angel replied. "From what I understand, Mr. Bohen can summon any monster in his Guild at will. I will keep treating people in Bordeaux, but I will answer your call for help in a pinch."

Basil chuckled. "You're in the storage system?"

"Is that a sub-System?" The angel glanced at him in puzzlement. "I'm not aware of it."

"Forget it." Basil briefly mourned his friends' lack of pop culture. He wondered if the general and Neria ever played *Pokemon*. "How do you intend to send us supplies?"

"Simple," Officer Elissalde replied with bemusement. "I'll store ammo, food, and weapons in the Guild inventory. It should allow you to summon them even half a country away."

"In fact, we will use your Guild inventory's teleportation properties as a direct supply line between Bordeaux and your group." General Leblanc carefully put his briefcase on the ground. "In return, I ask that you send us any extra resources you find on your travels. Fuel, abandoned weapons, vehicles... Anything is welcome at this point."

"After we take a cut for sales," Shellgirl insisted. Basil glared at her. "What? It's a trade, we gotta think of ourselves too."

General Leblanc glanced at Shellgirl. His entire body language changed. His eyes suddenly radiated an oppressive aura of authority that silenced Basil and caused Shellgirl to shut up.

"Allow me to put it in very simple terms." The general's voice was as cold as a Siberian winter. "Every weapon we give is marked. If you sell or lose one, we will know. Then we will track you. And we will deal with you appropriately."

He loomed over Shellgirl, who suddenly shrank in spite of her higher level.

"With a guillotine."

Shellgirl remained silent a moment, before looking down and mumbling "I'm sorry" under her breath.

"Now," the general said with a lighter tone. "We have prepared an itinerary for you. Major, if you would?"

Officer Elissalde handed Basil a map of France. A path to Paris was marked in green, with two alternative routes in orange and red. According to the notes on the map, the colors indicated the danger presented by each route. Dozens of points were marked as dungeons across the country.

"The road to Poitiers is cut," Neria explained as she pointed at various landmarks. "So your best bet is to go through the Massif Central and then up to Orleans. Paris will be right around the corner afterward."

"The Massif Central?" Buggy asked in confusion.

"It's a chain of mountains in the south-east of France," Basil explained with a frown. "That's quite the large detour."

"In terms of length, yes," Neria agreed. "But the Poitiers region is teeming with monsters, whereas the mountains have fewer dungeons. You will save time by avoiding unnecessary fights and closed roads."

"Aw, but we'll miss out on the loot," Shellgirl complained.

"We don't have time," Basil replied. Kalki might have already reached Paris by now. "And at our levels, I doubt we'll win much from enemies."

"Pointless fights are exactly that: pointless." General Leblanc nodded in support. "We have established an outpost in the city of Limoges. They will host your team and show you the path through the mountains. Once you're in Paris, I ask that you conquer a local dungeon if possible. This will allow us to teleport troops to the city thanks to your Guild feature and secure a foothold in the north."

"You want to retake the capital?" Basil asked with a frown. "Do you really need to? It might take a lot of troops to do so."

"More than its strategic location and resources, Paris is a symbol," the general explained. "If we can reconquer it, we will show the people of France that we can turn back the tide. More pragmatically, it'll help us deploy troops to help take over the UNESCO HQ. From what we know of Dismaker Labs, I doubt they left it unprotected."

"And what about the server?"

"I've agreed to your demand. We're willing to deliver it to your friend through Major Elissalde."

Friend was a tall word for Walter Tye, but Basil agreed with a nod. "I think we're good to go then."

"Almost." The general glanced at his briefcase. "After much consideration... I've decided to entrust your party with a Baguette."

Basil raised an eyebrow, especially when the guards escorting the general exchanged a worried look. Even Neria seemed uneasy all of a sudden. Basil knew the French held bread sacred, but that kind of reaction suggested something more sinister.

His doubts were confirmed when General Leblanc opened the briefcase. Instead of a delicious piece of bread, it contained a strange metal device with a retractable antenna, a screen, and a keypad. The System wouldn't reveal to Basil its true purpose, but the general enlightened him anyway.

"This," he explained, "Is what we call a Baguette. It's a top secret, French-made weapon system directly connected to a nuclear submarine."

Basil's heart skipped a beat. No way... was he serious?

"Once you activate it with a password, you can set a countdown." General Leblanc pointed at the screen and keypad. "The Baguette will connect to the submarine and act as a homing beacon with near-perfect accuracy for a first strike missile. Once the countdown ends, it will launch a Mach 25 intercontinental ballistic missile straight at the device's location. It should bypass all known forms of jamming and hit the mark with a precision of 99.98 percent."

Oh God, he was serious. Basil could only stare at the device in disbelief. "You are giving me a *nuke*."

"What's a nuke, Mister?" Rosemarine asked, suddenly curious. "It sounds great!"

"Your assigned missile will contain a neutron bomb, which won't cause as much property damage as a normal nuclear device, and it's lent rather than given..." General Leblanc coughed. "But yes, you can order a single nuclear strike."

Basil's teammates glanced at him in confusion. They didn't know about the significance of the device, besides Plato, who kept glancing back and forth at the device. The cat was as tense as his owner.

"Sir, umm..." Basil didn't know what to say. "Are you sure you want to lend me this?"

"No," the general replied bluntly. "But extreme situations call for extreme measures. This device was created to preserve our country from violent occupation, and that line has been crossed months ago. The situation has escalated beyond our wildest expectations already. So we'll have to up our game too."

"But I..." Basil coughed. Damn it, the situation made him utterly uncomfortable. He had jokingly dreamed about using nukes in the past, but now that he was being offered one in real life... it didn't sound so casual anymore. "I'm not a member of your army."

"Major Grange made you an auxiliary in our armed forces, did he not?" The general shrugged. "For whatever reason, the System has bound you to this Kalki. If he is indeed as important as

we believe, then the factions warring for control of our world will do anything to capture him. Preventing that scenario might require use of excessive force."

Basil grit his teeth. "You think they'll send someone we can't beat in a fight."

"I'm more worried they will send an army after him, but yes, the possibility of a high-level monster like Tamura showing up also crossed my mind." The general scowled. "The threats presented by Incursions have been exponential so far. The more time passes, the greater the chance that a creature immune to conventional weapons invades our reality."

"He's right," Vasi whispered to Basil. "A few creatures in my world could tear through your cities like your miniatures. If anything like them shows up... you'll need all the firepower you can get."

Basil understood that, but he doubted his girlfriend understood just *how much* firepower the general was offering him. It was like moving from using a bow to an AK-47.

"What's the password?" Basil chuckled, mostly because being entrusted with a *goddamn nuclear device* left him tense as hell. "Beret12345?"

"No." The general glanced at Neria, who was tense as a bowstring. "Major Elissalde is the one with the password. You won't be able to validate a strike without her agreement."

"Wait, you give us a weapon that we can't use?" Buggy asked in confusion.

"Isn't that a bit too much redtape?" Shellgirl asked with a frown.

"The bomb should kill *anything* within a few hundred meters of the impact point and flood a two-kilometers radius with a wave of neutron and gamma radiations." The general's words spooked everyone, with the exception of Rosemarine, who started salivating. "The area will be irradiated for years afterward, so I will stress this: using the Baguette is a last resort. I will hold you and Major Elissalde personally responsible for any misuse of it."

"I... I understand," Basil replied. His response surprised a few of his teammates, but he understood the seriousness of the situation. That the general would entrust him, of all people, with that kind of device was a telltale sign that mankind was already completely *fucked*. "I won't use it unless all other options have been extinguished."

"I know." The general smiled thinly. "I will hold you true to these words."

Rosemarine licked her fangs. "Mister—"

"I'm sorry, Rosemarine," Basil said. He knew her all too well. "You can't hold it,"

"Aww," she complained. "I'm sad..."

"Now go, child," General Leblanc said with a military salute. "You have a long road ahead of you."

Chapter 18: Man vs Highroad

"Ah Basil, always reliable." Walter Tye stared at the neurotower's wreckage with great interest. "Though I would have preferred the sample to be in a better shape. This one has seen better days."

"Send me the bill," Basil replied. Major Elissalde stood at the server's side clad in a military uniform. She kept a straight face even as her gaze darted from one corner of Walter's shop to another. Hagen faked being a lifeless statue, before waving a hand and spooking her. "It's in the best condition that I could get."

"Unfortunate, but acceptable." Walter raised a hand at the server. Black miasma surrounded his hand as he cast a spell. "Restore Item."

The miasma spread to the neurotower and swiftly covered the damaged parts of its structure. A second later, the mist dissipated to reveal a pristine black tower of a server.

Quest: Forever Serpent's Errand II completed! Your party earned 60,000 Bonus EXP (10,000 for you).

Nice. Basil checked his status and smirked. He was only four thousand experience points away from leveling up and completing the Tamer class.

"Thank you for your delivery, Basil." Walter turned to Major Elissalde next. "I see you brought a friend too. Neria Elissalde, is that it?"

If Neria was unsettled by the fact he already knew her name, she didn't show it. "Walter Tye, I presume?" She gave him a military salute. "I am Major Neria Elissalde of the French Armed Forces. I'll be your contact with our organization."

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance," the shopkeeper replied with a polite nod. "I will grant you a device to teleport to my shop anytime. I'm always happy to find more respectful customers."

"I must make a few things clear first." The major cleared her throat and, if Basil wasn't mistaken, her hand briefly brushed against the handgun around her belt. She feared the shopkeeper as much as he did. "This device is French army property. We are lending it to you for now, but we may requisition it back at any time. Additionally, we ask that you share the results of your investigation with us without holding anything back."

Walter gave her a bemused smile. "But of course."

"You won't find any better rule-abiding citizens than us," Hagen said with a hand on his chest. "We love the law."

The lie was blatant, but since Neria lacked any other option, she pretended to believe it. The army was scraping the bottom of the barrel for answers.

"I'm wounded by the comparison, Basil," Walter mused with a thin smirk. "The bottom of the barrel, truly?"

"Says the guy reading minds uninvited," Basil replied with a snort. Neria winced at his words. She must have realized that she couldn't keep any secret from the shopkeeper.

"I am a man of my word, Major," Walter told Elissalde, blatantly ignoring Basil's remark. "I accept your terms. I'm also willing to trade magical items for samples of your world's technology. I'm something of an expert at pest extermination."

"Or extermination in general," Hagen said with a thumbs up. "Corpse disposal included in the package."

"I... I will take your proposal to my superiors." Major Elissalde frowned at the shopkeeper. "But I doubt they will give you anything sensitive."

"Who do you take me for, some closet conqueror eager to stab you in the back later?" Walter shrugged. "I have no interest in your world, and far better things to do than managing people."

"Like holding the counter," Hagen joked. "He doesn't trust anyone with the duty."

"I suppose you won't take interns then?" Basil mused.

"Only those we kill ourselves," Hagen said with a laugh. Neria winced at his words, which seemed to delight the dullahan. By now, Basil was certain that Hagen simply relished unsettling others.

"I will need time to analyze the device fully." Walter put a hand on the server. "Come back to me in a week or so. I should have preliminary results to present by then."

"Oh, I know that face," Hagen commented. "You're going to be working overtime on the case."

Basil didn't notice any change in Walter's facial expression, but then again he was always creepily unexpressive. The Tamer still wasn't used to the shopkeeper's utter inability to blink.

"Are we done?" Basil asked.

"One last thing before you go," Walter replied. "I've noticed a trend about the portals which I believe you should be informed of."

Neria Elissalde exchanged a worried glance with Basil. The same thought had crossed both of their minds. "Do you have information on the next Incursion?" the Major asked Walter. "Anything would help."

Walter nodded sharply and raised a hand in the air. A holographic representation of a network materialized above his open palm. A red sphere at the center connected to four others through crimson links.

"Basil, I've told you once that Systems usually connect to others to create bridges between worlds," Walter said. Basil nodded in confirmation; he remembered very well. "What I forgot to mention is that this is usually a limited phenomenon. A world rarely connects to more than four or five others at once."

"Usually?" Basil didn't like the sound of that. "That's not the case for ours?"

"I'm afraid not." More links appeared in the network at Walter's urging and the central nod became the center of an enormous web. "Your Trimurti System actively tries to create as many portals as it can in a short amount of time. It is currently connecting to dozens of universes across the cosmos, inviting demons and warriors to use your planet as a battleground."

"Why?" Major Elissalde asked with a confused frown. "I mean, why summon more competition? There can only be one Overgod, or so the System says."

"My hypothesis is that the people who created the neurotower network were trying to speed up the leveling process as much as possible," Walter replied calmly before dissipating his hologram. "By comparison, it took Hagen and I years to reach level thirty in my world, yet our common friend here has achieved the same in the span of months. By constantly applying pressure, your System enforces quick level growth."

Basil snickered. "They're trying to speedrun their way to godhood?"

"I do not know the term 'speedrun', but yes, I suppose the designers intend to select an Overgod as quickly as possible. If previous competitions were indeed terminated early for one reason or another, it makes sense to hasten the process... no matter the bloodshed required to do so."

Neria Elissalde gulped. "What difference will it make compared to the first Incursion?"

"The number of portals and invaders," Walter replied calmly. He didn't sound too bothered about the fact Earth would become an even worse battleground than it already was. "The first Incursion connected to a limited number of worlds. The second one will connect to an exponential amount with higher level individuals, and the third—I assume there will be a third—should multiply that amount furthermore."

Basil and Neria digested the news in silence. Both had expected the worst, but to hear an outside expert confirm it made it feel all the worse.

"The person responsible for this mess said he was only interested in opening a gate to another world," Basil said, thinking of Maxwell. "Do you think that's the System's real goal? Opening a specific pathway?"

To Basil's surprise, Walter shook his head. "It may be an anticipated side-effect, but no, I don't think so. Your Trimurti System's purpose is to select an Overgod first and foremost. Perhaps your enemies created the neurotowers to build a bridge to a high-level world they couldn't reach otherwise, but the System will not stop functioning after accessing this world. It will keep creating monsters until someone reaches level 100."

Or until someone managed to slay Kalki and summon Shiva. Basil feared to learn which option was the most likely.

"That, and if my suspicions are correct..." Walter marked a short pause, as if carefully picking his words. "Your Trimurti System must continuously keep summoning creatures to your planet to function. It requires constant conflict to grease the wheel, so to say."

Basil scowled as he remembered Tamura's words. How Quests encouraged destruction and where experience came from... "Walter—"

"I know you already have your hypothesis about how the Trimurti System works, Basil," Walter interrupted him. As always, the shopkeeper must have read his mind. "But do not be too hasty in assuming the worst. When magic is concerned, nuances can matter a great deal."

Basil chuckled darkly. "Are you saying this to cheer me up?"

"In a way." For once, Walter Tye's thin smile seemed genuine. "A clouded mind cannot think rationally. Let me analyze this server first, and then we can discuss facts rather than assumptions."

It didn't help Basil feel better, but at least he had found a good way to cope with all the terrible truths thrown at his face lately: by not thinking about them. He would cross that bridge once they reached it.

Neria glanced at him with a thoughtful look. She must have drawn her own conclusions from the fight with Tamura, but thankfully didn't voice her suspicions out loud. Instead, she simply patted Basil's shoulder in silent sympathy.

No matter what the future held for them, at least they were all in it together.

"Be careful, my friend," Walter whispered before they left the shop. "I have the feeling the competition is about to escalate greatly."

The Bohens left Bordeaux immediately afterward. The goodbyes were short and to the point; on some level, everyone knew they would meet again soon. Even Little Nessia seemed to think this wouldn't be the last time they crossed paths.

And so Rosemarine pulled a new and improved Steamobile onto the road to Paris, with enough food in storage to last weeks and enough weapons to blow up a small castle. Basil rode on her back to give her directions, shaking at each bump on the ground.

"Take the left road at the next junction, Rosemarine," Basil said as he tried to understand the map. "We'll leave the A89 for smaller roads and avoid the town of Perigueux. According to our intel, there's a dungeon near it."

"Yes, Mister." Rosemarine trampled an abandoned car. They were few and far between on the roads around Bordeaux. The army and locals had gathered all vehicles they could transport back to the city, leaving the path ahead clear and easy to traverse.

Besides a few military checkpoints, this part of the journey was utterly uneventful. They passed by villages somewhat undamaged by the apocalypse and even watched farmers along the road growing vegetables the size of horses. Basil wondered how many of them would grow teeth like House Garden once did. He promised himself to check on Ronald through the Logs later today.

A group of army soldiers stopped them at the next road junction, where the A89 national road bifurcated towards the northern mountains. They had been warned by their HQ about the Bohens' arrival and allowed them to continue after a quick check.

"This is the safe zone's limit," a soldier warned Basil. "Afterwards man, you're on your own."

Basil raised an eyebrow. Rosemarine turned her colossal head in the grunt's direction, her shadow looming over him.

"Yeah..." The soldier trailed off before taking a step away from Rosemarine. "I don't think you guys will need protection. Good luck."

Basil heard him sigh in relief when they left the outpost in the dust.

The quality of the road *considerably* degraded after that last checkpoint. Not only did more abandoned cars pop up on the way, but so did holes, plants overrunning the bitumen, and rocks. Even worse, a raindrop fell on the map. Basil clenched his teeth as he looked up at clouds gathering in the sky. "Oh, that's just great."

"I'm here, Boss!" As if on cue, Buggy emerged from the Steamobile. The centimagma carried a metal plate between his mandibles. He leaped on Rosemarine's back and swiftly raised his makeshift protection above Basil's head. "Here!"

Basil was thankful for the 'umbrella', but he noticed raindrops turning to steam upon touching the centimagma's body. "Buggy, you're weak to water," he pointed out. "You shouldn't be out in the rain too long."

"It's all right, Boss," Buggy said. "It's uncomfortable, but it doesn't hurt anymore. I'm tough enough now."

"Yeah, but you don't have to spend the whole journey holding a plate above my head."

"I told you, Boss, everything is okay." Buggy giggled to himself. "I finished building the nest, so I have nothing better to do anyway."

Basil raised an eyebrow. "The nest? What for?"

"For Vasi's eggs." Buggy squealed in happiness. "Now that she kissed your cheek, she might lay her eggs at dawn anytime now!"

Basil blinked a few times, and then struggled against the urge to facepalm. "Buggy, that's not how babies work."

In fact, Basil wasn't sure he could even have children with Vasi at all considering their different species. She had *horns* for God's sake.

"But... but I've seen it in the chicken coop!" Buggy protested. "The hens laid eggs in the morning! Unless... unless babies spawn from dungeons too?"

"That's not how it works with humans." As Buggy looked at him in confusion, Basil cursed fate for forcing this conversation. "You need a few more extra steps in between."

"He needs to spray her with his pollen first," Rosemarie 'enlightened' Buggy with her plant wisdom. "Then she will make seeds to grow in the ground after feeding them with blood."

"That..." Basil chewed his lip, before realizing that any answer would be even more embarrassing. "Yes, something like that."

"Oh." Buggy sighed in disappointment. "I'm sorry Boss, I thought it would happen more quickly."

"Why are you so fixated on me and Vasi anyway?" Basil found it a little creepy.

Buggy's answer made him reconsider. "Because I want you both to be happy, Boss."

These simple words were said so earnestly that Basil couldn't muster an answer. He looked over his shoulder at Buggy, who winked back. To think that they first met trying to kill each other...

"Thank you, Buggy." Basil smiled. His chest felt warm and fuzzy for some obscure reason. "You know, you can stop calling me Boss. You're my friend, not my subordinate."

"Can't I be both, Boss?" Buggy asked as the raindrops turned into a faint, sustained rain. "You should smile like that more often."

Basil chuckled. "I'll try."

True to his word, Buggy spent the next hour protecting Basil and the precious map from the rain. The centimagma left a trail of steam behind him due to his body's heat, yet remained unperturbed and instead hummed to himself. Basil was thankful for the company. It broke the monotony of the trip.

The countryside slowly changed as they progressed. Flatlands turned into woody hills and then stranger things. On the side of the path ahead, a mound of dirt resembled a giant's face. A forest of jagged spikes of stones covered a hillside and stinking fumes floated out of noxious mud pools.

Both fauna and flora became barely recognizable. Purple grass off the road receded at their approach, as if afraid to be stomped by Rosemarine. Electric hedgehogs and weasels with blades for claws watched them from afar. Fiery ants the size of dogs briefly peeked out of a hole off the side of the road, before hastily retreating underground at Rosemarine's approach. Flocks of black-winged creatures with a single eye for a body flew over the Steamobile without a sound.

The sight filled Basil with both wonder and sadness. On one hand, the landscape and fauna reminded him of the times he explored Bulgaria's forests in his youth; there were always wonders and new life to look for. But on the other hand, it was a sore reminder that Earth's ecosystem had changed forever.

"Boss, look up."

Buggy's words drew Basil out of his reverie. A trio of red demons flew towards the Steamobile. They resembled stereotypical imps with forks, bat wings, and wicked grins.

Diablotin

Level 13 [Demon]

The creatures took a good look at Rosemarine and then flew away in the opposite direction as fast as they could. Basil couldn't help but smile. They were fifteen to twenty levels above the local monsters and none dared to take a shot at the party.

How good it felt to be a shark among small fish for once.

"Do I blast them, Mister?" Rosemarine asked while licking her fangs.

"Nah," Basil replied. "We won't get any exp from it. If they won't attack us, we'll return the favor."

"We could eat them," she argued.

"Your laser doesn't leave anything behind."

"Oh, right." Rosemarine glanced at the fleeing demons with longing. "Next time..."

"You know, I expected attacks on the way," Buggy said. "But the trip is very peaceful so far."

"It's natural selection, Buggy." Basil grinned. "All the idiots died early trying to take on tougher foes. Now only the cowardly, the crafty and the strong remain."

"So... you think we will reach Paris without a fight?"

"No." Plato's voice echoed behind them. "He says most marauders will avoid us and the few who dare attack us will present an actual challenge."

Basil looked over his shoulder. His cat emerged from the Steamobile, ran through the rain as quickly as he could, and swiftly took refuge under Buggy's umbrella.

The centimagma blinked in confusion. "Mr. Plato? What are you doing here?"

"You're walking in the rain?" Basil taunted him. "Have you burned your cushion? Or did you grow waterproof fur in your sleep?"

"Aha, we've got a comedian here." To punish Basil's taunts, Plato took over his lap and wouldn't move from it. "I'm bored. Vasi spends her time playing that holomachine game and Shellgirl does nothing but rub her face against our new rifles. She makes the same noise you often do in the toilet."

"What noise?" Rosemarine asked naïvely.

"Nothing." Basil's cheeks reddened a bit, but he swiftly changed the subject. "There's a portable TV if you want to kill time."

"It's boring to watch alone. I need an audience to criticize every show I disagree with." Plato looked at Basil's map. "Are we in Paris yet?"

"No," Basil replied.

"Are we in Orléans yet?"

"No."

"Are we in Limoges yet?"

"Tomorrow at the earliest," Basil said absentmindedly. "We'll make a stop in the Périgord Limousin natural park for the night. We can watch *Major Chicken* then, if we aren't attacked on the way."

Plato looked up at Basil with an annoyed look.

Basil sighed upon realizing his mistake. "I jinxed it, didn't I?"

"Yes you did, you madman," Plato replied before touching Basil's nose with his tail. "When will you learn? What will it take?"

"Boss?" Buggy squinted at the horizon. "Are those normal clouds?"

Cursing his tongue for tempting fate, Basil glanced west. The white rain clouds were slowly pushed aside by a familiar aurora. This one was dark blue and filled with countless points of light. The sight reminded Basil of a clear night sky, except this one showed up in the middle of the afternoon.

He would have mistaken the phenomenon for the telltale sign of a local dungeon, if it wasn't spreading across the horizon.

"Boss..." Buggy trailed off.

"Yeah, it's moving closer." Basil frowned. "Rosemarine, pause. Buggy, recon."

Rosemarine stopped in the middle of the road. Basil stored his map in the inventory as Buggy leaped off Rosemarine to apply his antennae to the ground. Deprived of protection from the rain, Plato shrieked and hid under Rosemarine.

"Warn me next time!" Plato complained. His fur was already wet. "I'm like sugar, I can melt from this!"

"Oh, poor thing," Basil teased him. Plato hissed in response.

The rain didn't last long anyway. The aurora dissipated the clouds as it floated above their heads. Yet the following notification warned Basil of greater danger ahead.

Artemis-Apollo's [God-Field: Orion Belt] changed the field to [Huntress' Dream].

- *[Fire], [Water], [Frost], [Light], and [Mythic] elements are strengthened.*
- *[Corrosion], [Earth], and [Darkness] elements are weakened.*
- *Healing and Regen effects are doubled.*
- *Weather effects are canceled.*
- *Players and Monsters with a Strong [Light] affinity have their Magic buffed.*

Basil blinked upon seeing the Artemis-Apollo name, and Plato said out loud what they were all thinking. "No way, them again?"

Metal Olympus. Of course. Tamura didn't represent all their forces in the region.

"Hey, why did we stop?" Shellgirl shouted from inside the Steamobile. She hopped out of it with an AK-47 in each hand, both covered in slime. Basil wisely didn't ask questions about it. "What's up in the skies?"

"Gee, what do you think?" Plato deadpanned. "Trouble! The answer is *a/ways* trouble!"

"Boss, I sense wheeled vehicles approaching from the east," Bugsy warned. His antennae trembled as they gathered information from vibrations in the ground. "They make the same sound as our old car."

Cars meant human drivers. Basil clenched his fists. Monsters he could deal with, but humans with classes presented a far greater danger.

"Shit." Basil cursed under his breath. "How many, Bugsy? And how far are they?"

"I sense a dozen, maybe two." Bugsy squinted as he tried to pick up subtle vibrations. "They're two hours away, maybe three."

"Wait, are they moving towards us or simply traveling west?" Shellgirl asked. She didn't sound eager for another fight. "Maybe they're moving to Bordeaux for a shopping trip."

Basil doubted they would be that lucky, and Bugsy swiftly confirmed his suspicions. "I think they're after us. They turned in our direction when we entered the field."

"Then it's not a raid, but a hit job." Basil summoned his halberd. "Looks like they didn't appreciate us killing their golf buddy."

"But how do they know we're here in the boonies?" Plato asked. "It's not like we advertised which road we would take."

"Maybe they can detect us from afar?" Shellgirl suggested wisely.

Basil's eyes widened as he quickly found an explanation. He turned in Rosemarine's direction, who stared back at him in incomprehension.

"The Dionysus essence," Basil whispered. "They must be able to sense it."

"I'm sorry, Mister," Rosemarine apologized. "Maybe I can digest it?"

"If Zachariel couldn't remove it, I doubt you can." Basil grinned ear to ear. "Looks like we'll have no choice but to fight."

Plato squinted at his owner. "Why are you happy about it?"

In response, Basil glanced up at the Steamobile's new howitzer. Shellgirl looked at her AK-47 with a blank look and Rosemarine licked her fangs in anticipation.

"Bugsy." Basil laughed with bloodthirsty glee. "Go fetch me the rocket launcher."

Angels wielded swords of fire, but a bazooka of justice would suit Basil just fine.

Chapter 19: Man vs Chase

Their pursuers caught up to them in the late afternoon.

Basil heard them coming long before they actually arrived. The rumbling noise of thundering war drums and the howl of wind instruments announced their arrival. Disturbed birds flew from the east, giving the party an advance warning.

It's not the best battlefield I could ask for. Basil checked the terrain one last time. A broad, shallow valley opened up before him. Alien wildflowers grew under the shade of stony hillsides. The steep slopes of a narrow pass rose a few kilometers away, its width barely large enough to let the Steamobile through. The road should join up to the national highway beyond this point, which would give Basil's crew more space to maneuver. *The pass will be the hardest part.*

The rest of his team had taken up positions. Vasi flew on her broomstick to secure the sky and Plato hid under the cover of invisibility to act as an ace-in-the-hole. Buggy and Shellgirl remained inside to manage the Steamobile's howitzer, with a crew of Fire Seeds occupying the vehicle's windows with Kalashnikovs. Basil didn't put much weight on the low-level plants' accuracy, but they could at least provide suppressive fire.

As for Basil himself, he rode Rosemarine with an entire arsenal stored inside his inventory and the bloodlust to make full use of it.

"Here they come, Basil!" Vasi warned from above. "From our right!"

"How many of them?!" he shouted back.

"A dozen!" So not the entire force. "They have fliers!"

As if on cue, their opponents showed up under the alien sky.

A squad of five winged white horses flew over the valley. A warrior in stylized armor mixing Greek hoplite and knightly aesthetics rode each of the pegasi; all of them wielded spears and javelins. A squad of centaurs rode under them with great longbows, their hooves crushing wildflowers as they stomped their way into the valley. Their fur was black as coal and their faces hidden behind red helmets.

Sagittarius

Level 18 [Beast/Humanoid]

Faction: Metal Olympus (Amnisiades)

The Pegasus riders, meanwhile, all had class levels in classes like Spearman, Cavalier, and even Shieldmaster. None of them reached level twenty, but the Bohens had lost too many friends to Players to underestimate them.

Basil assessed the situation. The fliers complicated matters, but he trusted his girlfriend to take care of the aerial force. The absence of vehicles in the raiding party, and the fact the sound of the war drums remained distant, indicated these soldiers were mere scouts.

"I'll take the pegasi, you deal with the rest of them." Vasi snapped her fingers and magical energy gathered in the palm of her hand. "Wanna see which of us can take out the most of them? The loser pays for the next date."

"Challenge accepted," Basil replied with a bloodthirsty grin.

"Can I play too, Mister?" Rosemarine asked with enthusiasm.

"Of course, dear." Basil summoned a potion from his inventory. Thick green ooze swirled inside the flask. "I brewed this for you."

"Let the reaping begin!" Rosemarine shouted joyfully. "A harvest of blood and guts!"

"That's my girl." Basil tossed the potion in the air and Rosemarine's tongue swiftly grabbed it. She devoured the flask whole and roared. Her muscles burst with new power as the elixir took effect.

[Mr. Hyde's Performance Booster] buffed all of Rosemarine's physical stats for ten minutes!

Rosemarine charged to the tune of Basil's war cry. "Fire at will!"

The howitzer thundered and unleashed a projectile. A cataclysmic explosion tore two centaurs to pieces, leaving a fuming crater in their place. The pegasus riders swarmed Vasi while their landbound allies raised their bows at Rosemarine.

Basil licked his lips in anticipation. He always liked horse steaks.

Keeping his halberd stored in the inventory for later, Basil summoned an AK-47 and empowered it with a Corrosive Rune. He was never a good shot, but his Skill stat, which had steadily increased after many level-ups, improved his accuracy tenfold. One of his first bullets hit a centaur in the chest and slew him on the spot. A second shot an archer's arm before he could return fire.

The other centaurs managed to cover the distance between Rosemarine and them. Their fiery arrows harmlessly bounced off the tropidrake's scales and Basil retaliated with a bullet volley, shattering knees and spraying guts all over the road. The dead centaurs crashed on the ground, never to rise again.

"Damn it!" Basil cursed. He couldn't manage a headshot even with an assault rifle! "I got three and a half!"

Vasi was too busy dodging javelins to answer him. She *hastened* herself to outpace the pegasus riders, moved above them, and then countered with a snap of her fingers. A mighty

burst of wind and ice shards erupted from her hand. The projectiles tore off their mount's wings while the wind pushed them to the ground. The entire squad crashed into the valley to their death in the blink of an eye.

"I got five," Vasi replied smugly. "Ten, if the mounts count."

"Nah, they don't!" Basil grinned. "Nice new spell!"

"New spells, plural!" Vasi shouted back with amusement. "That one isn't even my best yet!"

Basil prepared to tease her a little when he heard Buggy shouting from inside the Steamobile.

"Boss, I sense enemies at the front!"

Basil turned to face the narrow pass before them. A jeep driven by a hoplite cosplayer had emerged from it. A second soldier stood on the roof with a rocket launcher pointed straight at Rosemarine.

Damn, they were trying to block the pass! "Rosemarine—"

"I've got them, Mister!" Particles of light gathered around Rosemarine's petals, the unnatural starry sky above them glittering in response. Rosemarine's strong Light affinity allowed her to benefit from the field's buff effect, even with the sun blocked from view. "Sunbeam!"

The Metal Olympus soldier opened fire first, a rocket flying out of his bazooka. A beam of light poured out of Rosemarine's mouth and vaporized the projectile, the vehicle, the people aboard, and a good chunk of the pass. The tropidrake stomped the ashes of her enemies without slowing down.

Basil tensed up as the sound of war drums grew louder. He couldn't see much within the pass, but he expected the bulk of the enemy force to await them on the other side. His hands tightened on his AK-47.

"Turn left when you exit the pass, Rosemarine," Basil ordered. "Plato, are you still nearby?"

"I'm waiting," his cat replied, utterly invisible. "I hear them, Basil. They'll catch up to us in minutes."

Rosemarine pulled the Steamobile out of the pass and onto National Road N21.

The hills behind them were swiftly replaced with a vast plain of abandoned farm fields, meadows, and the rare trees in-between. A damaged road cut through the landscape under an alien sky. There were no villages nor settlements to be seen around, except for a few crumbling ruins of old houses.

A *Mad Max* raiding party welcomed the Bohens.

As Buggy predicted, two dozen vehicles chased after the Steamobile. It was a ragtag bunch of Peugeot 208, Dacia Sandero, bikers, and even two customized cargo trucks. Almost all of them were staffed with Ancient Greece human cosplayers, but their troops included a few monsters too. Winged women with electrical whips served as their air force alongside a duo of pegasus riders, and a monstrous one-eyed giant stood atop one of the trucks with a wide axe. The other truck was equipped with loudspeakers boosting the music of a bard crew and wardrummers.

Cyclops Maneater

Level 27 [Giant]

Faction: Metal Olympus (Amnisiades)

Harpy Huntress

Level 15 [Avian/Humanoid]

Faction: Metal Olympus (Amnisiades)

It was impossible to miss the marauders' leader. Artemis-Apollo glowed above her troops like the morning star in the night sky.

The creature took the shape of a splendid, curvaceous woman with marble skin and hair of gold styled in an elegant bun. Silver pieces of armor covered her breast, hips, and legs. Six great wings of sunfire carried her above the land she sought to rule. All in all, she appeared like a goddess descending from the heavens. A longbow of light materialized in her hands and she pointed it at the Steamobile as if it were a boar to be slain.

The real fight started now.

Basil quickly assessed the situation. A good kilometer separated the Steamobile from its pursuers, but the smaller vehicles swiftly gained ground on the slower Rosemarine. Basil doubted a direct howitzer strike would take Artemis-Apollo out, so better to bleed out her forces before keeping her for last.

"Buggy, Shellgirl, blow up the Bards to debuff them!" Basil barked orders. "Vasi, we need a speed buff!"

"On it!" Vasi raised a hand at Rosemarine. "Hasten!"

Time dilated around the tropidrake as she rushed onto the road at twice her normal speed. Basil had to hold on to her not to fall off. The ground trembled as the chase's next step started in earnest.

Artemis-Apollo opened the hostilities with an arrow of light aimed at the Steamobile's armored wheels. The vehicle shook from the impact, but the metal shielding resisted the attack.

Rosemarine's burst in speed allowed her to outpace the larger vehicles, but not the smaller ones. The faster cars and bikes separated into two groups racing across the grassy plain. One moved to the Steamobile's left and the other on the right in a pincer maneuver. The Fire Seeds lying in ambush opened fire from their sniper holes to delay them. Bullets pierced windows or bounced off metal roofs in short order.

First blood was on Basil's team, for the howitzer thundered and blew up the bard truck in one strike. The vehicle exploded in a fiery detonation that shook the entire region.

Artemis-Apollo immediately retaliated with an arrow of sunfire targeting the Steamobile's cannon. Her aim was true and her projectile exploded in a rain of flames on impact, but the vehicle resisted the attack. The howitzer retaliated with a precise shot. The fake goddess managed to hit the projectile in midair with another arrow, detonating harmlessly. Cannon and archer exchanged volleys without any of them managing to break the deadlock.

"Bugsy, reload faster!" Basil heard Shellgirl shout from within the Steamobile; her frantic voice barely cut through the sound of howitzer rounds fired in the skies. "More shells! I can't shoot without ammo!"

"I do what I can with my mandibles!" Bugsy shouted back. The centimagma's role was to reload the cannon while Shellgirl adjusted the aim. "We don't have much left!"

After blowing up another howitzer round with a well-placed arrow, Artemis-Apollo's wings shone with a silver glow. Rosemarine let out a squeal, alarming Basil.

"Rosemarine, what is—" Basil's eyes widened in surprise as a crescent moon mark materialized on the back of Rosemarine's neck.

Artemis-Apollo's [Huntress' Moon] marked Rosemarine as the hunt's target! Rosemarine's chances of avoiding attacks have been halved for one hour, and her odds of suffering from a critical hit have been doubled!

Since Artemis-Apollo couldn't destroy the vehicle, she targeted the dragon pulling it!

"Her range is insane!" Basil attempted to scratch off the mark just in case, and only managed to make Rosemarine giggle. At least she enjoyed it... "Alright Rosemarine, I'll cover you."

With their boss providing suppressive fire and shielding them from the howitzer, the Metal Olympus raiders assaulted the Steamobile from all sides. Vasi cast her shadowspike spell on the back of the road, impaling a Dacia and forcing other vehicles to take a detour to avoid destruction. A Peugeot bypassed the Steamobile and approached Rosemarine from the left. Basil saw it coming and stored his AK-47 back in his inventory.

A rocket launcher of justice swiftly materialized in its place.

Basil pointed his weapon at his attacker with a gleeful grin and pressed the trigger. The driver barely had time to blink in horror before a rocket blasted his car to kingdom come. The burning metal husk flew into the air and crashed off the side of the road.

"Four and a half!" Basil boasted. "I'm catching up, Vasi!"

"Shellgirl and Bugsy have the highest kill count," Plato muttered behind him. A Peugeot approached from the left, filled to the brim with low-level warriors. "My turn. Luck Up!"

Basil didn't hear nor see his invisible cat's attacks, but he witnessed the throat of a Peugeot's driver sliced open by a blade of air. The vehicle veered off tracks and was crushed under the Steamobile's wheels.

"Ah, four in one strike!" Plato boasted proudly, before his voice swiftly turned from triumph to annoyance. "Birds incoming!"

Basil looked over his shoulder. With their master keeping the howitzer occupied, the harpies and pegasus riders moved to encircle the Steamobile from above.

"Vasi!" Basil shouted, but his girlfriend had already intercepted the fliers. An aerial duel began in the starry sky. Harpies attempted to throw Vasi off her broom with their electrical whips, but the witch kept her distance and bombarded her foes with fireballs.

Unfortunately, Vasi was one woman facing a full squad. She danced around the opposition, but struggled to even keep the fliers from approaching too closely. Noticing her struggle, Artemis-Apollo dodged a howitzer round instead of blowing it up and instead targeted Vasi.

Basil's heart skipped a bit. "Vasi, arrow from the south!"

His girlfriend heard him and avoided a light projectile at the last second. However, the interruption allowed two pegasus riders to bypass her. They dived upon Rosemarine from above with murderous intent.

"For the mistress!" The two riders shouted as they raised their javelins. The maddened glint in their eyes made Basil shiver. "Long may she reign!"

"I should have brought a guillotine," Basil said as he swiftly switched his rocket launcher for his more practical laser pistol. Bolts of field-empowered light flew next to javelins. Basil managed to wound a rider in the shoulder, but failed to stop him from throwing his weapon.

Two javelins pierced Rosemarine's back and pierced her leaf-scales. She let out a scream of pain that made Basil wince. The enemy riders moved to strike again, but one of Plato's wind slashes cut one pegasus' wings and caused the mount to crash down onto the ground. Rosemarine blasted the other in the chest with a well-placed ray of light, killing him.

What's wrong with these guys? Basil thought as he pulled out the javelins out of Rosemarine's back and gritted his teeth upon recognizing a violet substance on their tips mixed with blood. The souvenir of Kuikui's death flashed in his mind and soured his stomach. "Poison..."

"I felt nothing, Mister!" Rosemarine reassured him. A quick check at her status confirmed the spears had failed to inflict the dreaded ailment thanks to her high Vitality. Basil sighed in relief. "But Mister, everything's slowing down..."

Vasi's Hasten spell dissipated. Forced to slow down, Rosemarine could no longer outpace the slower vehicles. The surviving truck caught up to the Steamobile and allowed its cyclops passenger to leap at it.

"Mistress!" The giant, roughly six meters tall, grabbed the exhaust ports and smashed them with its axe. His maddened roars echoed with the autumn wind. "Witness me, mistress! Witness me!"

As if on cue, Artemis-Apollo's eyes shone like the heart of the sun. The cyclops roared as his body surged with power.

Artemis-Apollo's [Apollo's Boon] buffed his Strength and granted him the [Regen] beneficial status!

"Plato, stop him!" Basil ordered as bikers with revolvers flanked Rosemarine. He had his hands full exchanging fire with them.

"Yeah, yeah!" With the invisibility potion running out, Plato became visible again right as he leaped at the cyclops' head. His rapier blinded the creature. The giant roared in pain and frantically swung his axe in all directions in a vain attempt to hit the far smaller cat. "What's your current count?"

"Seven... I think?" Basil said as a harpy fell onto the road—Vasi was racking up quite the lead. Three bikers attacked from this side, each a duo with a driver at the front and an attacker at the back. The closest vehicle was a Harley Davidson with a gunner passenger at the back.

Basil raised his pistol but the enemy proved to be the quicker shot. A bullet grazed his chest and was barely deflected by his ankylosaurus scale armor. Basil pressed the trigger in retaliation. His projectile blasted off the attacker's head and threw the corpse off the vehicle, leaving the driver defenseless.

Critical hit!

Finally! Basil had succeeded with his first headshot! Encouraged by his success, he rose to his feet atop Rosemarine, held his breath... and leaped off the tropidrake.

The jump was risky, but rewarding. Basil landed on the Harley Davidson right behind the driver. The vehicle veered off tracks from the sudden shift in weight, but the biker managed to avoid falling off. He looked over his shoulder, his eyes widening in surprise behind his helmet.

"What the—AAHH!"

Basil swiftly threw the driver overboard and assumed full control of the vehicle. The Harley Davidson thrummed between his legs like a wild, savage stallion.

Inspiration suddenly seized Basil. He stored his pistol back in his inventory and switched it for his flaming halberd. Then he raised his favorite weapon above his head, basking in the feeling of the cold autumn wind brushing against his face.

"Perfect," he whispered.

Basil roared as loud as his Harley, halberd raised above his head.

He charged after the bikers harassing Rosemarine. The first of them he cut in half with a swing of his halberd, rider and motorcycle included. The second drew a sword and clashed steel with him.

"Why are you so eager to die?!" Basil snarled before swinging his halberd. "You're throwing your life away for a flying statue!"

"Once I slay you, the mistress will reward me!" The swordsman shouted as he parried the strike. "She'll finally love me back!"

Basil's superhuman strength caused the parry to backfire. The biker was thrown back by the blowback and crashed off the road. Basil's respite didn't last long, for the truck that carried the cyclops to the Steamobile attempted to run him down from behind. Rosemarine rescued him by gathering energy and blowing up the vehicle with another sunbeam.

Something's wrong with these guys, Basil thought as he drove next to Rosemarine. Her body gathered light energy once more. *They can't all be fearless fanatics.*

"Sunbath!" Rosemarine shouted. Her body released particles of light, healing her wounds and curing Basil of his exhaustion. "Mister, I'm thirsty!"

"Here, but that's my last!" Basil unstored another strength-boosting potion from his inventory and tossed it at the tropidrake, who devoured it whole. The enemy vehicles had been dealt with, though Vasi still struggled with the harpies and Plato couldn't knock down the cyclops off the Steamobile.

It was the enemy leader that worried Basil the most. So far the false goddess had stuck to exchanging fire with the howitzer from afar, occasionally disrupting the group's formation and empowering her allies. She was troublesome but not truly dangerous. Either Artemis-Apollo lacked Tamura's firepower... or she was holding back for some reason.

She's observing, Basil realized. Whereas Tamura threw summoned troops into the meat grinder without a strategy in mind, that fake goddess probed her foes' defenses. *She's looking for a weakness and assessing our abilities.*

The fake goddess finally found an opportunity. She glowed brightly and then multiplied. Basil could only stare in shock as the false goddess' body divided like a cell into four different beings. They spread in a square formation and opened fire all at once.

The howitzer blasted one of the four goddesses to oblivion. The copy's body faded away in a shower of light, but the three others hit the cannon all at once with exploding arrows of sunlight. Basil squinted as the world brightened on impact. The Steamobile shook and its cannon fumed. The howitzer didn't return fire again.

"Bugsy!" Basil shouted as the three fake goddesses started covering the distance between them and the Bohens. "Shellgirl! Are you alright?!"

"We're alive, Boss!" Bugsy shouted from inside the vehicle. "But the cannon, it's broken!"

"Forget the cannon!" Shellgirl emerged from one of the Steamobile's windows and climbed up on its roof. Her tentacle-cannons fired ice projectiles at the harpies surrounding Vasi. "Let's clear the skies before the competition arrives!"

"Help!" Plato shouted as he leaped off the cyclops' shoulder. His rapier had inflicted half a dozen wounds on the giant, but the monster kept thrashing around in a maddened rage. The cuts closed on their own and even the eye was slowly regenerating. "The cripple is healing as soon as I hurt him!"

"I'm coming, Mr. Plato!" Bugsy burst out of the Steamobile through a window and swiftly coiled around the cyclops' chest. Both roared as they brawled.

The three remaining copies of Artemis-Apollo chased after the Steamobile in a V-formation. Unable to identify the real one from the fakes, Basil slowed down his bike and approached the one on the right.

"Basil Bohem, I presume?" the woman asked from above upon seeing him approach. Although it sounded far more melodious than in Dismaker Labs' board recording, Basil immediately recognized her voice. "You and your dragon stand accused of murdering my brother Dionysus."

"I didn't know you and the snake were related, Miss Hypathia," Basil taunted her back. "That, or you're way into your character."

"Oh?" She laughed, her cold white eyes squinting in amusement. "So you know the truth."

"Yes, I know we should have exterminated all the nobles when we had the chance!" Basil sneered. "I'm sure you didn't even work a day in your life!"

Basil had read the files compiled by the French army on Dismaker Labs' board. Hypathia Masters de Kemmeter had been a typical socialite before the apocalypse, the heiress of some Belgian old noble family and a UNESCO ambassador. Dismaker Labs had been one of the many companies in which she took shares, with apocalyptic results.

"It is true I was a gentry once, but thanks to my hard work I have ascended to a higher level." She smiled at Basil, who felt a strange desire stirring in his spine. "We don't have to fight, my boy. I'm sure I could win your allegiance... with the right offer."

Permanent [Charm] ailment...

Basil saw red. "Sorry, I prefer horns over wings."

Failed! It failed miserably! You shrugged off Artemis-Apollo's [Sin: Lust] Perk!

"Saddening." Hypathia snorted and raised her bow of light. "Bah, I would have killed you anyway."

"You remind me of a mermaid I've met." Basil gritted his teeth in fury. Her retinue's suicidal dedication suddenly made a *lot* more sense. "She too was so popular that she had to brainwash people into following her!"

"I have ascended to the realm of the gods." Hypathia materialized an arrow of ice and fired it at Basil's head. "It is the duty of humans like you to venerate me."

"I only believe in one God." Basil shattered the ice arrow with his halberd. To his worry, another copy was moving to threaten Basil and the last one floated above Rosemarine. "His names are the Father, the Son..."

Basil stored his halberd and switched it with his rocket launcher.

"And here's the Holy Spirit!"

He pressed the trigger and set the sky ablaze.

Chapter 20: Man vs Mirror

Basil's rocket blew up the fake goddess to kingdom come.

Her body exploded into shards of ice that rained on the ground like falling stars. Basil was almost thrown off his Harley Davidson by the blast, but managed to hang on to his vehicle.

Since Hypathia's two other copies didn't vanish, he could only assume that he had slain a clone. As one Artemis-Apollo raised her bow in Vasi's direction and another copy targeted Rosemarine, Basil wondered if either of them was the original.

Vasi had managed to shoot down the last of the harpies with Shellgirl's help. She saw Hypathia coming and managed to avoid an arrow of fire aiming for her face. The witch and the goddess danced in the skies above the Steamobile, with Shellgirl firing ice shards at the enemy. Her frosty projectiles shattered harmlessly on Hypathia's marble skin without inflicting damage.

With Basil too far away to intervene, the second clone opened fire on Rosemarine's back. An arrow of ice materialized in Hypathia's bow of light and surged across the sky. For a brief instant, Basil thought Rosemarine would move fast enough to dodge it. The crescent moon mark on her neck dashed his hopes with a silver glow. The arrow's trajectory bent like a missile guided by a homing beacon and nailed Rosemarine.

Her scream of pain echoed across the land. Basil's stomach soured in dread as a layer of permafrost covered his darling tropidrake's back. Rosemarine nearly stumbled onto the road, but managed to stand on her feet and keep running across the desolate national road.

Basil checked his friend's status and his eyes widened in panic.

Rosemarine Eglantine de la Barthe: 1382/3200 HP. [Frostbite] ailment: Rosemarine will take weak [Frost] damage at regular intervals, and her Magic will be debuffed.

Between Rosemarine's natural weakness to Frost and the Orion Belt Field effect, more than half of his adorable plant's health points had been shaved away in a single blow! Another ice arrow would kill her.

"I'm coming, Rosemarine!" Basil shouted as he smashed the accelerator. "Monster Cure III!"

[Frostbite] ailment lifted.

Healing light coursed through Rosemarine's body. Her leaf-scales shrugged off the ice covering her, yet Basil's Perk could only heal a paltry hundred HP; far too little to make a difference should she be targeted again.

He cast Monster Cure II again and again as Hypathia materialized another arrow of ice. Vasi and Shellgirl were occupied by the other copy, and Buggy and Plato had their paws and mandibles full trying to throw her cyclops minion off the Steamobile.

With no one to interrupt, the fake goddess raised her bow of light for a second attack. Rosemarine looked over her shoulder, burning light gathering in her petals. "Sunbeam!"

Rosemarine blasted Hypathia with a blazing ray of condensed sunlight. The air shimmered from the heat as it illuminated the starry sky. The light swallowed the fake goddess and continued its course into the distant clouds.

Basil had witnessed Rosemarine's attack incinerate monsters to ashes and vaporize castle walls. Yet as he saw Hypathia's shadow remain whole inside the light, he started to doubt it would slay her. The strength of the beam pushed the clone back a few meters, but when Rosemarine ran out of breath and the light was extinguished, the fake goddess emerged from her ordeal unharmed. Her arrow of ice had melted into nothingness, and she swiftly drew her bow to target Rosemarine anew.

Basil's jaw clenched at the sight. "Elemental immunities?"

Basil had fought foes that could shrug off one element in the past—the waterboarding mermaid incident came to mind—but he had never faced someone outright invulnerable to multiple ones. Since Shellgirl's ice projectiles failed to affect the other copy, Hypathia was immune to Fire, Light, and Frost.

This negated a large part of Basil's rune arsenal... but he could do more than attack with them.

"Magitek: Fire Rune." Basil's magic infused the Harley Davidson. The wheels caught fire and the metal parts of the vehicle heated up. The motorcycle turned black as coal as its engine roared and its exhaust ports breathed fire. His vehicle's speed accelerated until he caught up to Rosemarine.

Having run out of rockets, Basil stored the launcher and switched it for his AK-47. It was difficult to aim with one hand and to direct the Harley with the other, but he managed to take a decisive shot. "Corrosive Rune!"

An acid-coated bullet hit Hypathia's copy before she could finish off Rosemarine. Where other projectiles failed to harm her, Basil's attack pierced through her chest and shattered the fake goddess into stardust.

Supereffective hit!

Only one clone remained.

"Target her weaknesses!" Basil shouted to his allies as he spammed Monster Cure II. Rosemarine activated her Sunbath Perk, her health bar slowly rising up. "Corrosion, Earth, and Darkness! They're the elements that her Field weakens, so she must be vulnerable to them like Tamura was!"

"I can't use any of them!" Shellgirl complained.

"But I can!" Vasi replied. Darkness gathered in her hand. "Shadowshot!"

A sphere of solid shadow surged from her fingers and hit the last copy of Hypathia in the shoulder. The fake goddess winced in pain from the blow, her marble skin turning black as coal where the projectile impacted her.

Most importantly, she didn't vanish like the other copies.

"Is... is this pain?" Hypathia was so shocked at being wounded that she briefly interrupted her assault. She stared at her shoulder in horror. Instead of shedding blood, her marble skin bloated and mutated. The spot where Vasi's spell had hit her started to resemble an eyeless face.

"What have you... what have you done to me?"

Is that a tumor? Basil wondered before forcing himself to focus. Now was the best opportunity to strike. "That's the real one! Dust her!"

Vasi pressed on with more shadow projectiles, but Basil's words snapped Hypathia out of her trance. The false goddess gained more altitude and swiftly divided herself into four duplicates once more. "Light Mirror!"

Basil cursed this turn of events, but remained confident. If she had entered battle personally rather than staying safely at the rear, then her cloning ability had a distance limit. The original couldn't wander too far from her clones.

"Go, Vasi!" Shellgirl cheered and buffed her best friend. "Motivate!"

"Hasten!" Vasi said. Time dilated around her until Basil struggled to keep track of her movements. His girlfriend's flying broom moved as fast as a falcon on cocaine and her shadowshots surged across the skies like missiles. Artemis-Apollo's clones spread out to avoid the bombardment, but none of their own projectiles could hit Vasi back.

Hasten wouldn't last long, but it brought the team precious time.

"Shellgirl, I'm sending you weapons through the Guild Inventory!" Basil unstored a rifle from his inventory. "Magitek: Corrosive Rune."

Basil's refinement succeeded, empowering the rifle with acidic power. He stored it in the Guild Inventory, which allowed Shellgirl to materialize the weapon in her hands. Moving at the Steamobile's top, she aimed at Hypathia's duplicates and opened fire at them.

"Basil, I wouldn't mind a little help here too!" Plato shouted as he stabbed the cyclops' fingers with his rapier. Buggy had coiled around the giant's neck in a doomed attempt to snap it, but neither he nor Plato managed to get him off the Steamobile. The monster simply healed faster than Basil's allies could harm him.

"Mistress!" the cyclops roared in spite of Buggy's best efforts to suffocate him. His hand grabbed an exhaust port and started ripping it out. Steam erupted out of the damaged vehicle's pipes.
"For you! All for you!"

"Hold on, guys!" Basil moved the Harley Davidson closer to the cyclops and summoned his halberd. "I'm coming!"

"I'm on it, Mister!" Rosemarine shouted. "Girls!"

Answering his call, the Fire Seeds inside the Steamobile leaped out of the windows to deal with the cyclops. The rampaging giant's hands smashed the far weaker monsters wherever he struck, but Rosemarine's remaining brood managed to cover his shoulders and head. Plato, seeing the danger, leaped back into the vehicle.

"For her Majesty!" the Fire Seeds shouted.

The plants exploded together in a cataclysmic detonation. Buggy was spared thanks to his Fire immunity, but skin melted off the cyclops' face. The disfigured giant lost his footing on the Steamobile and nearly fell off it. Only one hand desperately held on to the vehicle.

"Buggy!" Basil shouted as he raised his halberd. "Get off him!"

"Yes, Boss!" Buggy uncoiled from the cyclops and crawled back onto the Steamobile. Basil struck the cyclops' arm the moment his friend was safe. His halberd cut through flesh and bones, severing the hand from the rest of the body.

"Mistress, I love—" The cyclops opened up his heart right as his fall ruptured his chest. The giant hit the ground at high speed, his rib cage cracking and organs spilling out of it; heart included. A few seconds later, the cyclops had become no more than a lump of flesh vanishing beyond the horizon.

Only Hypathia remained.

At this point, Vasi's Hasten spell had run out. Only two of the copies remained, but to Basil's horror, the shoulder wound that his girlfriend had inflicted on the original was closing on its own. The black, eyeless facial tumor on the fake goddess' marble skin receded back into her body until she regained her unearthly beauty.

Artemis-Apollo is back at full health!

"She can clone herself *and* regenerate?" Basil choked in disbelief. "You cheater! You pay-to-win cheater!"

"She's a bird, what else did you expect but foul play?" Plato asked before unleashing a Wind Slash at the two Hypathias. He managed to hit a copy that exploded into a shower of stardust, identifying the last one as the real one. "There she is!"

Basil swiftly switched his halberd for his corrosive AK-47 and opened fire. Shellgirl did the same with her own rifle and Vasi joined in the fun with a shadowshot. Hypathia managed to dodge the last projectile, but both bullets hit her in the chest. Acid spread on her womb and breasts like spilled oil on a water's surface. More blackened tumors erupted from her wounds.

Hypathia snarled in pain and put some space between herself and the Steamobile. She moved to its right and zigzagged in the skies to avoid the bullets.

She's frailer than Tamura and doesn't seem to have close-combat abilities, Basil guessed. She's a pure long-range fighter. If we can stay close and damage her faster than her regeneration can keep up, she'll eventually fold.

"Rosemarine, stay close to her!" Basil ordered as he chased after Hypathia. The fake goddess had already begun multiplying again. "Vasi, up for a tag team?"

"Of course, handsome." His girlfriend moved her broom over him and cast Hasten on him. "I'm burning through my SP faster than my pastry stock, though, so I don't think I can keep this up much longer. I'm still in the lead for the kill count competition though."

"Yes you are," Basil replied with a grin. "Scary feature, that tumor wound thing."

"It's not me," she replied with a frown. "Hasten."

It wasn't her fault?

[Hasten] status effect! Your speed will be doubled for two minutes!

Basil frowned as time dilated around him and his motorcycle. The world blurred and his vision turned into a tunnel of light. At the end of it was Hypathia, on whom he opened fire at hypersonic speed. With Vasi's robes doubling her spells' duration, Basil could enjoy the buff to its fullest.

Luck finally worked in his favor, for he managed to hit the real one in the right leg with his first bullet. The doubles didn't vanish when the original took damage, though the same wounds appeared on all of them to avoid helping identify the original. This time, the damage took on an even more horrifying shape: that of a golden tumor with two blank, milky eyes staring back at Basil.

"Well, that's creepy," Basil mumbled to himself. He was already scared of cancer after watching René die from it, but seeing a tumor with eyes disturbed him to his core. Even Hypathia tried to cover the wounds with her wings, as if to suppress the memory of it. "Something's wrong with you, rich girl."

"Shut up," the four Hypathias hissed back, their wings glowing like the sun. "Revealing Light!"

A burning, blinding flash of light erupted from the four Hypathias. Basil had to cover his eyes with his hand to avoid going blind, and Vasi's newest shadowshot was blown away by the enemy's radiance.

[Blind] ailment Resisted! Plato, Buggy, Shellgirl and Vasilisa have gone [Blind]!

Artemis-Apollo has analyzed your System information.

"Vasi? Vasi are you alright?" Basil lowered his hand just in time to see the four Hypathias grinning at him. All of them raised their bows at his face, right as Rosemarine's moon-shaped mark disappeared and suddenly reappeared on her Tamer's hand.

Artemis-Apollo's [Huntress' Moon] marked you as the hunt's target! Your chances of avoiding attacks have been halved for one hour, and your odds of suffering from a critical hit have been doubled!

Four arrows of ice flew straight at Basil.

Still hastened by Vasi's spell, he switched his AK-47 for his halberd in the blink of an eye. Knowing the projectiles would bend to follow him, he didn't bother dodging. Instead, he swung his blazing weapon and shattered any arrow threatening him.

Basil's eyes turned to Vasi, whose broom flew around without direction. Thankfully, Hypathia ignored Basil's girlfriend to chase after him. She had mistaken him for the party's weak link.

"You're a Tamer, aren't you?" Hypathia's clones all spoke at once. They floated in a square formation right above his head. "The System says all your friends will perish with you."

"So will yours." Basil snorted. If anything, he was happy Hypathia would focus on him rather than his vulnerable girlfriend. "Bring it, Marie-Antoinette."

Hypathia switched tactics from ice arrows to fire ones. Since he couldn't easily deflect those with his halberd, Basil trusted in his motorcycle and smashed the accelerator. The projectiles chased after him like missiles homing on his crescent moon mark. Basil's Hasten-empowered vehicle allowed him to outpace a few until they dissipated, but one exploded close to his back. The blast almost threw him off his vehicle.

"This is nothing personal, young man," Hypathia said with a tone that implied otherwise. "I can't let someone capable of killing us free and loose in the world. We'll have enough trouble when the real threats await around the dimensional corner."

"Maybe you should have thought of it before destroying the world," Basil replied, seething from the sensation of flames burning on his shoulders. "Were you tired of taking Instagram photos with Bill Gates and pandas?"

"Did you know there was enough food around to end world hunger?" Hypathia asked with a patronizing tone as she and her clones prepared another volley. "Yet nearly one billion people,

a seventh of mankind, were dying from famine around the globe. And don't get me started on world poverty, war, and global warming. The world was already crumbling because of greedy, selfish little men."

"Wait, *you* think that you have the moral high ground?" Basil choked at her hypocrisy. "You destroyed the world and use brainwashed slaves!"

"They should be happy to die in the service of a great cause."

Basil glanced over his shoulder at his allies on the Steamobile. Rosemarine was closing the gap between her and Hypathia, but Plato covered his eyes with his paws and Buggy helped a blinded Shellgirl aim with her rifle. The centimagma didn't seem troubled by his own lack of sight, probably thanks to Tremorsense, but his fire breath wouldn't affect the enemy. Vasi ran circles in the sky, struggling to stay on her broomstick

Hypathia paid them no mind. Considering most of them neutralized and believing victory to be within her grasp, she focused entirely on Basil. She showed as much battlefield awareness as Tamura before her.

It was a fatal mistake.

"Monster Cure II." Basil's magic spread to his allies, curing their blindness as Jesus did with the old man of Bethsaida.

You healed Vasilisa, Plato, Buggy, and Shellgirl from the [Blind] ailments!

Like Walter said. Basil looked over his shoulder and witnessed Vasi taking position above Hypathia. Rosemarine arrived from the left, with the Steamobile's crew ready to open fire. *Specialization pays off in the end.*

"This destruction is only the first step of purification," Hypathia ranted as she and her clones opened fire again. "We're going to recreate the world, Bohem, a better world. A pure blue planet free of suffering."

"Your walk betrays your talk," Basil said as he switched weapons for his AK-47. He suddenly veered his Harley Davidson to the side and lowered his head at the last moment, the fiery arrows narrowly missing. "And you're no goddess of mine."

Basil pressed his weapon's trigger right as his allies attacked from all sides. Vasi fired an orb of darkness from above. Plato used a Wind Slash from the left side by side with Shellgirl, who opened fire with her rifle. As for Buggy, he ripped a metal plate from the Steamobile and threw it at Hypathia with all his might.

Basil's bullet destroyed a clone, as did Vasi's shadowshot. Plato and Shellgirl hit the same target, which dissipated into the ether. But Buggy... Buggy's improvised projectile bounced off the original's head with such strength as to make her waver.

"I got her!" Buggy rejoiced. "I got her!"

Exploiting what little time he had left under the Hasten spell, Basil followed up his ally's success with a rain of bullets. Two of his projectiles missed, but the third hit Hypathia in the head.

"Uh... argh... I can't... I can't take this anymore!" Hypathia snarled in pain as her wound grew into a blackened, mouthed tumor. "Teleport!"

She courageously advanced in the opposite direction as the Bohens. Like sharks smelling blood in the water, the party immediately chased after her. All the while they kept up the pressure with projectiles. Each blow caused a new tumor to appear, whether golden or black.

"Teleport!" Hypathia shouted, her anger turning into panic. She attempted to create duplicates again, but the group shot them down as soon as they appeared. "Ashok, let me teleport back! Ashok! Ashok, you trai—AH!"

Hypathia shouted as her body suddenly split in half.

Basil watched in amazement at this odd turn of events. The fake goddess crash-landed on the grass, her back rupturing in two as the tumors infesting her body joined together in a circle. One half of the mutated flesh took on a golden color and the other a shade of black.

"Maxwell, what... what's happening?" Hypathia crawled on the ground, her bow of light dissipating into nothingness. "What's happening... to me? I feel... I feel..."

"What's wrong with her?!" Buggy asked as Rosemarine stopped the Steamobile at a respectable distance. Basil slowed down as his Hasten buff dissipated, but remained wary. "Her body..."

"She's sick." Plato shuddered in disgust. "Beyond sick."

"My beauty... you said you would make men worship me, Maxwell... Maxwell!" Hypathia held her head with both her hands and screamed. "Aaagh!"

Her harrowing, haunting screech made Basil wince. To his horror, faces appeared on both halves of her splintered back: a masculine visage on the golden one, and a feminine on the black one. It seemed as if demons possessing Hypathia struggled to escape her body.

"The gods inside her are rebelling," Vasi guessed as she lowered her broom's altitude. "She doesn't have the strength to keep them suppressed anymore."

Tamura only had Dionysus to contend with, but from her name she got greedy and asked for two deities, Basil thought grimly. She was never worthy of this power

This ordeal couldn't have happened to a nicer gal, but Hypathia's misery brought him no pleasure. Basil would rather put her down like the animal she was.

"This is the end," Basil said as he climbed down from his motorcycle and raised his AK-47 at the false goddess' head. "Bugsy, Plato, let's finish her off."

"Wait..." Hypathia hissed as the Bohens surrounded her. She raised her hand at Basil, her eyes pleading for mercy. "I can... save me..."

"You want healing?" Basil asked, sensing an opportunity. He put the tip of his barrel against the false goddess' temple. "Then start talking. What's in the UNESCO HQ?"

"Ben..." Hypathia whispered as the tumors grew larger. "He's overseeing the Naraka subsystem... still trying to get her back..."

Vasi frowned in confusion. "Naraka? Her?"

"If I die... my soul..." Hypathia's eyes twisted into terrible fear as her body ripped further. "I don't want to go to that place..."

Basil winced. His worst suspicions started to sound plausible. "What does the soul have to do with this?"

"Your memories... your knowledge... the weight of your emotions, of your thoughts and beliefs... they form what you call the soul." Hypathia vomited thick black blood. Shellgirl covered her mouth at the sight of her agony. "They are like batteries accumulating power... and release the charge upon death."

Basil's blood froze in his veins. "Where does the charge go afterward?"

"When we kill... the accumulated spiritual power of the victim's soul... is released... the Trimurti System harvests it before it disperses... and transfers that excess energy to the winner..."

"Experience Points." Vasi chewed her lips. She had put two and two together too. "This is where experience points come from."

Basil's grip on his AK-47 tightened. He had suspected as much, but now a worrying possibility formed in his mind. He had always wondered how the System managed to violate conservation of energy, but if souls indeed had power...

"Where do souls go afterward?" Basil pressed this selfish, irredeemable vermin. She *knew*. She knew from the first day and signed on it! "Where do they go?"

"Please..." Hypathia pleaded. "I can't..."

"Where do they go?!" Basil snarled in anger. "Where do souls go—"

Hypathia perished before he could finish.

Torn from within by the godlike powers she should never have been allowed to wield, her body snapped in half like a twig. A flash of light erupted from her remains. Basil and his team took a step back as the fake goddess crumbled into stardust. The starry sky above started to dissipate, the Field effect collapsing without anyone to fuel it. Basil's crescent mark vanished into nothingness.

Of Hypathia, only two ethereal spheres remained. No larger than a fist, one was the color of the moonlight and the other as golden as the sun.

Congratulations! Your party earned 220,000 EXP points (36666 for you). You've earned two levels (total 35).

*You have earned an **[Essence of Artemis]** and an **[Essence of Apollo]**.*

Basil looked at the spheres in silence, before turning to his allies. Most of them were either confused by their foe's confessions, or in Vasi's case, greatly disturbed by its implications.

Only Rosemarine remained cheerful in victory. She looked up at the clearing sky. The setting sun had reappeared alongside the distant moon. She glanced at the two celestial bodies, then at the spheres, and then back at the sky. Rosemarine held her breath as she returned her focus on today's prize. She had connected the dots.

"Can I eat the baby sun and moon, Mister?" she asked innocently.

"No, sweetie," Basil replied with a sigh. "No."

Rosemarine lowered her head and whined in disappointment.

Chapter 21: Man vs Camping

Basil had found two ways to deal with a clouded mind: playing games and cooking.

Since Apollyon's forces had treacherously destroyed his Nintendo Switch and ruined over five hundred hours of intense playtime, Basil had no other option but to pour his heart into the sacred art of Bulgarian cuisine. Thankfully, today's bounty allowed him to experiment with traditional recipes.

As it turned out, you could do many things with two dead pegasi and a dose of imagination.

The Steamobile's kitchen couldn't compare to his old house's, but slicing a winged horse's flesh wasn't a question of tools and comfort; it was a matter of patience and love for a job well done. Whenever Basil doubted his kitchen chef ways, he remembered the smiles of his monsters as they swallowed a dish of his invention. Their smiles, and the victorious thrill of devouring one's enemy, made the pain and frustration worth it.

After a good two hours of work, Basil was proud of the final menu. First a *bob chorba* soup of delicious beans, onions, tomatoes, and pieces of pegasus hearts for starters; then, a kebab sliced from the beasts' mighty legs with spicy rice as the main dish; and finally, strawberry gelée served with cream cheese for dessert.

Of course, Basil wouldn't let the rest of the pegasi's remains go to waste. The feathers would make for some fine pillows and the leather shall be turned into fine clothes to keep his friends warm in winter. For Basil was a gentle, caring soul. As for the bones, he would find a way to craft them into tools. Disney's Hercules would have screamed at the sight of Basil's hard work. And it was all right.

Basil had come to *hate* Greek mythology as of late.

With the meals completed, he allowed himself a moment to breathe. It was almost eleven in the evening and his group would soon stop for the night. They should reach the city of Limoges tomorrow with bellies full.

Now that Basil had cleared his head through hard work, it was time to assign his two new levels.

"It's the end of an era," Basil whispered as he opened his status screen. His eyes lingered on his Tamer class; his first, the one that started this entire journey into monster madness and the unknown. To finally fill it out made him feel strangely nostalgic.

Less than half a year had passed since that strange morning when he woke up with a screen stuck between his eyes, but it felt like a lifetime ago.

Level 20 Tamer Stat Gains: +1 STR, +1 AGI, +1 VIT, +1 MAG, +1 CHA. You earned 30 HP and 10 SP.

All for One (Passive): Tamer class Capstone. You have proven that the bond uniting you to your monsters is unbreakable. All buffs and beneficial status effects affecting you apply to your monsters; however, status ailments and debuffs also carry over.

[All for One] applies to your entire Guild.

The rush of power filled his bones, gentle as a dopamine rush. It was the warm feeling of completing a race, of achieving a milestone on a journey. As for that new Perk... the sheer tactical possibilities it presented gave Basil pause for thought. The potential rewards were as great as the drawbacks.

Congratulations, you have completed your first class! For this achievement, you can select one of your stats except for HP/SP; it will receive a one-time bonus chosen at random (maximum +6).

"What?" Basil clenched his jaw in annoyance. "Do I gain a bonus each time I complete a class?"

Yes.

"Why didn't you inform me sooner?!" If Basil had known there was yet another incentive to class specialization early, he wouldn't have spread out his levels so much!

Your Intelligence was too—

"I select Intelligence," Basil said before the System could finish its sentence. "System, invest in my education!"

You have gained +4 INT and 20 SP. You can now remember up to 6 Spells.

"Take that, Dumbledore." For his second level, Basil finally decided to take a level in Deathknight. His current plan was to alternate with Dragonknight afterward, progressing in both classes at once. It might have been suboptimal, but he would need additional firepower to deal with dragons in the near future.

CRACK!

The noise of shattered glass echoed in Basil's mind, much to his surprise.

*Congratulations! Through your unshakable faith and unusual choices, you have unlocked a rare class variant of Deathknight: **Deathknight of the Sepulchre!** A formidable champion of the faith defending holy resting places. STR (A), AGI (B), VIT (B), SKI (B), MAG (B), INT (C), CHA (A), LCK (B).*

The Sepulchre? As in the Holy Sepulchre? Basil knew there was once a crusader order dedicated to protecting Christ's tomb, but to think the System would make it into a class...

Or perhaps the System had finally recognized his neighborhood crusader's vow.

Level 1 Deathknight of the Sepulchre Stat Gains: +1 STR, +1 VIT, +1 SKI, +1 MAG, +1 CHA, 1 LCK. You earned 30 HP and 15 SP.

Soulbound Weapon (Passive): *Select a weapon in which you have an advanced or perfect proficiency. This weapon will be bound to you, allowing you to teleport it to your hand at will as long as you both remain on the same world; it will also gain new abilities and improve in quality as you progress into the Deathknight of the Sepulchre class. You can only select one Soulbound Weapon and cannot select a new one until the first is destroyed beyond repair.*

Of all of today's surprises, this one might have been the first good one. Basil counted all the weapons in his inventory, from his humble pistol to his rocket launcher. In the end though, only one was worthy of this Perk.

Basil summoned his trusty halberd and raised it with both hands. "I shall bind this holy weapon to my soul!"

The System answered his decision with a burst of energy. Burning light swallowed his halberd and reforged it into a new weapon. The hand-forged steel making up its structure gained a red and yellow hue, much like a young fire. The axe blade sharpened and the spear tip took on the shape of a stylized flame. The halberd still felt warm to the touch even after the light dissipated.

Croque-Mordeuse

Family: Soulbound Weapon (Axe/Spear).

Quality: B.

Power: +17 STR.

Crit: +10%

Accuracy: 70%

Effect 1: Ignores half of a target's defensive stats during damage calculation.

Effect 2: [Blazing Rune]: Inflicts an additional 30% [Fire] damage.

Effect 3: [Ghostbuster]: Inflicts Deadslayer supereffective damage against the [Undead] Type (x3 damage) and can harm incorporeal targets.

If there's something strange in your graveyard, who are you gonna call? Croque-Mordeuse! She'll keep hidden bodies out of sight and your dead wife out of mind! Croque-Mordeuse!

"Deadslayer?" Basil chuckled. Walter wasn't going to like this development. "Beautiful."

Vasi had told him that he would never become a Paladin... but a holy fire halberd-wielding knight made for a pretty nifty consolation prize.

Rosemarine stopped the Steamobile near a small river. A large hill overshadowed the area, its surface covered in stone and boulders. Basil noticed facial shapes dug into the granite formations; with their long tusks and small eyes, they looked a lot like fantasy trolls. Buggy hadn't noticed the presence of enemies nearby with Tremorsense, so Basil assumed that whoever created these decorations had either perished or fled at the party's approach.

The cold wind of early November blew among the leaves of distant trees. Buggy started a fire from coal and harvested wood, the flames illuminating the darkness and comforting the group with their warmth. Rosemarine had coiled around the campfire and fallen asleep from exhaustion before the dinner was even served. Plato swiftly sat against her belly, exploiting her warmth for his own comfort.

"Hey, Partner!" Shellgirl called out to Basil near the fire. The mimic booty held the two essence spheres in her hands close to Vasi. "Check this out!"

The entire party watched on as Shellgirl started juggling with the two spheres. Basil winced as he watched the godly essences move from one hand to another, half-expecting his friend to drop them. But Shellgirl proved herself skilled enough to keep them in constant movement.

"Impressive." Vasi giggled and clapped her hands at the spectacle. "You're good at this."

"I could make money this way," Shellgirl replied with a grin. "For two wares bought, a free five-minute performance!"

"For the love of God, please don't drop the dead gods' souls," Basil pleaded. "I don't want to know what will happen if you break them."

"I don't think any of us can, handsome," Vasi reassured him. "We could reshape or transform them, but destroying a god's essence is almost certainly beyond our power."

"Any idea what to do with these spheres?" Basil asked as he let the starting soup stew on the campfire. If Vasi allowed Shellgirl to play with the essences, then his girlfriend had already taken a good look at them.

"I suppose we can either eat them like Rosemarine or use them for crafting," Vasi replied.

"Or we could sell them," Shellgirl stated the simple solution. "I mean, I'm sure Walter would trade us one of his legendary spears against these two big balls. Look at the size of them!"

"He might," Vasi conceded with a chuckle, "but I couldn't teleport to his shop to ask him directly. I suspect he has temporarily closed his shop to study the neurotower."

Of course a necromancer would find a device powered by tormented human souls fascinating. Unfortunately, Metal Olympus' ability to track down the essences made them a liability. Carrying three of them was the equivalent of painting a target on their back.

"You were wise not to let Rosemarine eat them, handsome," Vasi said as she warmed her hands near the pyre. "She would have ended up like that woman, torn apart from within. A body can't handle more than one of these essences."

"I'm still not sure eating one is a good idea at all," Basil replied. He glanced at Rosemarine, who snorted adorably in her sleep. His poor tropidrake was exhausted after carrying the Steamobile for a full day and a deadly chase. "I'm waiting to see what her new metamorphosis will do."

Vasi scowled when Basil served the team their soups. He briefly thought she didn't like his cuisine, which would have wounded him deeply, but it became clear that something else weighed on her mind.

"I don't think that what happened to our foe was an accident," she finally said.

"The teleportation misfire or the failed cancer chemotherapy?" Plato asked in-between bites. "Basil, cook more flying horse hearts next time. They're delicious."

"If we find more," Basil replied before sitting next to his girlfriend. "You were saying, Vasi?"

"Hypathia's breakdown was preplanned." Vasi shook her head. "I'm a good witch, Basil, but I'm still a work-in-progress. Yet even a cursory examination of these essences tells me that mixing them would be a terrible idea. I can't imagine someone with the resources and intellect to summon the Trimurti System would miss this detail."

"Hypathia might not have realized the danger," Basil pointed out after sipping his soup. It tasted nice enough, but he should have added more pepper. "She was an investor, not a technician... but yeah, Maxwell must have known and didn't care."

"Or he fully expected her to self-destruct," Vasi pointed out.

"Maybe." It wouldn't surprise Basil much. When you make a deal with the devil, you should always expect to see the short end of the stick. "And now twice a member of the board was prevented from teleporting away. Once is a coincidence, two is a pattern."

Hypathia mentioned her colleague Ashok during her breakdown, calling him a traitor when she failed to teleport. By simple deduction, this Ashok was almost certainly responsible for Tamura's inability to escape his own death.

It worried Basil. From the information he had received from the French army, Ashok was by far the most dangerous member of the board behind Maxwell himself.

"How many of these board members are left?" Shellgirl asked after getting tired of juggling. She set the essences among her treasures and slouched on her hoard like a dragon queen. "Two?"

"Three." Basil summoned a file from his inventory and tossed it to Shellgirl. It was a copy of the French army's investigation into Dismaker Labs. "Chief Technical Officer Benjamin Leroy, Chief Operating Officer Ashok Acharya, and Chief Executive Officer Anton Maxwell himself."

"COO?" Ever the studious gal, Shellgirl read the documents with attention. "Oh, that's the big boss' right-hand right?"

"Yes, he's like my Basil," Plato said. "Dutifully fulfilling my every wish."

"I'm still waiting for my paid vacation," Basil joked back.

"You can always dream." Plato snickered. "What next, a minimum wage? Shouldn't the joy of humble work be a good enough reward?"

"Of course it is, king of cats," Vasi mused before petting Plato behind the ears. "But perhaps we should talk about starting a union."

Shellgirl lay down on her back to better read the document. "I'm not sure if I remember this right," she said with a thoughtful look. "But didn't the snake say that this Ashok was the only one in contact with their big boss?"

"He did," Basil confirmed. "Makes sense. If he was COO, then Maxwell trusted him above the rest."

"Then is he killing his allies for himself, or on his boss' behalf?" Shellgirl asked.

"What difference does it make?" Plato belched after finishing the starter. "They're dead anyway."

"I don't understand how it all fits," Shellgirl explained. "What's the point of granting your allies immense power if it is to eliminate them later?"

"Maybe they're not useful anymore, Shellgirl," Vasi suggested. "Sometimes, it's that simple."

"They stopped being useful when the System started, no? Why not give them a severance package at the very start then?"

"Good point." Vasi crossed her arms. "I see two possibilities: either Maxwell couldn't kill them then, or the board members served a purpose in the early days of the Apocalypse."

"Mmm..." Buggy snapped his mandibles. "Boss, I have an idea, but... I'm not sure if I'm on the right track."

"Nobody is, Buggy," Basil replied kindly. "Go on, there's no right answer."

"Emperor Veg—I mean, Emperor Maxwell." Buggy cleared his throat as the rest of the team looked at him strangely. He had clearly watched too much *Major Chicken*. "I mean the villain. The villain wants to open a portal to another world, right?"

"That's the most likely possibility, yes," Basil confirmed.

"But portals don't open unless everyone on the planet becomes strong enough," Buggy said. "That's why the Apocalypse Force is killing low-level people. What I mean to say is... maybe it's the same thing with Metal Olympus too? They were supposed to cause as much damage as possible until levels rose high enough for gates to open."

"That..." Basil trailed off with a frown. "That's plausible."

"You mean he used his employees in the early stages to build capital, and now he's trying to get rid of them now that the money's coming in on its own?" Shellgirl frowned. "That's disgusting and unethical. You can't build a good work culture with that kind of attitude."

"But why not let them run around then?" Plato asked with skepticism. "They aren't useful anymore, but they aren't dead-weight either. Why bother killing them?"

Vasi quickly guessed the likeliest answer. "Because they know too much."

"Yeah, you're right." Basil frowned as the situation started to clear up. "All members of the board were privy to the System's inner functions and true nature. If any of them were to be interrogated, they could allow enemy factions to understand how the whole machinery functions."

Including the ghastly parts. Basil tried to follow Walter's advice and not to think too much about Hypathia's revelations on the fate of souls, even if it bothered him greatly. He needed to obtain more hard facts before drawing fearful conclusions.

Basil would wait for Walter's conclusions on the neurotower. Crossing their respective findings would help them uncover the whole situation rather than pieces of it.

"Before he entered the business world, Ashok Acharya started out as an Indian army officer involved in the Kashmir conflict," Shellgirl read the army's file out loud. "He was court-martialed after accusations of extrajudicial torture and murder of civilians, though his culpability was never proven. Afterward, he started a private military company mostly known for protecting questionable rare ore extractions in Afghanistan, Mali, and other third world countries."

In short, he was a nasty piece of work.

"Private Military Contractor?" Vasi frowned. "You mean mercenaries?"

"Like adventurers?" Buggy asked naïvely. "He took on quests too?"

"More like he bullied poor people out of their lands on behalf of corporations, all so they could exploit their natural resources," Basil replied grimly. "For money."

"A thief then," Vasi summed it up. Shellgirl sneered in disgust too; she didn't believe in making money through foul ways. "How did he end up with Dismaker Labs?"

"The company needed specific rare ore to create advanced batteries and computer technology," Basil explained. "The army suspects that Maxwell brought him in to secure the supply. That, and I suppose Ashok helped cover up what his organization was truly up to. If he had experienced mercenaries to act as security, it would have been child's play to make witnesses and whistleblowers disappear."

That worried Basil the most. Tamura and Hypathia had been rich oligarchs, but Ashok was a merciless killer with military training and experienced troops. He would make far better use of his newfound divine powers than his colleagues; and if he sabotaged them on his own behalf rather than Maxwell's, then he was probably shooting for Overgod too.

"What about Emperor Maxwell?" Buggy asked. "Which planet does he come from?"

"Unknown," Basil said with a snort. "The army could barely find any verifiable information on him before he started Dismaker Labs. It's almost as if the company came to life and then grew a human face out of nowhere."

"Or he came from another world like I did and infiltrated your society," Vasi suggested with a smile. "Perhaps he has horns too."

"All I hope is that he's not a reptilian or worse, a devil in a suit," Basil replied grumpily. "Too many of them already."

"Personally, I'm betting on an alien," Plato said. "Gray with shades of green."

Shellgirl continued to read the document to herself, her expression turning from curiosity to sadness. "That's awful," she whispered.

"What is it, Shellgirl?" Vasi asked.

"I'm reading the CTO's entry, Benjamin Martin Leroy." Shellgirl flipped a page of the document. "His daughter was killed seven years ago in a place called Tunis."

"There was a wave of terrorist attacks in Tunisia in 2015," Basil said with sorrow. He still remembered watching the events on the news with a lurking stomach. "Dozens of tourists were murdered by madmen with assault rifles. Leroy's daughter was among them."

Vasi chewed her lip. "Hypathia said he was trying to 'bring her back.'"

"I thought the same," Basil admitted. If Dismaker Labs' technology could indeed influence the souls of the dead, then Maxwell must have enlisted Benjamin Leroy's assistance with the promise of bringing back his daughter to life.

"I've heard some of my world's gods could revive the dead, and not as walking corpses," Vasi said. "But only under very specific circumstances. I'm not sure how it will work on this planet though."

The thought of bringing back René, Kuikui, and Orcine immediately aroused Basil's interest. "What circumstances?"

"From what I understand..." Vasi smiled sheepishly. "You had to pay for it."

Basil looked at her silence as he struggled to find his words. Too late. Shellgirl beat him to it.

"I knew it!" she shouted in triumph. "The afterlife runs on money, yo!"

Some said death was the great equalizer. They were lying to themselves. The rich *a/ways* had it better.

After dinner, the group spent a little time outside rather than retreat inside the Steamobile. The campfire hadn't died down, so its warmth protected them from the cold wind.

Vasi rested against Basil's shoulder as the couple watched the sky. "The stars are beautiful tonight."

"They're all fake," Basil grumbled.

Vasi rolled her eyes. "I know that, my grumpy bear, but they're still beautiful."

"How does the night sky look in your world?"

"The moon is made of gold," she replied. Shellgirl's head immediately snapped in the couple's direction. "So many adventurers are mining it for material that astronomers wonder if it'll eventually fall out of orbit."

"It's still less dangerous than ours," Basil mused. The dungeon auroras on the moon's surface grew more noticeable with each passing night. "Do you intend to return there one day? To your world?"

"Eventually, but I'm in no hurry. I gotta visit my mom someday." Vasi smiled at him. "Will you follow me there, handsome?"

"I suppose, if the opportunity presents itself." It wasn't like Basil had a house to return to, since the last one went down in flames. "How would your mother react?"

"She would try to eat you for taking her dear daughter away." Vasi chuckled. "Honestly, I don't know. How would yours?"

"She would ask '*when are the children coming?*'" Basil's mother had always been obsessed with his reproductive future.

"I'm afraid she'll have to wait a long time for that," Vasi replied with a grin.

Basil distinctly heard Buggy whine in the background, but paid him no mind. "General Leblanc said he would be looking for my mom."

"And what will you do if he finds her?" Vasi asked sharply.

"I don't know," Basil admitted. His mother, if she still lived, was always across the continent and he already had enough trouble to deal with in western Europe. "I would try to give her a call at least."

Vasi nodded in appreciation, but thankfully didn't press the subject further. After today's exhausting events, they easily fell into a comfortable silence. Basil found the sensation of her slow breathing on his chest more peaceful than any word. He held Vasi tightly against him and started to fade into the dreamlands...

At least, until something cold fell on his cheek and jolted him back to consciousness.

"What is it?" Vasi glanced at him with a frown, before turning to stare at the sky.

White crystals fell from the heavens above their heads, carried by the autumn wind. They were so small Basil almost missed them in the dark. First there were only a few, then many more dropping from white clouds. They melted when they approached the campfire and melted against Buggy's carapace, much to his displeasure.

"It's snow," Vasi whispered with a smile. "It's snow, Basil!"

General Winter had come early.

Chapter 22: Man vs Snow

Basil had never speedrun a season before.

The snowfall started out as faint and amusing, but the situation quickly degraded. The temperature dropped twenty degrees in less than an hour, to the point Basil had to put on a scarf, a winter hat, gloves, and a mantle to cover his feathered armor. He still felt cold afterward.

The blizzard that followed was just the coup de grâce.

The party spent the whole night bunkering inside the Steamobile. It was terribly difficult to squeeze Rosemarine inside and they had to use a good chunk of the coal reserve to keep the heating at full power. When they crawled out of their vehicle in the morning after the storm subsided, the entire region was covered in a soft layer of snow. Glaciers and icicle curtains had taken over the hills. Sleets of ice cracked under the group's feet wherever they walked and the Steamobile's wheels struggled to advance on the frozen road.

"I hate frost," Basil grumbled while sitting with Vasi on Rosemarine's back to guide her. With his tropidrake slowed down by the frost and the snow, Buggy had to stay at the front and melt obstacles with his firebreath. "I hate it so much."

"You'll get used to it, Handsome." Vasi was the only one happy with this state of affairs. She looked very cute with a fur mantle and a red winter hat over her horns. "It's not that cold."

"It's minus fifteen and dropping still."

"I was born in a place called the *Winter Kingdoms*," Vasi replied with a grin. "To me, this weather is a warm spring."

Basil was starting to have second thoughts about visiting her home.

"Besides, you can always turn into a bear if it's too cold," Vasi pointed out.

"We might all turn into werebears if I do that, thanks to my new Perk."

"You say that like it's a bad thing. Bear fur would help everyone with insulation."

Basil locked eyes with his girlfriend. “What do you think dragon and centimagma werebears would look like?”

“I don’t know.” She held his gaze. “But don’t you want to find out?”

When she put it that way... now Basil was dying to see the potential results.

“All right, but only because you asked.” Basil activated his Pèth’s power. Fur grew all over his skin as he transformed into a mighty werebear, his clothes stretching and adapting to his new morphology. It helped with the frost, but he greatly struggled not to fall off from Rosemarine’s back; as it turned out, men made for better dragon riders than bears. “So?”

Vasi raised an eyebrow. She didn’t transform into a she-bear, nor did Rosemarine grow fur over her leaf scales.

“It’s not working,” Basil noted the obvious. “System, explain yourself.”

*Unique effects and exclusive Perks, including were-transformations, will not be shared by **[All for One]**.*

“You said the Perk applied to all buffs and beneficial effects,” Basil pointed out. “So isn’t it false advertising?”

Dismaker Labs wishes you a happy apocalypse!

“Vasi, the System doesn’t want a werebear party.”

“Saddening,” Vasi whispered as she leaned against his fur. “But I can make the most of—”

Basil had transformed back into a human before she could finish. “You were saying?”

“Why did you change back?” she asked in disappointment. “Your fur is so comfy.”

“Sorry, but it’s *really* painful to ride Rosemarine in bear form.” Basil checked his map. The wind almost swept it off his hands, but he managed to hang on to it. “Sweetie, take right after the glacier.”

“Which one, Mister?” Rosemarine asked. His tropidrake had undergone a few physical changes since the drop in temperature. Her Harvest Perk no longer provided fruits and she had lost her

foliage. Her facial petals were also taking on a dark shade of blue. Perhaps it was meant to absorb more light or regulate her body temperature. Basil had little idea how a tropical flower dragon's biology worked. "The pointy one or the round one?"

"The pointy one, I think." Damn it, almost all these glaciers looked the same. Basil couldn't see anything under the ice.

"We should test out your All For One's limits as soon as we can," Vasi suggested. "Imagine if I were to cast Hasten on you and we all benefit from it. It would divide the SP cost by six and make it much easier to manage buffs."

"And imagine if I'm targeted by a Berserk ailment again, or worse, brainwashed." Basil still had nightmares over what he had done to Plato under Tamura's influence. "All for One is a double-edged sword."

"I say it's worth the risk." Vasi put a finger on her lip, her expression thoughtful. "If we can find an item that grants you immunity to status ailments, it'll negate the downsides of your Perk and let us abuse the good parts."

"Probably," Basil agreed. "We need more elemental weapons too. Half of our attacks couldn't damage Hypathia."

"We can expect future enemies to be immune to or resist multiple elements," Vasi agreed with a nod. "Maybe you should take more levels in Runesmith and Technomancer? If you can empower our equipment until we cover most elements, then we'll have the means to target all potential weaknesses."

"I'm working on it." Thanks to his Intelligence boost, Basil had finally, *finally* managed to learn the Savage Rune spell; and he still had space for one more. "The more elemental runes I have to infuse our weapons with, the better."

"I'll help. I intended to remove some of my low-tier spells from my spellbook and replace them with higher ones, so we can kill two birds with one stone."

"Basil, Basil!" As if triggered by the word 'birds', Plato bolted out of the Steamobile to join the couple. "What's happening to me?!"

“What’s the matter?” Basil looked over his shoulder and gasped in shock. “AH!”

His black cat was now white as snow.

“Basil, what’s happening to me?!” Plato asked in panic. His hair had switched colors and more than doubled in length, giving him a puffy, Siberian cat look. He didn’t appear happy with it at all. “I’m getting fat and snowy! Like white chocolate!”

“I, uh…” Basil stared at his cat in shock. Plato’s hair often lengthened around December, but it was the first time he had seen such a drastic change. “I don’t know, maybe it’s a Cait Sith winter camouflage.”

“So cute…” Vasi whispered before petting the cat. “So soft too…”

“Don’t get used to it.” Plato sulked. “I hate winter.”

After recovering from his shock, Basil smiled at his cat’s misfortune. “If you ask me—”

“If you say white is an improvement over black, then you’re a racist,” Plato complained. “You should be ashamed of yourself!”

“You’ll be the first white panther,” Basil taunted him.

To his surprise, his words gave Plato pause. The cat’s eyes widened, a terrible idea no doubt crossing his warmth-deprived mind.

“Snow leopard,” Plato whispered, his yellow eyes full of hope. “I am no longer a dwarf panther. I am now a snow leopard cub.”

“Where are your black spots?” Basil asked with amusement.

“I’ll gain them in the spring.” Plato hissed at his friend. “Doubter. Doubter!”

Bugsy sneezed loudly at the caravan’s vanguard. Flames burst out of his mandibles and swiftly turned to smoke. Rosemarine briefly stopped her advance to wait for him to recover.

“Bugsy, are you all right?” Basil asked in worry.

"I'm zorry boz," Buggy apologized with a nasally voice. The centimagma's sheer resilience allowed him not to take damage from the snowflakes and low temperature, but the lava making up his blood had hardened on the surface. "I'm not uzed to getting a cold."

"Here, I can heal you! Sunbath!" Rosemarine glowered and showered Buggy in healing light. He answered with a scoff of smoke. "Oh? Why isn't not working?"

"It's not an ailment," Basil noted after checking the team's status. "The cold must be messing with your metabolism, Buggy."

"Go rest, brave bug," Vasi said softly. "I can warm up the path with fire spells."

"I'm all good Mamz..." Buggy coughed and sneezed smoke. "Ugh... I'm zorry."

"No, don't be." Vasi climbed down from Rosemarine's back. "I'll take over."

"But I can still work!" Buggy protested with pride.

"Buggy, you will help Shellgirl inside," Basil replied. The last member of their party stayed inside the Steamobile to fuel the engine with coal and water. "That's an order."

"I... alrizght, Boz." Buggy nodded obediently as he crawled back inside the Steamobile. "Thank zou, Vazi!"

"You are welcome," Vasi replied before summoning a flame in the palm of her hand. She walked in front of Rosemarine, blasting off icicles and snow mounds on the way. Basil watched her move before focusing back on the map. The sun was barely visible in the sky as white clouds obscured it.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Plato said. "But isn't global warming supposed to increase temperature instead of lowering it?"

"Climate is complicated," Basil replied. "It's a very complex machinery."

That was already true without the System's involvement. *With* the Trimurti System, video game logic prevailed over science. The weather had changed one month earlier than normal to fit the season's stereotypes.

“Can we migrate south after we blow up Paris?” Plato pleaded. “There’ll be warmth and birds to hunt.”

“We aren’t blowing up Paris,” Basil replied.

Plato looked up at him with skepticism. “Basil, you have a nuke and an attitude problem. It’s not a good combination.”

“We aren’t *intentionally* blowing up Paris.” Basil grumbled at his cat’s lack of faith. “Oh come on! The USA and Russia had like ten thousand of those things and never used them!”

Come to think of it, Basil wondered what happened to all the leftover weapons of mass destruction in those two countries. He hoped lack of maintenance would disable them before they could transform that winter into the nuclear variant.

The journey carried on in monotone silence across the snowy wasteland. New monsters popped up around the countryside—including flying giant snowflakes, white rabbits with icy horns, and adorable, white glowing worms the size of dogs—but none of them proved aggressive nor strong enough to threaten the group. The Bohens eventually reached a frozen river, which Basil identified as the Vienne. Limoges shouldn’t be far now.

“You know what we need, handsome?” Vasi asked at the caravan’s front in between casting fire spells.

“A blanket?” Basil deadpanned. Plato had taken over his lap and provided a sliver of warmth.

“A bard,” Vasi countered. “To entertain us on our journey.”

“I can sing, Miss!” Rosemarine boasted. “I have invented a song!”

Aww, she was a budding musician!

“We’re all ears, Rosemarine,” Basil encouraged her. “But don’t use the ice as drums like you did with Bordeaux’s bridge, please. We don’t want to start an avalanche.”

Rosemarine cleared her throat, gathered her breath, and then started singing a song of her own devising. “We pray all night to get holy! We pray all night to get holy!” The tune reminded Basil

of a certain techno band's hit song. "We've come far enough, on the road to the holy land! Let's kill all the infidels, and take back Jerusalem!"

"How does she even know about Jerusalem?" Plato asked in confusion.

"I read her Bible bedtime stories back when she still fit in a greenhouse," Basil explained with fondness. Ah, the nostalgia... "She loved the Crusade sequels."

"Don't be like the dinosaurs and the megafauna!" Rosemarine sang. "Who died because they didn't believe in Christ!"

Rosemarine proved to be a surprisingly good singer. The flower lass had a talent for music, and Basil would make sure to nurture it in the future.

"I smell food," Plato said. "And a fellow feline!"

Basil looked up from his map and squinted. He noticed the smoke of chimneys from houses in the distance, which he assumed to be Limoges' suburb. A blue dungeon aurora floated over the town, bright and beautiful.

After a minute's walk, Plato's warning proved correct. Basil caught sight of a massive mammoth coming in their direction, with two great tusks that could impale ten men at once and soft brown wool covering its body. A man with a hooded fur mantle and a spear of ice rode the beast much like Basil mounted Rosemarine.

Patrick Gaillard

Level 25 [Humanoid] (Cryomancer 6/Oliphant 10/Cavalier 6/Bartender 3).

Party: Bar Gaillard.

Odo, Mammoth Patriarch

Level 22 [Beast/Giant]

Party: Bar Gaillard.

After squinting, Basil noticed stripes of black in the snow. A sabertooth white tiger walked next to the mammoth, its fur so well-camouflaged that the naked eye struggled to follow its movements.

Sasha, Snow Smilodon

Level 21 [Beast]

Party: Bar Gaillard.

“Howdy, travelers!” The mammoth rider raised his ice spear at them, albeit in a friendly way. He wore armor of stuffed leather and wool under his mantle, alongside a tusked mask covering most of his face. The only exposed parts of his body were his two blue eyes. “I assume you’re the Bohens brigade?”

“We’re technically auxiliaries rather than a brigade, but yes,” Basil replied before having Rosemarine and Vasi stop. The tropidrake and the mammoth examined each other, the latter whiffing the former with its trunk “You’re our military contact?”

“Yep,” the man replied. “I thought you might have lost your way in the blizzard, so I came to find ya. Don’t worry, the dungeon is ours. The monsters here are friends or food.”

That explained his utter lack of reaction at seeing a giant flower dragon carrying a steampunk carriage. It pleased Basil greatly. He had yet to see a city that actually welcomed monsters in its midst instead of just tolerating them like Bordeaux.

“Hey, another cat,” the smilodon said upon noticing Plato. She sounded like a female. “What’s that metamorphosis? First time I’ve seen it.”

Plato squinted in response. Basil could tell his friend was spending all of his willpower not to show jealousy. “Cait Sith. Half fairy, half winner.”

“Nice. Is it an English variant?” The smilodon chuckled to herself. “I got the snow smilodon metamorphosis ‘cause I had a strong Frost affinity. Pretty nifty, uh? I even got stripes, like a tiger.”

Plato looked at the smilodon, then at his new fur, and finally back at Basil. After holding his owner's gaze in silence for a few seconds, the cat silently walked back into the Steamobile with an empty, traumatized stare.

"Did I say something wrong?" the sabertooth tiger asked in confusion.

"He'll get over it with time," Basil replied evasively.

"I could have been a smilodon," Plato whimpered before he vanished from view. "Damn it, damn it, damn it!"

"Anyway, name's Patrick," the mammoth rider introduced himself. "The big guy is Odo and the tiger is Sasha, my former house cat. Come on, say hello."

"Sup' strangers," Odo the mammoth said with a grunt. He didn't look like the talkative kind.

"A pleasure to meet you." The smilodon gave them a polite nod. "Always glad to meet newcomers."

"Basil Bohem," Basil introduced himself and his group. "This is Vasilisa Yaga, my girlfriend, and the beautiful dragon is called Rosemarine Eglantine de la Barthe."

"Each of my scales is a tormented soul," Rosemarine said chirpily.

"Another undead?" Odo grumbled. "Great, as if we didn't have enough of them already with the Mammoth Graveyard."

"Anyway, welcome to Limoges," said his rider. "We've got a place set for you and supplies too, but uh, you want to wear masks in town like I do."

"Why's that?" Basil asked with a frown. "Is the air toxic?"

"Sort of." Patrick sighed. "My good friend, have you ever heard of Covid-19?"

"I have, yes." Basil squinted. "Please don't tell me—"

"Well, there's a new variant and the whole town caught it. Covid Winter Edition, we called it."

“Is that a joke?” Basil seethed in annoyance. The world had ended and Covid was *still* a thing?
“Patrick, are you kidding me?”

“I wish!” Patrick grunted in annoyance. “The System made it into a variant Disease ailment. It’s not deadly, but it knocks you out real good and makes you shiver for days. We’ve been looking for remedies since the outbreak started.”

“Oh, are you in need of a good wood witch’s brew?” Vasi asked with a smile. “If so, I’m your gal.”

“I’m also an alchemist with a pharmacology Master’s degree,” Basil said. “Maybe we can help.”

“That would be great!” Patrick rested his spear on his shoulder. “Out of curiosity, did you ever eat goblins?”

“Yeah, why ask?” Basil asked with eyes full of hope.

“Cause there’s like, two dozen snow variants running around the tundra and harassing our trappers. We intended to hunt and cook them for dinner, if you’re up for it. I would understand if you wanna pass though. Not everyone is fine with eating the little buggers.”

Basil grinned ear to ear. “My good man, I have the feeling you and I are going to get along just fine.”

After such a long journey, he had finally found a cultured community.

Chapter 23: Man vs Bar

Once upon a time, Basil Bohem had intended to work in pharmaceuticals.

The idea had formed in his mind early on. Since his family was too poor to buy him books or video games, he would often spend time in his school's library to read magazines. One of them focused on science, and its pages had awakened an interest in biology and chemistry that never truly went away.

"Here, sir," Basil said as he poured a red elixir down a sick man's throat. A nurse was recording the results on an Ipad at the bedside. "That should help."

"Thank you, young man," the patient rasped. He was probably as old as René on his deathbed, with wrinkled skin and a kind smile. "I already feel better."

"It's nothing." Basil held the old man's hand to reassure him. He always had a soft spot for senior citizens. Most of them were starved for human warmth. "Just sleep and rest for now. The doctors will take care of you."

"We will pass by in a few hours to check on your health, Mr. Demesmaeker," the nurse promised with a smile. "Please do not smoke or drink until then."

Oh, I healed a Belgian, Basil thought with an amused smile upon recognizing the name. *May God forgive me.*

The old man kindly waved at Basil as he and the nurse left him. Doctors moved from room to room like overworked ants. One almost hit Basil by accident in one of the clinic's hallways, before apologizing profusely.

Basil was astonished that the French healthcare system still worked at all.

"I believe we can close the trial phase, Mr. Bohem," the nurse said after reviewing her files. "Your potion has a one-hundred success rate so far."

“Told you it would work.” After struggling to cure the new Covid variant with standard potions, Basil had found the solution in his *Jekyll & Stein* alchemical manual. The *Van Helsing’s Blood Ministration* potion made for an excellent remedy against the Disease ailment and it was relatively easy to manufacture.

Yes, the fact that it required fermented blood scared people at first, but it beat being sick in bed all day. The plentiful hostile monsters inhabiting the countryside would provide a near-limitless supply, and they could always find blood donors at worst...

“Mr. Bohem, would you mind if we made a copy of your crafting manual?” the nurse asked as she led him back to the reception desk. Vasi was waiting for him there under a glamor. “Our medical department would benefit from its distribution.”

“Sure.” Basil wondered if they would end up creating flesh golems. *Jekyll & Stein* included a few recipes to build them, though he lacked the Alchemist levels needed to do so himself. “I’ve also discovered a few bomb and potion formulas, if you need those.”

“Of course, we always welcome new options.” The nurse opened her status screen. “We’ll share our own medicine crafting recipes in return. We’ve discovered a few through trial and error.”

[Nurse] Lila Marieme shared 10 Recipes. You can check them in your Crafting subsystem.

Basil immediately did that. The list included formulas for Cold Resistance Potions, an improved version of his Green Medicine, and a Fertility Enhancer. He would keep that one a secret from Buggy, so as not to give the centimagma any wrong ideas.

“The city council is currently developing a common crafting recipe database available to everyone,” said the nurse. “The army asked that you be granted access to it, Mr. Bohem. You won’t be able to use all the formulas within—not without leveling up in the right classes—but it will help in a pinch.”

“I would be thankful.” And a common crafting database for all Players was an incredible idea in general. “You know, a lifetime of watching apocalypse movies taught me civilization would collapse into a dog-eat-dog world. Instead, I’m in a city with universal healthcare.”

“You think too little of mankind, Mr. Bohem.” The nurse chuckled. “Civilizations have collapsed many times in the past, but we always picked up the pieces.”

Basil bade her goodbye with a lighter heart and then rejoined his girlfriend. “You look happy,” Vasi noted as she put her arm around his own. “I hope you didn’t play doctor and nurse behind my back.”

“Never,” Basil replied. “Though they offered me masks and a lab coat for cosplaying.”

“Oh?” Vasi grinned coyly. “Will you give me a private check-up, Doctor Bohem?”

If she wanted to play it that way, he would bite. “You will have to set an appointment if you want a thorough examination, Miss Yaga.”

“I see a window of opportunity.” Her hand brushed against his chest ever so slightly. “Bugsy is knocked out cold and your baby plant is sleeping in a greenhouse. My dear Shellgirl is busy trading with local merchants for new supplies...”

“And Plato?” Basil asked with a coy grin of his own. “Have you considered my cat’s well-being?”

“He is still sulking about sabertooth tigers.” His cat would never change. “Which means he won’t bother us. Will you take me on a date, Mr. Bohem? I would like to weigh my options a bit more before the operation.”

“But of course,” Basil replied softly. “Do you have a location in mind?”

“Yes.” Vasi grinned wickedly. “And since I’m the one who won the bodycount competition, you’ll pay for it.”

“Do your worst,” Basil replied defiantly. “I have sworn an oath, and I shall keep it.”

“So dramatic. Well then, let’s hit the bar.”

“The bar?” Basil’s enthusiasm immediately deflated. “I don’t drink alcohol.”

She laughed at him. “Then you’ll thank the gods for inventing non-alcoholic beverages. Come on, it’ll be fun.”

Vasi all but dragged Basil outside the clinic, much to his annoyance.

As far as French cities went, Limoges was rather picturesque. The old center in which the clinic was located took inspiration from XVIIIth century architecture, with narrow, snow-covered streets and small brick houses. If anything, the buildings were the most normal part of the city.

Nothing screamed little French town like a giant sloth using street lights to jump from one roof to another.

The smilodon and mammoth that Basil's party encountered outside the city were not an exception, but the norm. Megafauna-themed monsters could be seen in every corner of Limoges. Woolly rhinos pulled wagons full of supplies through the snow. Almost every adventurer party went shopping with a cave bear pet in tow—much to Vasi's joy—and nearly all pet cats had shapeshifted into sabertooth tigers; not that dogs were left behind, as most had embraced their wolf ancestry. As Patrick had warned the Bohens, the city's people had quickly tamed and befriended the local monsters.

Of course, the moose wasn't among them. The moose was too powerful, too wild, to be bound by mortal hands.

What surprised Basil the most, however, was the occasional presence of humanoids other than humans in the city. He and Vasi passed by several shops managed by orcs, and one city watch patrol included a skeletal knight in full plate armor. Yet none of them disturbed the locals. They had become part of the landscape.

It surprised Basil that Vasi had decided to hide her true nature behind an illusion spell after seeing this. If a walking corpse wouldn't disturb Limoges' citizens, he doubted her horns would.

Vasi led him to a tavern whose outside walls were painted like a castle's defenses and its door shaped like a drawbridge. The name 'Bar Gayard' was written above the door in an ancient medieval style. Basil could hear the sound of laughter coming from it. Clearly the city had voted against confinement.

"I missed these places," Vasi whispered. "We should dance later."

"I'm not good at it," Basil pointed out.

"I'll teach you." She pulled him past the doors and into the establishment. The tavern was surprisingly bigger than it looked from the outside, with dozens of wooden tables and enough

space to house a hundred people within its walls. The owner, Patrick, worked to make cocktails for adventurers from behind a counter alongside an orc assistant. A waitress dressed like a medieval tavern wench took orders from parties of mages, gunslingers, and swordsmen.

The place had been specifically decorated to mimic a fantasy pub. Coats of arms and swords covered the walls, alongside stuffed head trophies of goblins, ogres, wyverns, and other creatures. The fur of a giant lion slightly smaller than Rosemarine made for a comfy carpet.

On a second thought, Basil might learn to appreciate the place. An establishment with so many trophies had to include a hunter's lodge society of some kind, and he always liked those.

"Oi, Basil! Welcome!" Patrick waved a hand at the couple as they approached the counter, his eyes setting on Vasi. He seemed to recognize her, even with the glamor spell on. "Is that your witch girl?"

"Under disguise," Vasi replied.

"You don't have to wear one. In case you haven't noticed, we're a pretty open community." Patrick whistled at the waitress. "VIP seats for these two!"

"Thank you, but I would rather not take unnecessary risks," Vasi said as the bar's staff brought the couple two stools to sit on. "I've had bad experiences in the past."

Basil frowned. "What kind?"

"The witch hunter kind," his girlfriend replied evasively as she claimed her seat. "I don't want to talk about it now."

"Sure, I won't push it." Basil sat close to the counter next to his girlfriend and quickly changed the subject. "I'm surprised you have both so many monsters around and a functioning community, Patrick. How did it happen?"

"Limoges' dungeon produces megafauna monsters and the occasional undead," Patrick explained. "But thankfully most of them are weak to Fire and the local glass industry produced a lot of Pyromancers. We killed the Boss in the early days and quickly stabilized the city."

"Who is the new Boss now?" Basil asked.

“The mayor. And when he dies in his post, his replacement will take over the dungeon too. It’s a pretty good set-up.” The bartender put his hands on the counter. “What do I serve you?”

“Something sweet, please,” Vasi said.

“Milk,” Basil ordered with a stern expression. Like a *real* man.

So shocking was his command, so pure his resolve, that Patrick stared at him for a few seconds in silence for a few seconds.

“With ice,” Basil added.

“So…” the bartender cleared his throat, truly intimidated. Basil suddenly realized that Patrick was still wearing his wood mask indoors. Perhaps it helped to hide the *fear*. “A milkshake?”

“Milk,” Basil repeated, more firmly this time. “With *ice*.”

Patrick held his gaze for a moment, before folding before Basil’s greater willpower. The bartender went on to prepare the drinks without complaint.

“I do wonder why you haven’t made peace with goblins,” Vasi said. She had watched the whole scene with amusement. “I’ve seen orcs in the street, undead too… why not those little rascals too?”

“I’ve lost count at how many times we attempted to broker peace with goblin tribes.” Patrick snorted as he poured red syrup into a cup. “It never went well. There’s always an odd goblin out there that minds its own business, but 99.9 percent of them are hateful little pricks that either attack on sight or wait until your back is turned first. You can only get them to behave through intimidation, and even then they’re always looking out for a sign of weakness. I mean, they were literally programmed from birth to kill us. Most can’t help themselves.”

“We’ve met friendly goblins before,” Vasi pointed out. “An autopsy gremlin and a hobgoblin.”

“Who still ran away at the first sign of trouble rather than trying to help,” Basil replied cynically.

“Maybe evolved goblins become smart enough to realize there are other options to life than violence,” Patrick conceded. “But what are we supposed to do, wait for them to kill enough

people until they grow a brain? By now we tell the critters to fuck off when they get too close to town, and then we open fire when they don't take the hint. Few of them listen."

Basil wondered how much nature and nurture influenced monsters. The System had spawned half his team, and although they behaved now, Buggy had tried to kill him the first time they met and Rosemarie had a near-boundless appetite for violence. Would other members of their kind have listened and made peace with Basil?

He had witnessed a good example of the phenomenon with House Garden. Only a minority of his sentient vegetables had remained loyal to him, while the rest tried to kill their gardener right after their birth. The System definitively made monsters hostile by default; Limoges' megafauna was well-behaved because they had been spawned by a Player-ran dungeon and thus naturally attuned to humans.

Basil wondered how cohabitation with wild monsters would progress over time. Humans domesticated dogs by breeding well-behaved wolves over multiple generations. Maybe a similar process would happen with monsters. The most aggressive ones would get themselves killed until only the friendlier ones remained.

"As for orcs," Patrick continued. "They are weird and short-tempered sometimes, but they're true to their word. Must have been because they came from another world first. We adopted most of them after the Incursion."

Vasi's eyes widened in dread. "Did they come from Outremonde?"

"Uh, no?" Patrick put ice in the cocktail. "They called their world Darkthorn or something like that."

Vasi sighed in relief, much to Basil's amusement. "Are orcs trouble in your world?" he asked his girlfriend.

"Some of them are... special." Vasi shuddered, which made Basil quite curious. "Don't ask."

Patrick served Vasi a red, fruity cocktail. "Here, it's on the house. For your good deeds."

"And here I was looking for my boyfriend to pay for it all," Vasi teased Basil. "What's your Luck stat?"

“Astronomical,” Basil replied with a smile. “Since I’ve met you.”

Vasi laughed and blushed a little. “Good answer, handsome.”

“Aww, your cheeks are so red,” Basil teased her. Payback time. “It’s cute.”

“Don’t make me zap you.” Vasi sipped her cocktail, her eyes widening in joy at the taste. “I have to ask, what does Bartender do as a class? Besides making excellent drinks?”

“Thank you, lass,” Patrick replied. “It functions a lot like Alchemist, except I can only craft drinks and potions. My cocktail Perks let me boost their effects in return.”

“What kind of boost?” Basil asked. He wouldn’t take the class, but he was deeply curious.

“See for yourself.” Patrick poured ice, milk, and lemon juice into a glass cup and served it to Basil. It tasted strangely sweet in spite of the ingredients used.

***[Milk Mojito]** boosted your Strength and Vitality for two hours; your bones cannot be **[Crippled]** for that duration.*

***[All for One]** has shared the effect with your team!*

“A two hour buff for a glass of milk?” Basil smirked ear to ear. “Now I understand why taverns are adventurers’ favorite hangouts.”

“You should see our inn,” Patrick replied. “The owner, Marine, she’s a capped Innkeeper. Eight hours of sleep in her bed, and you recover from almost anything short of death. A cripple had his two legs grow back in the night. She’s never made so much money.”

“Why not use her to cure the plague then?” Vasi asked the simple question.

“We do. Unfortunately, her Perks only apply to her designated inn and its limited number of beds.”

A woman armored like a samurai and armed like a gunslinger called out to the bartender.

“Patrick! Three Demon Mojitos and a Goblin Tequila please!”

“On it, sweetheart.” The bartender went to work while keeping up the conversation. “You know, Basil, you can make pretty good wine with a wyvern’s blood and two babaus. Add a quarter of

the weight in sugar once you've harvested the liquid, a little acid and yeast, and bam, you're set. The wyvern blood makes it thick, and the babaus spice up the deal. I'm sure your party will love it."

"Duly noted," Basil said. "But I've got the meat cuisine covered. It's the vegetables I'm struggling with."

"You can hunt carrot titans and dempon kales north of the city. The former are usually level 19, but they're solitary so you should have no problem killing them. The demon kales are harder to catch. They're good at dodging and flying away."

"What about the road to Paris?" Vasi asked wisely. "Anything we should be wary of?"

"The road to Orleans is relatively safe. We're teaming up with Guilds from our neighboring cities to clean up the region." The bartender half-mindfully tossed four drinks to the waitress, who instantly teleported to the samurai lady's table. Neat. "But it's complete chaos once you reach the Île-de-France. The Seine River has dried up, high-level undead are everywhere, and local parties have turned into bandits. Or at least that's what I've heard."

Basil scowled. As expected, Paris would prove to be their greatest challenge yet. "Did you happen to meet a man named Kalki passing through?"

"Leblanc's staff already questioned us about him, and no, we haven't." Patrick shrugged off his shoulders. "If your guy can fly, then he probably went straight for Paris without stopping in-between."

That made sense. Already going to Limoges was a detour on Basil's part.

"Do you know anyone who could give us information on the city?" Vasi pushed on. "Perhaps a traveler could enlighten us on its situation."

"I thought this was supposed to be a date," Basil pointed out.

His girlfriend winked at him. "We have to make sure we'll survive to the next one, no?"

When she put it that way...

“Mmm...” Patrick glanced at his patrons, his gaze stopping on a distant table. He raised his hand. “Elsa, Roxie! Get your asses over there!”

“We aren’t done drinking, P!” Basil recognized the voice as the samurai lady from before. “We’ll pay later!”

“Get your asses over there!” The bartender shouted louder.

“All right, sheesh...”

A minute later, the samurai approached the counter with a fellow woman. Basil took the opportunity to study them closely. Both were around his age range and clearly caucasians in spite of their Japanese-inspired clothes. The samurai girl’s armor was strapped to the brim with firearms, from arquebuses to a sword with a barrel. Her comrade was a pretty brunette dressed like some kind of barbarian, with wolf pelts and an oni mask hanging around her neck. She carried a naginata weapon strapped to her back.

Elsa Dupontin

Level 20 Humanoid (Berserker 17/Bard 3)

Party: BuzzBand.

Roxanne “Roxie” Leclair

Level 19 Humanoid (Samurai 5/ Gunslinger 5/Gunblade 9)

Party: BuzzBand.

“What’s up, P?” asked the samurai, ‘Roxanne.’ Her eyes widened in shock when she noticed Basil and Vasi. “Damn, level 35?”

“Woah, no way!” Her teammate whistled at the couple. “Did you guys eat a dragon or something?”

“It was closer to a snail with delusions of grandeur, but yes,” Basil deadpanned.

“Nice,” said the naginata wielder, ‘Elsa.’ Neither she nor her teammate seemed surprised by the snail part. “Any suggestions for newbies like us?”

“Don’t keep your head in the sand, because it might cost you something that you love.” Basil’s scowl deepened as he remembered his poor, murdered house. “Kill them all. Fire and brimstone.”

“I figure that’s where the Berserker levels come from?” Elsa asked with a sly grin. “I rampaged a few times myself.”

“Once, she threw a child at us while Berserk,” her teammates said with a deadpan expression. “He was ten.”

“One time!” Elsa complained. “One time!”

“Did he survive?” Basil asked, horrified. The confession reminded too much of his own misadventure with the Berserk ailment for comfort. “The boy?”

“Oh, yes he did. The brat’s class had insane Vitality. I think he even liked the flight course.” The samurai shrugged. “He and his dad kinda split from our group afterwards though, and I couldn’t blame them.”

“The name’s Elsa. Nice to meet you.” The berserker shook hands with Basil and Vasi, clearly eager to change the subject. “The doubter next to me is Roxie.”

“Basil Bohem,” Basil introduced himself. “And the princess next to me is called Vasi.”

“I forgot my crown in the carriage,” Vasi mused.

“Anyway, what’s up?” Roxanne asked Patrick. “Why did you call us, P?”

“These two’s party will leave for Paris tomorrow,” the bartender explained. “Do you have any pointers to give them?”

“Don’t,” the samurai said immediately, a scowl forming on her face. “You don’t wanna go there. We were lucky to make it out alive.”

Her teammate nodded. “Paris is a monster-infested ruin, and not the fun kind. I don’t recommend approaching it even with your high level.”

“Are you natives from the city?” Vasi asked cautiously.

“No, but we were in its suburbs when the world went crazy,” Elsa said. “Have you ever heard of the Japan Expo?”

“The anime convention?” Basil asked with a grin. “I used to go there before Covid confinments canceled it.”

“Wow, really?” Elsa gave Basil a gentle fist bump, and her teammate quickly did the same. The brotherhood bond of anime fanaticism united them. “So glad to meet a fellow weeb.”

“A weeb?” Vasi frowned. “What is that, a secret society?”

“It’s something like a cult and guilty pleasure,” Basil joked.

“Don’t feel guilty,” Roxie said with a faint smile. “All the hours spent watching Isekai anime and playing video games paid off big time. It’s half the reason why we made it out of Paris alive. That, and the katanas.”

“If you really want to know, we were an indie rock band before the whole System shitshow,” Elsa explained with a smirk. That explained the party’s name. “We were so happy to play for Japan Expo after the post-Covid reopening and then bam! The whole world turns into a manga!”

“The Seinen kind,” Roxie added with a sigh. “We didn’t even get legendary weapons for our troubles.”

“Seinen?” Vasi raised an eyebrow at her boyfriend. “I have the feeling you are all speaking in code.”

“I’ll explain later,” Basil reassured her. “Wasn’t the Japan Expo taking place in the *Parc des Expos* this year?”

“Yeah, it was supposed to,” Roxie confirmed. “And that’s why we’re still alive. We were in Paris’ periphery.”

“Most cities have one dungeon because they don’t have too many monuments,” her teammate said with a scowl. “Paris opened the apocalypse show with *six* of them.”

“Six?!” Basil choked in astonishment. One dungeon was trouble enough, but six on the first day meant a relentless barrage of monsters unleashed on an unprepared population.

“Yeah, you can imagine the disaster.” Elsa nodded sadly. “The Louvre, the Eiffel Tower, Versailles, Notre Dame, the UNESCO building... they all transformed into dungeons at once and their power immediately rebranded the place.”

Basil’s eyes widened at the mention of the UNESCO HQ, but he let the two finish their tale.

“The whole city’s unrecognizable, mate,” said Roxie. “The dungeons changed the geography and turned it into a new and improved Sahara desert. With mummies and scorpions and sphinxes...”

“As Roxie said, we were in the periphery so we had it less bad than people in the city center... but only barely so.” Her teammate sighed sadly. “We and other parties had to fight our way out of the Parc des Expos. Few made it out alive.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Vasi whispered with sincerity. “We’ve lost people too.”

Roxie looked away. “We were lucky. Our whole band made it to Limoges in one piece.”

“Are you really sure you want to go to Paris?” Elsa shook her head. “It’s suicide.”

“We have to,” Basil insisted. “We must rescue a friend.”

The two adventurers exchanged a silent glance, before acquiescing to their request. “Your loss, but I can respect the sentiment,” Roxie said. “What do you wanna know?”

“Our target is the UNESCO HQ,” Basil explained. “But really, any info will help.”

Considering the danger ahead, they should gather as much information as possible.

“The UNESCO building?” Elsa smiled sadly. “You’re too late. It’s already gone.”

Basil’s jaw clenched. “What do you mean, it’s gone?”

“You know the Louvre? The museum with the *Joconde* painting?” Elsa asked. Basil nodded in confirmation, recognizing the *Joconde* as the French term for the *Mona Lisa*. “It turned into an actual Egyptian pyramid dungeon. When the Incursion happened, it grew in power and... swallowed the UNESCO building? Not sure how to put it into words.”

“The dungeons fused,” her teammate cut in. “The Louvre Pyramid absorbed the UNESCO building into itself and started spawning more powerful monsters afterward. That’s probably why Pluto did it.”

“Pluto?” Vasi asked.

“The Boss of the Louvre Pyramid. He controls most of Paris except for the Eiffel Tower dungeon, since some psycho murderhobo cult managed to beat him to the prize.” Roxie scratched her cheek. “The Apocalypse Punks or something?”

“The Apocalypse Force, Roxie,” Elsa corrected. “Apocalypse *Force*.”

This is just getting better and better, Basil thought darkly. Pluto was the Roman name of the Greek god Hades, and considering that person targeted the UNESCO HQ, he was almost certainly Benjamin Leroy’s godlike avatar. *At least our enemies are fighting each other as much as they target us.*

His distaste must have shown on his face, for Elsa immediately picked up on his animosity.

“You’ve met them?”

“We had that displeasure,” Vasi confirmed. “They are bad news.”

“No kidding.” Roxie snickered. “They kill everyone who isn’t part of their group. At least Pluto spares the kids he abducts.”

Basil clenched his empty glass so tightly that it shattered in his hands. Shards bounced off his hardy skin and showered the counter, much to his annoyance. “Sorry, Patrick.”

“It’s okay, I’m used to it.” Patrick grabbed the shards and they magically reformed into a complete glass. “Bartender Perk.”

“Neat,” Basil commented before turning his attention back to the Parisian party. “He’s abducting kids?”

“Yeah.” Elsa put her hand in her hair, her gaze distant. “His monsters kill all the humans they encounter, except for children under ten years of age. They capture and bring them to the Louvre Pyramid instead.”

“For what purpose?” Vasi asked with a dark look. “Does he intend to sacrifice them?”

“I don’t know,” Elsa said sorrowfully. “The few adventurers who managed to infiltrate the Pyramid and came back to tell the tale said the children were well-treated, but they couldn’t rescue anyone.”

Basil clenched his jaw as he remembered the information in Benjamin Leroy’s file. His daughter had died a little over seven years ago in a terrorist attack, so taking on the guise of a death god like Hades made sense if he intended to revive her. And if Hypathia was to be believed, then he administered a soul-harvesting device of some kind...

“Bartender?” Basil turned to Patrick. “Do you know if Hindus believe in an afterlife?”

“What does it have to do with abducted children?” Roxie asked with a frown.

“Everything,” Basil replied dryly.

“I think the Hindu mostly believe in reincarnation,” Patrick replied absentmindedly as he poured a drink, confirming Basil’s suspicions. “Like, you die and you’re reborn as somebody else.”

A man with power over souls and who had lost his daughter seven years ago was kidnapping any child within that age range.

What were the odds?

Chapter 24: Man vs Dance

“So if I understand correctly...” Basil put his finger on the Louvre’s location. “The UNESCO dungeon is located under the pyramid? Like a basement?”

“More like a necropolis,” Elsa explained. A map of Paris covered the bar’s counter, and the Japan Expo survivors were only too happy to scribble useful notes. “An Outlaw pal of ours, Abdel, broke into it. He reported that the place is at least seven floors deep. As for the pyramid upstairs, it’s as large as an Egyptian one and surrounded by a large army of monsters.”

“How did your friend manage to infiltrate it then?” Vasi asked.

“Through Paris’ Catacombs.” Elsa pointed at a site in the south of Paris. “The old underground tunnels lead to the buried UNESCO building... if you can get past the hordes of undead inside and reach the right quarry, that is. You can’t take two steps without fighting a skeleton.”

It was a good thing that Basil had taken a level in Deathknight of the Sepulchre then. He would send ghosts back to their graves, whether they liked it or not. “Do you know how we could contact this Abdel?” he questioned the Parisians. “Any help would be welcome.”

“Sorry,” Elsa apologized with a sheepish smile. “We lost contact with him after we left Paris. I don’t even know if he’s still in the city.”

“Didn’t Johnny keep a map of the catacombs?” her teammate asked with a frown.

“Oh right, I forgot about Johnny.” Elsa nodded. “Yeah, one of our teammates is into ghost rituals and occultism. I think he kept a map of the catacombs, but it won’t be up to date.”

“Is he a Witch?” Vasi asked curiously. “Our coven is looking to recruit.”

“He’s an Occultist,” Elsa replied. “Does that count?”

Vasi sighed in disappointment. “No.”

“We’ll find someone,” Basil reassured his girlfriend. “And we’ll buy your map.”

“Eh, I think Johnny will give it for free,” Roxie replied with a shrug. “It’s not like he’ll have much use for it anyway. We ain’t returning to Paris anytime soon.”

Basil hesitated to mention Leblanc’s plans to take back Paris. The general had asked that the party try to conquer a dungeon so he could teleport troops there. Attacking the Louvre Pyramid made the most sense so far. Taking it over would allow them to kill two birds with one stone, as it would neutralize a member of Dismaker Labs’ board and let them establish a permanent foothold in the city.

But first, they needed to locate Kalki. If the musician intended to visit the UNESCO building, then they should find him in the Louvre’s vicinity.

Elsa ran a circle around the Eiffel Tower and Paris’ western edge. “This was the Apocalypse Force’s turf before we left Paris. The Eiffel Tower dungeon, the Trocadero, and Boulogne. No idea if they’ve managed to keep the area since.”

“What about Versailles and Notre Dame?” Basil asked. “You said there were six dungeons in Paris.”

“When the apocalypse started, yes, but the numbers shrank since. Notre Dame was under Pluto’s control when we left, while Versailles and the Arc de Triomphe were contested by both factions.”

“Pluto’s got the most dungeons,” Roxie said. “That makes him the guv’nor by default.”

Basil observed the map closely. The various dungeons formed a bulwark around the Louvre. The Eiffel Tower and Triomphe covered the west and north sides, while Notre Dame dominated the city’s eastern part. There was no way to approach the pyramid without encountering resistance somewhere.

The catacombs looked like the best option for now. It would let the party bypass the lesser dungeons and strike from an unexpected direction.

“What about the local monsters?” Basil fished for information. Vasi smiled at him, but said nothing. “What are the levels, the types? Any elemental weaknesses you’ve noticed?”

“Lots of undead, mate,” Roxie replied. “Bugs, sphinxes, and rock things too... Most are weak to water and light. As for levels, their levels upgraded beyond level 20 after the Incursion. Paris is a tough place.”

“Oh, I forgot to mention it.” Elsa cleared her throat. “Pluto has a Perk that affects the entire city.”

“God-Field?” Basil guessed.

“You know of it?”

“We’ve encountered foes with variants of this power, but the effects are unique to each individual.” Basil started to scribble notes on the map as Vasi finished her second drink. “What are the elements it affects?”

“It empowers Soul, Corrosion, Fire, Earth, Darkness, Mythic and instant death effects, if I remember correctly.” Elsa scratched her cheek. “It weakens Wood, Water, Light, and most importantly, healing effects. You should stock up on potions.”

“Oh, and the field raises everyone who dies within its range as a zombie under Pluto’s control,” Roxie added with a snort. “You better burn monsters’ corpses after you’re done with them.”

“Or eat them?” Basil suggested.

The two Parisians exchanged a glance. “I, uh...” Elsa chuckled. “I suppose that works too.”

Basil vowed not to let a single steak escape. “Thanks for your help,” he said as he folded the map. “We’ll keep in touch.”

“I’ll ask again.” Elsa frowned at the couple. “Are you really sure you want to go to Paris? Anyone still inside is either dead, fled, or part of a gang now. If your friend went to the city... I doubt he made it out alive.”

“I’m pretty sure he did,” Basil replied. The world hadn’t been crushed by Shiva yet, after all. “We can use a tool to locate him.”

Roxie shrugged. “Your funeral.”

“But be sure to return to Limoges if you make it out alive, guys,” her teammate said with a warm smile. “We could start a Berserker Anonymous club.”

“Yes, sure.” The class’ mention made Basil wince. “About that... Why did you level up so much in Berserker? I would understand if you were a solo act, but aren’t you putting your team in danger?”

“Yeah, it took us a while to learn to stick to the rear,” Roxie said with a deadpan look.

“Ah, it’s not that bad...” Elsa chuckled in embarrassment. “We mostly struggled with our formation in the early days, but I figured that higher level Perks would mitigate the downsides of the Berserk ailment.”

Basil’s eyes widened in curiosity. “Did it?”

“Yep!” Elsa grinned ear to ear. “The Berserker level 13 Perk, Anger Management, grants immunity to mental ailments like Charm or Madness... and most importantly, it allows me to tell friends from foes.”

“She still does stupid shit while Berserk.” Roxie chuckled. “But I don’t know if it’s the class or just her in general.”

“I’m not dumb, I’m simple,” Elsa protested. “I attack the closest enemy in sight until it’s dead, that’s all. Sometimes that’s not the best option, but how do you expect me to think rationally when everybody looks like a spider Nazi?”

“What’s a Nazi?” Vasi asked in confusion.

“A vicious idiot,” Basil replied. And here he thought his goblin obsession was unhealthy, but spider Nazis? This girl had *issues*.

“Yeah, I think I played too much *Wolfenstein*...” Elsa fidgeted in place. “Anyway, how about we share build information? I was considering taking levels in Tamer with all the cave bears running around the city.”

“I still say an auroch would be a better mascot for the band,” her teammate replied. “Bears don’t have horns.”

“But bears are cute and fluffy,” Vasi argued. She never missed an opportunity to defend her favorite animal. “And they can *dance*.”

“I know, right?” Elsa chuckled. “Roxie’s just salty that we outvoted her.”

“Like all geniuses, hindsight will prove me right,” her teammate deadpanned. “Bear pop is overrated, auroch funk is eternal.”

Basil wondered if he should transform into a werebear to support his girlfriend’s argument, before deciding against it. Shapechanging in a bar full of monster hunters might not be the best idea.

The two groups exchanged class information and split up afterwards. The Parisians returned to their table to drink in peace, whereas Vasi led her boyfriend to the bar’s dance floor. Bards played a catchy medieval ballad on loudspeakers. After some reluctance, Basil put his hands on his girlfriend’s back as she leaned against his chest; both settled in a slow, steady dance.

“See, you’re not that bad,” Vasi teased him. “I dare say, we might make a passable dancer out of you in a few years’ time.”

“I’m only going along with this because you asked,” Basil grumbled. Even then, he mostly let his girlfriend take the lead. He had never felt comfortable with dancing in a public space, and the ground floor was crowded with other couples. “Don’t make it a habit.”

“I’ll let you pick the activity next time.” Vasi’s arms moved around his neck. “I can tell your heart isn’t into it. You’re still thinking about Paris, aren’t you?”

“Sorry,” Basil apologized. He wanted to be present in the moment for his girlfriend’s sake, but the discussion with the Parisian party had raised too many questions. “I’m just trying to figure out what equipment we’ll need. Flashlights for catacombs, anti-undead weapons, and I should probably learn a water-elemental rune to empower everyone.”

Vasi smiled at him. “What happened to the real Basil?”

He raised an eyebrow in confusion. “The real me?”

“First you make plans for battle, and now you prepare a dungeon diving operation days ahead with great forethought.” Vasi winked at him. “Where’s the wild bull running into battle after making a blood oath to his ancestors?”

“He outlived Kuikui and Orcine, learning his lesson: that luck is no substitute for preparation.” A lesson Basil should have taken to heart earlier after the battle with Steamslime, for his team’s sake. “That kind of disaster won’t happen again on my watch.”

“Never say never, handsome. Nobody can tell what tomorrow will be made of.” The song’s tempo slowed down and so did their dance. “I suppose you’re reconsidering taking levels in Berserker?”

“No,” Basil replied softly. “In fact, I’ll probably abandon the class entirely.”

“Oh?” She raised an eyebrow. “Why’s that?”

“Because I don’t want to rely on anger to win my battles,” Basil admitted. “Even if I obtain a Perk to manage the side-effects, it won’t solve my issues. It’ll help me suppress them, that’s all. I would rather move on. To change.”

“You already have, Basil,” Vasi replied softly. “You’re far more grounded since the first time we’ve met. More self-reflective, more considerate. Less bitter too.”

“Less bitter?” Basil scoffed. “We’re bums who have been eating shit all day for weeks.”

“Yes, but still, I can tell that you’re happier than before in some ways. A few months ago you didn’t even want to leave your house to meet other people, but now you’re in a bar with a beautiful girlfriend and becoming buddy-buddy with strangers. And more to the point…” She looked into his eyes. “You’re enjoying a social activity.”

Well… Basil wouldn’t go that far, but she had a point. He had been extremely wary about other people even before the apocalypse began due to the mess with his family, work life, and René’s inheritance. His social circle didn’t extend farther than Plato, but now he was on cordial terms with a French major, an interdimensional merchant, and even a god in human form.

Basil wasn’t certain if it was for the better, but he was definitely becoming more sociable.

“Maybe it’s because of you,” he teased his girlfriend. “You’re rubbing off on me.”

“Oh, I would love to gloat about that success,” Vasi replied with a laugh. “But it runs deeper. You put more thoughts into your actions rather than reacting.”

“I admit that before the apocalypse, I was feeling...” Lost? Confused? Basil struggled to find the right word before settling on one. “Aimless. After I failed to find my place in the world, I had no idea what to do with my life besides living in my little corner of the earth.”

“And do you know what you want to do, now?”

“Sort of.” Basil’s ambitions didn’t extend farther than stabilizing the world enough so he and his friends could live in it peacefully; he had no idea what he would do with his life afterward. “I feel I’m on the right path.”

“I understand. Do you want to know what I think?” Vasi didn’t wait for him to answer. “Deep down, you like to help other people.”

Basil chuckled. “I won’t turn down someone in need of help, but to say I like it...”

“Basil, Basil, don’t play coy with me.” Vasi shook her head in disbelief. “I saw your expression when you left the clinic. You were *happy* to heal the sick.”

“Oh, that’s nothing,” he brushed her off. “It was just to secure supplies.”

Vasi rolled her eyes. “Basil...”

“All right, yes, I liked it,” Basil admitted. “I like feeding healing juices to senior citizens. Happy now?”

He felt a few dancers looking at him strangely and ignored them in turn.

“Poor choice of words,” Vasi commented with a grin. “But I’m glad you’re starting to become more honest with yourself.”

“How about you then?” He returned her smile. “What’s up with the glamor? Shouldn’t you be honest with me about it?”

“Ah, you’ve cornered me.” Vasi sighed. “I suppose I owe you an explanation. I’ve run afoul of witch hunters in my world the few times I visited human villages.”

“Because you practiced magic?” It surprised Basil. From what he had heard, Vasi’s homeworld was full of magic and wonders. Witch hunters should feel out of place in that kind of environment.

“No, because I’m a hag on my mother’s side.” Vasi let out a sigh. “Long story short, my maternal family hasn’t exactly been getting along with mortals.”

“What did they do?”

“You know, the usual: baby abduction, slavery, maiden sacrifices... Many of us have tried to turn over a new leaf, but there’s a lot of history to make up for. And my father is a demon. It doesn’t inspire much confidence.”

“So even if you haven’t *done* anything, you were treated as suspicious for what you *are*.” Basil quickly put two and two together. “Is that why you asked Patrick about why this city hasn’t made peace with goblins? Because you saw a little bit of yourself in them?”

“Yes. Can’t say I didn’t expect his answer.” Vasi shrugged. “But I’ve learned to live with it. A glamor is cheap and will spare us both a witch hunt.”

“That’s not entirely the same, but I see where this comes from. I’ve faced prejudice too in the past.” A lot of western Europeans seemed to have a radar for easterners like Basil, and never missed an opportunity to explain to him how Bulgarians were either crooks or thieves. He had gotten into quite a few brawls to defend his country’s honor. “But you don’t have to fear anything.”

“Because your people tolerate hags?” Vasi mused.

“Because I’m with you,” Basil replied kindly. “Nobody will lay a finger on you so long as I’m around.”

Vasi blushed a little. “Oh, sweet talker you. You may not have the paladin class, but you do sound halfway like one.”

“Isn’t that a bad thing?” Basil scowled. “I thought you weren’t a fan of them?”

“I’m not. Half the Paladins I’ve met say sweet words to get laid, not because they mean them. The other half simply draw their swords and ask questions later.” Vasi thought for a second as

the song slowed down. They had almost reached the end of this dance. “Paladin may not be the best term, true... you sound *knightly*. You speak little, but only because you mean every word you say and you back them up with actions. That’s what I find endearing.”

“I do have a knight class, gotta live up to the hype,” Basil replied with the same tone. “I don’t think I’m the only one who has changed either.”

“Oh?” Vasi raised an eyebrow, her gaze playful. “Do tell.”

“You’re invested in this quest too,” Basil pointed out. “I think you like it too. The adventure, the travels... *saving people*.”

“I do admit it has its moments.” The song came to an end, and bards started arguing over the next tune. “Is it over already?”

“Another dance?” Basil suggested. He was actually starting to enjoy it, though he would never say so out loud.

“No, I’m satisfied,” Vasi replied as she moved her face close to his own. “I had something else in mind.”

She leaned in and kissed him on the lips.

Basil pulled her closer until nothing separated them. Vasi’s skin felt good against his, and her hands stroked his hair as if she owned it. A jolt of electricity ran through his body as their lips met, alongside a shiver of pleasure. It had been so long since he had kissed a girl on the lips, but he had never forgotten the taste, the warmth, the comfort... for a few seconds, he forgot the crowd around them. Paris, Kalki, the Apocalypse Force, and Metal Olympus, none of them mattered.

The world stopped at her.

Like all good things, the kiss was over way, way too soon. Basic mortal needs—like breathing—forced Vasi to pull back. She was blushing almost as much as he did. Basil had watched her kiss another knight in Château Muloup to charm him... but this time, it meant something to her.

“Nice,” Basil whispered with a pleased smile. “But Christmas is next month. It’s a bit early for surprises.”

"I'm terrible at counting time, Basil," she joked back with a coy grin. "How about we continue this in a more private place? Like the toilets? Nobody ever thinks of the toilets."

"Our car isn't that far," Basil teased her back, thinking of the Steamobile. "It would be warmer, and we have a TV..."

"I don't think we'll need—" Vasi stopped herself, frowned, and checked her dress.

"What's the matter?" Basil asked in confusion.

"An emergency." Vasi sighed as she brought a small crystal skull from her pocket. The device trembled like a mobile phone's alarm.

Walter was calling at the worst time.

"Basil, Vasi, how good to see you again." Walter nodded at the couple as they teleported into his shop. Neria Elissalde, who was already present, welcomed them with a smile. "I apologize for calling on such short notice."

"You didn't catch them at the right time, chief." Hagen straightened up at his employer's side. The neurotower loomed behind the shop's counter, tall and terrible. "I can tell."

"It's all right," Vasi whispered without truly meaning it. She was no happier than Basil at having their date interrupted early, but the situation required their full attention. "I suppose you finished analyzing the server?"

"I did and gathered you here to discuss my findings." Walter smiled at Basil, a gesture that sent a shiver down his spine. Somehow, Walter Tye managed to make even the most innocent gesture look menacing. "But first of all, let me congratulate you on taking a level in Deathknight. Excellent choice."

"I don't know this Sepulchre variant," Hagen noted. "What does it do?"

"It made my halberd super effective against undead," Basil replied bluntly.

A short silence followed his declaration. Walter's smile faded away in disappointment. He didn't look amused, *at all*. Hagen's reaction to the news was more lively. He exploded in laughter and swiftly collapsed to his knees.

"Disappointing," was all Walter said. "Truly disappointing."

"I'm sorry, chief, I'm..." Hagen held his armored chest. "Ahaha!"

"How can he laugh without lungs?" Neria asked with a confused frown.

"Ignore him," Walter replied dryly.

Well, his happiness didn't last long, Basil thought. Then again, he's a necromancer. Must be sad to see a client turn in the opposite direction.

"Good to see you again, Neria," Basil greeted the Major. "Did you receive my latest report?"

"I did." Major Elissalde smiled ear to ear. "The General was extremely happy when I forwarded it to him. That's one less member of Metal Olympus to deal with, and if another is indeed in Paris, we might eliminate most of their leadership in quick succession."

"We should reach Paris in a few days," Basil warned. "I've got a few requests for elemental weapons, if you can satisfy them."

"I'll see what I can do," Neria promised before turning to face Walter. By now, Hagen had regained his composure and was back on his feet. "In fact, perhaps we should discuss the essences you gathered with Mr. Tye over here? Did you inform him?"

"I am aware of your recent victories," Walter replied. He must have read their minds already.

"The details you've gathered should complete my findings."

Basil crossed his arms. "Did you figure out how the server works?"

"I have studied your device, yes." Walter scowled darkly. "Unfortunately, this confirmed my hypothesis. Your world's System functions similarly to mine, which is not a good thing."

The necromancer marked a short pause, as if trying to find the right way to sugarcoat a difficult truth.

“What do you know,” he asked, “of the soul?”

More than I want, Basil thought. And less than I should.

Chapter 25: Man vs Soul

It was one thing to imagine the darkest possible scenario, and another to have it confirmed beyond doubts.

“A... prison for souls?” Neria looked up at the neurotower, her face now pale white. “This server is... a prison for souls?”

“Yes,” Walter confirmed with clinical detachment. He didn’t sound horrified, or even surprised; merely disappointed. If anything, Basil found his utter lack of feelings creepier than all of Apollyon’s threats. “This device’s primary purpose is to act as a spiritual magnet, capturing souls upon death before they can reach their proper resting place and then distributing them inside a wider network. All put together, these steel towers function as a spiritual engine of global proportions.”

Walter’s elaborate terms couldn’t disguise the simple truth underneath.

“They use dead people as magical fuel,” Basil spat in disgust. “This is where the experience points come from, isn’t it?”

“And far more.” Walter raised his hand and summoned an illusion in the palm of his hand. The picture of a hydraulic fountain mechanism appeared in a puff of smoke. “Imagine a machine that is hermetically closed from the outside world. It is made of three parts: a basin, a water reservoir, and a container full of air. All three of them are connected by pipes, but nothing gets in and nothing gets out. No water ever is spilled. Do you follow me so far?”

“You’re describing Heron’s Fountain, aren’t you?” Basil guessed. He had learned about it in his chemistry class. “One of the first hydraulic machine.”

“You are well-learned, Basil.” Walter nodded slowly. “In this system, the water from the basin descends into the air supply. The resulting pressure is transmitted by the air to pipes into the water reservoir, which then pushes the liquid up into the basin. The cycle then repeats itself.”

“You are describing a perpetual-motion machine,” Vasi noted.

“No such thing exists,” Basil pointed out. “Even in a hermetic container, some energy is always lost through friction.”

“You are both correct in a way,” Walter said with a calm tone. Basil could tell he enjoyed playing the role of the teacher. “What I described is an ideal state of perpetual motion, but entropy causes a slight loss of power with each cycle. No matter how optimized a system is, the water will eventually stop moving.”

“System?” Major Elissalde squinted. She had listened to the explanation in silence so far, but she had quickly deduced where the demonstration would lead them. “I assume you chose the word intentionally, Mr. Tye?”

“Indeed,” Walter confirmed. “In very simple terms, my world’s System and yours are a machine, magic is the energy generated to produce motion—”

“And the water is made of harvested children’s souls,” Hagen cut in. “The ultimate solution to the child support conundrum.”

“Please, my friend, do not interrupt me.” Walter cleared his throat. “Now, souls are like spiritual batteries. They build up power in the form of thoughts, memories, beliefs, emotions... Anything capable of sentience, of self-awareness, has a soul. Humans, animals, dragons... even some plants and machines. As a rule, anything that can gain levels and benefit from a System has a soul.”

This checked with what Hypathia had told them, but Basil was starting to see new implications. Trees on the road didn’t have levels, but even the smallest animal like Plato had shown the ability to gain experience. Every last one of them had a soul and feelings, even before the Trimurti System’s arrival.

To his own sorrow, Basil was starting to wonder if vegetarians might have had a point...

“What about the afterlife?” he asked. If souls and angels existed, then certainly Heaven and Hell did. “Is there an afterlife?”

Walter’s answer didn’t satisfy him. “I suppose it depends.”

“On what?” Neria asked dryly. The Major was clearly growing more and more uncomfortable with the discussion.

“On the world,” Walter replied with a shrug. “Upon death, my world’s System transfers a soul to an afterlife where their accumulated power is slowly drained from them over a long period of time. Thoughts, memories, everything that made the person an individual are stripped clean like flesh from bones. The harvested power fuels the System, and the freshly blank soul is then reincarnated in a new body to repeat the cycle anew. Another world’s System might skip the afterlife step and move straight to the reincarnation phase, whereas others might follow a different set of rules. There is no universal answer.”

“Makes sense,” Vasi said. “My world of Outremonde has multiple afterlives, depending on which god a dead soul worshiped in life.”

A flash of distaste appeared on Walter’s face, but the necromancer quickly regained his composure. His disdain for deities showed itself once again.

“Is that why demons are bargaining for human souls?” Basil asked, trying to see how this new information fit into his belief system. It couldn’t be *all* wrong.

“Yes,” Walter confirmed with a nod. “Souls accumulate spiritual power, so many beings try to skim a few for their own personal gain. But their individual activities pale in front of a System’s harvest of death.”

“All right.” Major Elissalde opened her mouth, and then closed it before she could formulate her sentence. “All right...”

“Neria?” Basil asked in concern. “Are you okay?”

“This is... this is a lot to take in.” Neria gathered her breath, exhaled, and then regained her composure. “So... the dungeons, the landscape changing, the monsters... it’s all made possible through death.”

“Yes,” Walter said bluntly.

Basil had wondered how crafting processes could violate the laws of conservation of mass. He had his answer now. They didn't: they simply drew energy and mass from magic produced by the neurotowers.

Even the mere act of crafting a potion required a dead man's suffering.

“Then why all the destruction?” Neria asked with a scowl. “Sixty million people die each year, more than a hundred thousand each day. Shouldn't that be enough?”

“A System often requires a periodic influx of power to keep functioning in the short-term, sometimes more than it can gain through age's toil.” Walter's illusory mechanism showed water slowing down inside the reservoir due to a lack of pressure. A sudden influx of air and water from the outside restarting the mechanism. “My world's Fate System regulated itself in a very simple way; by incentivizing war.”

Basil clenched his jaw in frustration. “What better way to encourage murder than by rewarding it with more power, eh?”

“But what about quests?” Vasi asked with a frown. “You can gain experience from them without killing anyone.”

“Not all deaths result from murder,” Walter pointed out. “People die all the time from old age, accidents, diseases... their accumulated power is released without a killer to claim experience, so the System harvests most of it and distributes a portion through quests. This creates a form of balance and prevents the most murderous of mortals from wiping out everyone else. Eventually, they will find someone who can fight back.”

Which allowed populations to recover and maintain the cycle of reincarnation.

“People can gain levels in my world without killing anyone,” Vasi said. “I've heard that an immortal farmer reached level sixty simply by toiling every day for centuries. This invalidates your theory.”

“As I've said before, all Systems are different.” Walter closed his hand and the illusion vanished. “It's possible your universe has a large enough population and enough excess energy that it

doesn't *need* constant conflict to function like mine does. Perhaps it generates natural disasters instead, or takes a more long-term approach to cultivating souls. I cannot tell without further research."

Basil meditated on this new information. It completed what he had learned before and somewhat confirmed his worst assumptions... but there was one big unanswered question Walter hadn't addressed yet.

"Where do they come from?" Basil asked. "The souls?"

Walter smiled in response. "Very good, my friend. You're on the right track."

Somehow his praise felt deadlier than his scorn.

"Oh, I see." Vasi nodded to herself. She had figured it out too. "This entire mechanism relies on souls being recycled so they can keep accumulating power, but the original ones had to come from *somewhere*."

"This is the great question to which I do not have an answer yet," Walter admitted. "No one knows where souls come from. I've been investigating this mystery for many years, but the source still eludes me."

"It's why we investigated your world in the first place," Hagen said.

Walter nodded in confirmation. "You see... I have been aware of your Earth for many, many years. I couldn't access it directly until the Trimurti System, but it's not the first time visitors from your realm visited mine."

Vasi raised an eyebrow in confusion. "I thought you couldn't travel to another world without a portal?"

"Not *physically*," Walter countered. "I've told you that my System caused phenomena similar to your Incursions. Nine worlds were connected by the same System and periodically forced to merge to generate conflicts. Yet the number of souls in each one remained the same. Since entropy caused some energy loss anyway, the cosmic machinery of my universe found a way to patch things up; by importing souls from another place."

Basil groaned and put a palm on his face. "Don't tell me—"

"I'm afraid so," Walter said with a sigh. "One day, mages found a special summoning spell allowing humans from a distant realm to reincarnate in ours as would-be heroes."

Not only did Basil's world now follow video game rules, but it also took inspiration from Isekai manga. Great, just great.

"And they were unbearably full of themselves too," Hagen mused at his master's side. "They died like flies, mostly because we killed them on sight."

"You are harsh, Hagen," Walter replied with a sinister chuckle. "It was done in self-defense, and only a handful of them."

"A handful?" The dullahan laughed. "We have an attic filled with their weapons."

"They were all idiots," Walter told his disturbed customers. "Sometimes, I wish I had researched a spell to expel them back to your Earth."

"Can we move on, please?" Basil asked with a shudder, and Major Elissalde fidgeted in place.

"Gladly," Walter said with a cold smile. "Summoning individuals from your Earth provided infrequent boosts of power to counter entropy. My world's Fate System was exceptionally stable and resource efficient, so it never needed to import more than a dozen new souls each century. The wheel of reincarnation was meant to turn forever, with only a few minor adjustments each time it stumbled on an issue."

"But that's not the case with Earth," Neria whispered, her expression grim. "Hundreds of invaders entered the Dax portal alone."

"The Systems' goals differ, and thus the methods used too," Vasi guessed.

"My world's Fate System was meant to bring long-lasting stability at all costs," Walter said with a hint of scorn. "Your Trimurti System isn't meant to save anyone nor last long. It is not a perpetual motion machine, but a god's cradle."

A cradle. The word brought Basil back to the ISS video, and the giant fingers holding the world in the palm of a colossal hand... "Is that why the Earth and the moon were sealed shut?" he asked. "To better capture the souls within?"

“Yes,” Walter confirmed. “If your planet is hermetically closed from the rest of the universe, then the Trimurti System has a much easier time managing the magical energy within it. The smaller the space, the easier it is to recycle the dead spirits trapped inside.”

Basil’s blood froze in his veins. Neria had been mistaken. The neurotowers weren’t a prison for souls; the *entire world* had become one.

Basil glanced at the server, a chill running down his spine. If he were to die now, no heavenly reward nor infernal torment would await him. His spirit would be trapped inside this vile machine, drained of thoughts and individuality, and then released back into an unsuspecting vessel.

Wait a second...

Walter said *anything* with levels had a soul.

“What about monsters?” Basil asked, a dark thought forming into his mind. “The dungeons materialized them from nothing, and they can gain levels. Where did their souls come from?”

Walter locked eyes with him.

“Your friend said it best, Basil,” he said with disturbing serenity. “A hundred thousand a day.”

Basil’s fists tightened. He glanced at his allies and watched their expressions turn into scowls as they came to the same, terrible conclusion.

“Sixty million humans a year.” Neria shook her head as the magnitude of Dismaker Labs’ crime dawned upon her. “Two hundred million land animals were slaughtered each day before the apocalypse. Eighty billion a year. Now add all the wildlife, the fish, the birds and the bugs... a single day would have been enough.”

If the neurotowers initiated a day before the System’s activation, then it had accumulated more than enough souls and magic to flood the world with armies. Millions more died within the first hours, creating a self-sustaining cycle of destruction.

Monsters were reincarnated humans and animals.

This was why they were driven to kill on sight on instinct. The more they slew, the greater their numbers grew. Bugsy, Shellgirl, and Rosemarine didn't remember anything before their birth, but inside them dwelled the resting place of an older person.

"These... these fiends..." Basil trembled with rage. "How dare..."

"Basil—" Vasi started, but he cut her off before she could finish.

"It wasn't enough for Dismaker Labs to kill so many people." Basil's fists clenched so hard that his nails sank in his skin. "They had to transform their victims into new tormentors next."

Vasi put a hand on his shoulder in comfort, but wisely didn't say a word. She knew nothing she would say would make it better.

"Not even these measures suffice, I'm afraid," Walter said. His voice had taken on a softer tone, though Basil couldn't tell if he was sincere. "Materializing a newborn monster requires magical energy proportional to its level, and all individuals need an exponential amount of experience to keep getting stronger. Your Trimurti System cannot function without throwing an ever-increasing amount of sacrifices into the grinder."

"The Incursions," Neria whispered. "Earth's population isn't enough."

"It's a feedback loop," Vasi guessed. "The Trimurti System uses energy to create portals that will attract outsiders, whose death will generate more power to create more portals."

"Exactly," Walter confirmed with a nod. "Stronger warriors and terrible beasts with high levels and powerful souls are invited to participate in the competition. The magic used in opening pathways to their world is quickly covered by the return on investment, but it's never enough. The escalation will only end when an Overgod is selected."

"But what then?" Basil asked with a scowl. "You said it yourself, the Trimurti System is designed to make the first person to reach level 100 a deity. What will happen once it fulfills its goal?"

Walter marked a short pause before answering. That wasn't a good sign.

"I do not know," the necromancer admitted. "At best, the Trimurti System will shut down and your Earth will be returned to its proper place. At worst... at worst, your world will have outlived its usefulness and crumble to dust."

Somehow, Basil couldn't bring himself to expect the best from Dismaker Labs. And neither did anyone else in the room.

"How do we destroy them all?" Major Elissalde pointed at the neurotower. "This should return Earth to its former state, shouldn't it?"

To Basil's surprise, Walter shook his head. "I am not certain that would be a good thing for your planet at this point."

"Why is that?" Neria asked with a frown. "If the System requires souls to function and the servers harvest them, then destroying them should bring down the entire infrastructure."

"Yes, but that's the problem," Walter replied. "The Trimurti System has become an integral rule of your reality, like gravity or magnetism. There is no guarantee your planet will be returned to its proper place if it is disabled by force. In fact, it's possible the Trimurti System is the only force keeping your unstable pocket universe from collapsing."

Or from being crushed inside Shiva's palm.

"Destroying a few dungeons would delay the Incursion process without meaningfully disrupting the entire network," Walter explained. "But destroying too many neurotowers might cause a general failure with unknown consequences."

"So what?" Major Elissalde frowned and crossed her arms. "You suggest that we just *accept* it?"

"There's another solution," Vasi pointed out. "We can track down those who brought the Trimurti System to Earth in the first place. Perhaps they know a way to reverse the process."

Basil nodded in agreement. Benjamin Leroy had been Dismaker Labs' CTO. His understanding of neurotowers was probably second only to Maxwell, and Hypathia also said that he managed a subsystem related to harvested souls. He might be the key to solving the Trimurti System problem.

If his 'teammates' wouldn't have him killed first.

"How do the Trimurti fit into this?" Basil asked. "Brahma, Kalki, Shiva? Are they related to the essences we collected?"

“The three members of the Trimurti were summoned to serve as the System’s administrators, maintain its integrity, and probably manage the flow of souls,” Walter said. “Whether consciously or not. Killing one of their avatars won’t affect them personally, but it will disrupt the Trimurti System beyond recovery.”

This confirmed it then. Kalki’s death would disrupt the world’s precarious balance, summon Shiva and spell disaster for everyone.

“As for essences, they serve an unrelated purpose,” Walter countered. “Unlike the likes of the Trimurti, who are power incarnate, lesser deities are spiritual entities fueled by the thoughts and beliefs of mortals. They require prayers, worship, and magic to survive. This makes them infinitely malleable, like clay. By infusing themselves with a deity’s essence, your foes gained power beyond their ken while keeping their original soul and thus, their ability to level up.”

“So it was just a method for the Board to secure an advantage in the competition?” Vasi squinted. “An ace in the hole?”

“A cheat,” Basil grumbled. “They did expect to face the Horsemen of the Apocalypse down the line.”

“Well, now they’re ours at least,” Vasi replied. “Do you want them, Walter?”

“No.” The shopkeeper shook his head. “It would be better for you to keep them.”

“We already have too many of them stashed away,” Hagen added.

“That too.” Walter chuckled darkly. “Do not misunderstand me, my friends. These essences have great value and I would gladly trade them for artifacts, but they stay with you because they chose to. The essences could easily return to their home plane on their own, yet they do not.”

“They want to take revenge on the Board,” Basil guessed.

“Most likely,” Walter conceded. “That, or they truly want to assist you in your quest. A few months or years are a blink in a god’s eyes. I suggest either giving them to a trusted ally or infusing a weapon with their power. The former more than the latter. Weapons can be stolen or broken, but power stays with you forever.”

Or until death at least. Basil wasn't certain whether his cat or halberd would benefit most from a godly essence, but he wouldn't make the decision alone. He would discuss the matter with his party first.

"I wish I could help more," Walter said with a soft tone. "But this technology is beyond anything I have seen yet. Only its creators will help you understand it further."

"You *could* help more," Basil pointed out. "You could lend us some of your weapons or artifacts. They would make a real difference."

Walter smiled, but behind the lips there were teeth.

"I like you, Basil." It might even have been genuine. "But I am a merchant, not a charity. I do not give or take, I trade."

As expected, even his advice had a hidden price tag. Basil appreciated the necromancer's wisdom and intel, but he was under no illusion about the man's character. Walter Tye wouldn't blink twice at Earth's destruction. It was but one world among many, and he supplied them all equally.

"Still, you are all valued customers," Walter declared. "I'm willing to infuse your collected essences into tools of your choosing for free, and I will gladly trade you weapons in return for your technology. Your machines' ability to manipulate souls through artificial methods fascinate me."

"Thank you," Neria said without really meaning it. She understood that begging and haggling wouldn't work with this kind of otherworldly capitalist. "We will be taking back the neurotower, if you no longer have any use for it."

Walter agreed to return the device after a few days, after which the group decided to separate. The shopkeeper returned to work behind his counter under his dullahan's watch, while Basil discussed how to proceed next with Neria and Vasi.

"It doesn't change much," his girlfriend said. "Our objectives remain the same."

“Yeah,” Basil replied with a nod. This new information contextualized their situation, but in the end, they still needed to find Kalki and members of Dismaker Labs’ board for answers. “We need to capture Pluto alive.”

“I’ll... I’ll report to the general and secure weapons for you.” Neria chewed her lower lip. “It’s....”

“Major?” Basil asked with a frown.

“Basil, I...” The former policewoman shook her head. She had managed to keep a façade of professional composure so far, but the recent revelations clearly shook her to her core. “Is it terrible that I feel dead inside?”

“It’s natural,” Basil admitted. He felt the same. “Nothing surprises me anymore.”

“It’s just... I’ve always thought that souls didn’t exist. That there was nothing after death. I’m... I’m glad not all of me will vanish... but I’ve watched so many friends die, and to imagine them imprisoned in a cold metal shell...” Neria looked away, avoiding Basil’s gaze. “It mortifies me.”

“We will free them,” Vasi reassured her kindly. “There has to be a way to disable the neurotowers and return your world to normal. We will find a solution.”

Neria nodded slowly, though Basil could tell she didn’t truly believe it.

Faith was the only crutch that remained when all else had failed.

Interlude: Horsemen of the Apocalypse

The world had fallen silent.

Two suns shone in a moonless sky. Crimson clouds flew over a desolate land, blown by the whispering wind. The stench of death choked the heavens above.

The ruins of broken cities stood empty amidst lonely plains and bloodied forests. Corpses festered in the open, in crumbling houses and collapsed temples. Yet neither flies nor vultures would dine on them.

They too were dead.

Everything with a pulse had perished. From mere insects to kings, all had been slain. Every creature worth a single experience point had been hunted down, even the ghosts. Mindless grass and silent trees were all that remained of a planet once vibrant with life.

Only a single woman yet breathed on a hill of swords. She stood alone, the wind blowing on her fair face, on her golden hair and empty blue eyes. Her black armor was drenched in blood, none of it her own. From her peak she watched a plain of corpses, of broken knights and dead monsters.

Some had been her men, whom she had slain like the rest. Infighting wasn't unusual in the Apocalypse Force. Once they had run out of things to kill and levels to grind, all that remained were each other... that had been the demons' way for many years, long before she joined them.

She was Brina, the Horseman of War; and war only ended when there was nobody left to fight. The peace of the grave.

Yet as she raised a hand and marveled at the sunlight's reflection on her gauntlet, she couldn't help but feel empty inside.

"Not enough," Brina whispered in disappointment. "Still not enough."

This world had been more of a chore than a challenge. Brina had entered this realm months ago at the helm of an army and found it torn by conflict. A great continental human empire and a

union of inhuman city-states had been fighting for control back then, yet they soon put their differences aside when she started laying waste to them both. They fought and haggled and prayed. Some even tried to bribe her to destroy their enemies.

But Brina was not interested in prestige, wealth, and conquest. She had no wish for honor or luxury. All she wanted was to accumulate strength. To gain levels, equipment, new secret techniques and mighty abilities.

Anything that would help her kill that... that *man*.

Oh, it had been so long Brina had found a foe strong enough to give her experience. Was there a worse feeling than stagnation? The despair of watching a dream elude the dreamer?

She had thought this world would strengthen her steel, but the reality disappointed her. The greatest champion of these people had been level 60. Legendary by his planet's standards, and pitiful by those of the Horsemen.

He had lasted two strikes. To his credit, that was one more than most. But he was not even a shadow of her true target. Brina's true enemy was magnitudes stronger, a merchant of death and a thief of souls. She was still so many levels away from beating him.

Brina felt tired as she watched the twin suns above her head; tired of pointless slaughter, tired of stagnating, tired of failing to fulfill her oath to King Odin.

"Is this how my journey ends?" She wondered. "Halfway through? Unsatisfied, unfinished?"

At this point, Brina was strongly considering picking a fight with the other Horsemen. They were all weaker than her, but they should provide her with experience points. The alliance was starting to run its course anyway.

Who was she kidding? There was only one creature in the Apocalypse Force whose death would give her the power she craved... and she couldn't even reach him.

"Brina." The dark voice echoed in her mind, the words louder than the wind. It called out to her across the veil of time and space. Brina shrugged it off anyway. Meetings bored her almost as much as an easy fight. "A suitable battleground awaits you."

Belphegor had said the same thing of this world and the reality had greatly disappointed her. Her fellow Horseman was a necromancer, much to her disdain. The death of weaklings profited him as much as the murder of the strong. So she almost told him to leave her alone with her boredom.

At least, until she heard his next words.

“The merchant peddles his wares there.”

Brina’s pulse quickened with fury. She raised a sword and summoned runes of power. The blade caught fire, the black flames of war and wickedness swirling around its edge. She planted the weapon into the bloodsoaked earth.

“Call the Horsemen,” Brina whispered as she activated her Perk.

The sword’s flames rose in a mighty wall of fire taller than a castle’s walls. The heat evaporated the blood off of Brina’s armor and set the grass ablaze, yet she didn’t flinch. She did not fear the Fire element, or any magic for that matter.

The shadows of three visages appeared among the flames: Apollyon’s, whose mandible and antennae betrayed his insectoid nature; the burning skull of Belphegor, Horseman of Death; and the faceless mask of Mammon, Horseman of Conquest. They were assembled in a triangle, at the center of which the dark symbol of a black hand with a fanged maw for a palm shone balefully.

“Brina, how unkind of you to make us wait.” Belphegor grinned wickedly. “We were almost about to start without you.”

“Do not waste my time,” Brina replied sharply. She had no patience for small talk. “Speak.”

“So quick and impatient,” Mammon said with a chuckle. “You were always the kind to skip the setup and go straight for the punchline. After all the work Apollyon and I went through to prepare the stage too...”

Brina had no time for this nonsense. “Is Walter Tye involved?”

“Oh yes, he is.” Mammon laughed. He knew that this vile man drove her madder than a bloodhound on a hunt. “Your favorite merchant of death peddles your fallen master’s weapons to heroes and villains alike. I have a receipt to show you, if you do not believe me.”

Brina seethed in quiet fury, her fingers trembling with cold rage. She had committed odious crimes before and after joining the Apocalypse Force, forsaking her duties as a valkyrie for the sake of power. She had tempered her flesh in Calamity Surtr’s flames and slain the heroes she had been meant to collect, all in the name of vengeance.

All to slay the enemy of the Aesir. The vile archmage who had tainted her universe with the curse of undeath and sold his victims’ mementos for profit.

Yet... yet after so many years of training and bloodshed and hunting, Brina had been no closer to finding Walter Tye, let alone beating him. The sorcerer could only be found when he wanted it. She had tracked a few of his clients, yet the trail always went cold.

It was good to have a lead... but Brina knew in her heart that it would achieve nothing. This warlock stood at the apex of the multiverse, a master of magic and destruction. Only the power of an Overgod, or something close to it, would cement his defeat.

And that elusive threshold looked so far away...

“I see,” was all Brina said in response.

“Disappointing,” Belphegor mocked her. “But fine. More levels for us.”

Apollyon let out a gleeful, droning noise. “My forces have established a foothold on the planet,” he declared with unbearable pride. “My swarm is raising a summoning amplifier as we speak. I shall be the first to descend and reap the harvest of souls..”

“The barrier will be weakened enough to let you through, true, but not at full power,” Belphegor countered. “You will take a hefty level penalty.”

“One that will be quickly recovered,” Apollyon replied with confidence. “The local population’s levels rose from one to the low thirties in the span of months. They will soon grow mighty enough to feed my hunger.”

This brought Brina's quiet attention. Under normal circumstances, a world's population increased in strength slowly over the course of years and then stabilized around a relatively low average. Levels were then distributed across a curve, with a handful of champions monopolizing the upper tiers of power.

For a population to grow from an average level of 1 to 30 in half a year was almost unheard of.

"What is this world's name?" Brina asked, her curiosity aroused.

"Earth," Belphegor replied. "A common name for the perfect battleground. This world was optimized for quick level progression, to complete the work unfinished in Elysium."

Elysium. Brina remembered it well. A world of elves and spirits, some of whom had even proved to be a challenge.

They had been so close to raising an Overgod on Elysium. The Maleking had manifested in its last days and came so close to winning the competition. But the Destroyer's Avatar had come down from the skies right as they were on the verge of victory. Brina had imagined the power of an Overgod on an intellectual level, but seeing fingers larger than a moon crashing down on her from the sky taught her the value of willful ignorance. Even King Odin would have prayed at the altar for mercy.

Brina had to evacuate the planet in short order in defeat and silent awe, her vengeance delayed once again.

No other world had proved as bountiful in levels since. The Unity cowardly manipulated levels to keep barriers up around their dominions, preventing the Apocalypse Force from bringing the good fight to them. Brina would never understand how these dragons could cravenly hide behind machines rather than win their own fights. The likes of Blackcinders and Grandmaster Wyrde would have made for worthy adversaries, enemies whose death would have empowered her tenfold. Instead, Brina had to settle for minor skirmishes and unworthy worlds.

Would this Earth prove different?

"The Unity arrived on Earth already," Belphegor noted. "Since they've failed to keep levels down, they will have no choice but to send their heavy hitters. Those cowards would rather see us lose than become Overgods themselves."

“Good,” Brina said. She had hunted many dragons, and would relish adding more to her trophy collection. “I am ready to fight them.”

“We know you are,” Belphegor said with an amused tone. “But you will have to wait. The barrier is not yet low enough for you to cross over, even with a level penalty. You will have to wait a few more months.”

Brina frowned in distaste. Months were nothing but the blink of an eye for her kind, but she hated to wait. Walter Tye might lose interest on the planet and move on, forcing her to begin her hunt all over again. She fell silent even as her colleagues discussed how to best occupy Earth.

“What’s the situation on the ground?” Belphegor asked. “What organized opposition can we expect besides the Unity?”

“Very little, my dear friend,” Mammon replied with a dark chuckle. “I have infiltrated the Player factions and divided them in preparation for our king’s coming. These fools spend more time fighting each other than our bug infestation.”

Where Apollyon sought to dominate through attrition and starvation, Mammon wielded cunning like a blade. These two always cooperated to soften up a world’s defenses before the rest of the Apocalypse Force arrived; the former with force and armies, the second with plots and tricks.

“Do not underestimate the local meat, Mammon,” Apollyon warned. “Some are... strong.”

“Oh right.” Mammon cackled. “Your drones were squashed how many times? One? Two? Thrice?”

“A few humans might prove a challenge to you, but to us?” Belphegor chuckled darkly. “They’ll be fuel for my flames.”

Apollyon buzzed angrily. “Scorn me all you want. By the time you cross the barrier, I will have grown wealthy in blood and strength. We will see how confident you are then.”

“Do you wish to challenge me, bug?” Belphegor replied, his laughter quieter and darker. “I’ll be happy to teach you a lesson.”

“Calm down, my hotblooded friends,” Mammon snapped. “You will have all the time in the world to slaughter each other once we’ve dealt with the Unity. You embarrass us before His Majesty.”

Two voices spoke in unison and silenced them all.

“Do as you will.”

The words were spoken in a whisper, barely louder than the wind, yet they stopped the bickering Horsemen right in their tracks. Brina herself tensed up.

“I hear the voices of the meek calling out to me.” Two voices whispered at once: one deep and brimming with rage, the other disturbingly cold and smooth. Their words cut like razors, each letter becoming an invisible weight on Brina’s shoulders. “So many worship at my altar even as I destroy their lives. My grace they seek; my might they must possess. They pray and beg for deliverance when I offer naught but silence.”

The hand symbol at the center of her flaming wall grew to cover it all. The visages of the Horseman shrank like lesser shadows in the presence of a greater darkness.

“Let me ask you all a simple question, my Horsemen: what determines a life’s value?” The dark maw opened wide to reveal sharp fangs and four glowing eyes where the tongue should have been. “Is it birth? Should the weak and the entitled rule by virtue of their ancestor’s achievements, even when they prove themselves unworthy?”

None of the Horsemen answered. All knew that their opinion mattered not, and none dared to voice it. On a primal level, they all understood a simple truth.

“Is it wealth? A worthless pile of paper or paltry numbers on a glass screen? A golden fetish whose only strength is the belief of those who enforce it?”

They knew that the voices belong to a being of pure malice and infinite malevolence. An entity that showed no more mercy to his allies than his foes. An incarnation of merciless strength that inspired and terrorized them in equal measure.

“Is it the law? A castrating illusion born of a herd’s consensus? Should a fool’s voice have the same weight as a sage? Should worthless parasites be treated as well as those who fight to live?”

The Maleking.

"I say no!" The demon's wrath turned the wall of flame blue. "Fate, fame, wealth, the laws of gods and men... all are naught but fabrications! The winner's justice, that is the one truth! The strong, the cunning, the talented, only those are fit to survive! Life is not a right, but a privilege!"

Brina had heard these words before. She had listened to them in her black heart after swearing revenge on Lord Thor's behalf and tempering her blade in the flames of Calamity Surtr. They had stayed with her with each slaughter since.

"I offer neither orders nor condemnations," the Maleking declared. "Do as you will. Kill foes and friends, I care not whose blood is spilled. Your life is yours alone. Yours to lose, yours to wager. But if it is inspiration you seek, then heed my call."

All across the multiverse, the other Horsemen waited in judgment.

"Mammon, Brina, Belphegor, Apollyon. Go forth, my Horsemen." The four eyes glowed like malicious stars on an empty night. "Paint the conquered plains with blood. Blow the winds of war to cast down craven lords and false prophets. Let famine starve the weak of breath and spirit. Death to the meek and the unworthy. Bring forth Hell Unending."

Brina felt the demon's gaze on her, heavy as gravity. She sensed his will looking into her heart and seeing her true desire within.

"Then, when the craven are dead and only the brave remain," the Maleking said, more softly. "We shall see which of us is worthy of strength's crown and heaven's throne. If you have the power to take my prize, then try. For one's true wealth is only what they can defend!"

One war to end them all. One tournament among the multiverse's greatest warriors, to determine which of them was worthy of true godhood.

The wall of fire collapsed on itself. The truth had been spoken loud and clear; no one needed to say more.

Brina glanced at the hill of sword and the desolate plains. Once her role had been to scour battlefields as one of King Odin's handmaiden, searching for heroes whose great deeds had earned them a place at the Aesir's table. These had been happy times; times of honor, of duty, and valor. Times when death once *meant* something.

Until it didn't.

One day Brina had come down from Asgard to find the rotting corpses of soldiers walking on their own. The vile plague of undeath had swept across the land, poisoning the cycle of soul and condemning the nine worlds to eternal decay.

Brina had lost the war for Asgard the first time around. She had to retreat after watching the heavenly host torn apart by the living dead, swallowing the bitter pill of defeat. Only vengeance could wash away her stained honor.

If she had to sell her soul to a demon for it, then she would pay the price.

Brina had months of waiting ahead of her, but her boredom had been replaced with something else. A stirring fire in the depths of her soul.

Excitement.

"Walter Tye... Nidhogg..." Her fingers clenched around her sword's pommel. "You will elude me no further."

She was done waiting for the right time that never seemed to come. Whether she gained the strength of an Overgod or not, she would confront Walter Tye at least. Whether she killed him or he killed her, her long war would end either way.

"My Einherjars," she said. "Come to me."

The bound specters of fallen champions rose to wage battle anew, as her Perk warranted. They would die and disappear under the fading sunlight, preparing themselves for the battle to come. She would watch them in silence, keeping herself occupied until the right time.

Soon, the gate to Earth would open for the Horseman of War.

And she would be ready.

Chapter 26: Man vs Tiger

The party left for Orléans in the morning.

A bitter storm of snow and wind engulfed them midway through, which considerably slowed down their progress. The situation didn't improve much after the blizzard abated. The deep rifts of ice left behind damaged the main road, forcing them to take detour after detour. A journey meant to last three days stretched on for a week, until Basil decided to cut his losses and travel through the more practical A71 path. It would force the party to bypass Orléans, but at least they should arrive in Paris before December.

"Basil, why is the snow better at slowing us down than a goddess?" Plato had asked his best friend after yet *another* blizzard.

"Because she wasn't the goddess of snow, obviously," Basil had replied grimly. "I hate winter."

Even then, difficulties piled up one after the other. An avalanche buried the Steamobile for a day; rot spoiled the party's rations and forced them to hunt a herd of wooly rhinos for food; and a band of traveling human merchants they encountered on the way turned out to be maddened cannibals. They were too weak to present a challenge, but Basil had to throw away their 'pork rations' much to Rosemarine's dismay.

Bugsy's condition didn't improve either.

The centimagma spent his days sneezing inside the Steamobile's engine room under a hill of blankets and hot compresses. Where Rosemarine had grown somewhat used to the cold thanks to her ability to gather solar energy, Bugsy required a constant stream of Monster Cure II boosts to remain somewhat lucid. The situation grew so bad that Basil decided to resort to extreme measures.

“Sorry to summon you like this, Zachariel,” Basil apologized as he called the angel with his One for All Perk. “But I’m at a loss at how to treat him.”

“No worries, sir, I live for this.” Zachariel examined Buggy. The centimagma coughed fire, forcing the angel to step back to avoid being incinerated. “Mmm... what a harsh Faithless Fever you have caught...”

“I’m sorry,” Buggy whimpered with a nasally voice. “I don’t know what zapping to me...”

“I don’t know either,” Basil admitted. “It’s not an ailment and you aren’t losing HP, but your stats have been heavily debuffed. Staying warm inside the Steamobile doesn’t seem to help either.”

“If I may, sir, I believe this is related to the current Field you’re traveling through,” Zachariel explained. “Elemental Types are heavily vulnerable to their effects. Just like how a water creature would deeply suffer inside a volcano, I believe our friend here simply cannot survive normally in a snowy wasteland.”

Oh right, Basil hadn’t considered Field effects. Nothing about the area indicated that fire elementals would die in it, but it did weaken Fire and strengthen Frost. Buggy breathed the former and feared the latter. Since Fields affected everyone within their area of effect, being inside the Steamobile didn’t provide any protection from them.

“So we either migrate south or leave Buggy like this until we reach Paris?” Basil asked with a frown, to which Zachariel replied with a nod. “It might be days ahead. Don’t you have anything that could ease his suffering?”

“May I suggest using the pagan essence you harvested?” Zachariel proposed. “I am not fond of them, but your tropidrake’s resistance to the Field effect could be related to the one that she ingested in Bordeaux. Consuming false idols has many health benefits according to research.”

Basil doubted it, but at this point they might as well try. He searched for the essences among his belongings and presented them to Buggy.

“Which one do you want?” he asked the centimagma. “Apollo’s? Or Artemis’?”

“From what Nessia taught me of this strange Greek religion, Apollo is a god of the sun and medicine,” Zachariel said. “He would be the obvious choice.”

"I don't know, boz," Buggy replied. "Are you zure you want to feed me one? Didn't you want to make a weapon with ziz?"

"We have enough guns as it is." Neria had sent them a new ammo shipment through the guild inventory. "Your health is more important to us, my friend."

"Friendz?" Buggy's eyes lit up with joy at the word. "I'm... thank zou so much, Boz."

"Now open your mouth and take your medicine," Basil said as he all but shoved the Apollo essence down his sick teammate's throat. The sphere of divine power vanished into Buggy's body and caused his lava blood to heat up.

Centimagma Buggy Venture absorbed the [Essence of Apollo]! Buggy unlocked a new divine metamorphosis (level 73 required).

Level 73 was far away, but at least the makeshift cure had worked. Buggy emerged from under the blankets warm and revitalized.

"How do you feel?" Basil asked.

"Better already, Boss," Buggy replied with his normal voice. Zachariel checked up on him with spells. "I could eat a whole mammoth!"

"Your metabolism has stabilized for now," Zachariel confirmed. "But I suggest that you follow a healthy diet, just in case. Trade ice cream for coal candies, wear warm clothes to protect yourself from the cold, avoid premarital sex, and you should be fine."

"Yes, Mr. Zachariel." Buggy let out a breath of fire. "I'm pumped now, Boss. Does Rosemarine need help with clearing the path of snow?"

"Not yet," Basil replied. "We've made a stop to let her rest and Plato hasn't returned from his scouting yet."

"Oh." Buggy lowered his antennae in disappointment. "Isn't there anything I can do? Maybe Vasi needs assistance with her potions? Or should I help Shellgirl with inventory management?"

Bugsy was eager to overwork himself right after recovering from a weeks-long sickness. Basil didn't know whether to scold or praise his dedication. "I guess you could always manage the engine, if you feel up for it..."

"Sir, if I may," Zachariel said. "Does our friend have an assigned Lair yet?"

"Uh, not yet," Bugsy replied. "I wanted to make one in Chateau Muloup but Ronald's got it covered."

"Good, good." Zachariel nodded to himself. "Then I would suggest looking for a suitable place to establish one. Building the correct Lair would let me return to Bordeaux in short order."

"What do you mean?" Basil asked with a frown.

"Do you remember how your Lair II Perk allows us to create our own, sir?" Zachariel asked. "We have created a few in partnership with other angels and discovered that some of them could possess a very interesting feature: Teleportation Circle."

"Teleportation Circle?" Basil's heart skipped a beat. "Teleportation to where?"

"From what we gathered so far, to all Lairs with the same feature and whose owners belong to the same party or guild," Zachariel explained. "We haven't finished testing the distance limit yet, but early results are promising."

"What did you say?" Shellgirl immediately barged into the engine room, much to Basil's confusion. Had she been listening through the door? "Zach, did my ears deceive me? You have found a way to create a teleportation network?"

"It would be a boon for us," Bugsy noted. "We could transport food to Ronald, back and forth."

"A boon? A boon?! It's a revolution in logistics!" Shellgirl shook Bugsy like a tree. "Can you fathom how much merchandise we could quickly transfer around with a teleportation network? How many people would pay us to travel from one safe warehouse to the other? No more time wasted in roadblocks and dirty snow!"

She had a point. Basil's recent troubles with the roads had taught him he shouldn't take good public service for granted. He wondered how much time they would have saved with a functional highway.

“Strange that I didn’t hear of it earlier,” Basil said. He had checked on Ronald, whose monster interns had established Lairs as safehouses and fortifications in the region around the dungeon. The fiendish burger hadn’t mentioned a Teleportation Circle at any point. “Our guild has established dozens of Lairs so far. Are certain criteria necessary to unlock the feature?”

“According to early forays, the Teleportation Circle only appears if the Lair in question is symbolically associated with thresholds and pathways,” Zachariel explained. “Castle, houses, even churches do not possess it, unlike caverns and haunted travel agencies.”

Ah, of course. Compared to dungeons, Lairs could be established almost anywhere but lacked many baseline abilities. Establishing a network of them would require a lot more prep-work.

“I guess we could try to find a suitable location on the way to Paris, or inside the city itself,” Basil suggested. “That would be easier than conquering a dungeon.”

“What if…” Buggy managed to shrug Shellgirl off him, his eyes bright with hope. “What if I were to build it?”

“The Lair?” Basil asked in surprise.

“Yes, Boss! What if I were to build mine from the ground up instead of looking for one?” Buggy snapped his mandibles in excitement. “Someone designed our house before we moved in, right? It didn’t sprout from the Earth like a dungeon!”

“But it still worked as a Lair…” Basil’s breath grew shorter as he realized the implications behind his friend’s idea. “Buggy, you are a genius!”

“Why not build offices with business Lair Features?” Shellgirl suggested happily. “We put a huge door somewhere and bam, instant teleportation!”

“If we design standardized plans, we could make a template easy to build anywhere,” Basil thought out loud. “The Roman army could build fortified camps in three hours with practice. We can do the same.”

“Let me write down the plans, Boss!” Buggy proposed. The centimagma had proved himself a strangely talented amateur architect, and he was always eager to practice his craft. “I’ll design the best Lair there is! It’ll be like a new house with a bigger chicken coop and pens for all farm

animals! And to make sure we get the Teleportation Circle feature, I'll... I'll build doors within doors! A big ring-sized archway opening the path to the stars!"

"Make me proud, soldier." Basil put a hand on the centimagma's head. "Let us start a new Bulgarian architectural revolution, with brutalist walls and post-modernist archways!"

"Let me help, Buggy," Shellgirl proposed with enthusiasm. "I'll supply you with the best materials you'll need!"

"Don't forget to add chapels," Zachariel suggested. "Everyone always forgets the chapels."

"I won't disappoint, Boss," Buggy swore. "I'll work harder than an ant and faster than a fly!"

Of that, Basil had no doubt.

Congratulations, your party earned 330,000 EXP (16,500 for you). You earned a level (total 36).

*Cait Sith Plato can now undergo metamorphosis into either a [**Carabas Cait**] (Fairy/Beast) or a [**Rakshasa Kitten**] (Beast/Demon)!*

Oh? It appeared Plato had slain a few creatures on his patrol.

Leaving his friends to discuss the merits of an office tower over a flat fort, Basil exited the Steamobile to face the cold outside. Rosemarine rested on the snow, under the shadow of an abandoned lodge close to a frozen river. Vasi cooked a potion stew in a cauldron right next to Plato, who dragged the corpse of a bear-sized penguin entirely made of ice across the ground.

"Ah, I missed hunting birds," Plato said as he leaped on his dead prey's belly and puffed his chest in pride. "I found a whole flock of them north. I couldn't resist."

"I thought you didn't hunt land-bound birds?" Basil taunted him before lightly kissing Vasi on the cheek. His girlfriend returned the gesture with a wink. "Penguins can't fly."

"Only wicked birds can live in a place such as this," Plato replied. "Anyway, Basil, you should rejoice. Our suffering is finally over."

"Let me guess, you have found an oven?"

"I followed the frozen river," Plato explained, wagging his tail in happiness. "Guess what? It dries up and leads to a warm, giant litter!"

"Warm?" Rosemarine's head perked up in interest. "Where?"

"A litter?" Basil's eyes widened in shock. "You mean a desert? Paris' desert?"

"Yes!" Plato meowed in happiness. "I saw the Eiffel Tower on the horizon!"

"But that's impossible." Basil frowned and immediately summoned his map from the inventory.

"We should still be days away, unless... unless we've reached the Gâtinais regional park already?"

"Did we lose our way again, handsome?" Vasi asked with a light chuckle.

"I'm afraid so," Basil admitted after checking the map. They must have taken a wrong turn near Orléans. "But on the bright side, we were so lost that we ended up back on the right track."

"Mister, can we leave now?" Rosemarine pleaded. She was back on her feet within seconds.

"I'm ready to walk again!"

Aww, she was such a hard worker!

"It's alright sweetie, you can rest a bit longer," Basil said, only for his tropidrake to stomp the ground with her feet in frustration.

"I've had enough of the snow!" Rosemarine protested, saying out loud what everyone was feeling deep down. "I can't even eat it! It makes my tummy growl!"

"Can you wait a few minutes until I bottle up my brew?" Vasi grinned ear to ear. "I'm almost finished."

Basil glanced at her cauldron. A sky blue potion boiled within it, as viscous as British porridge and as unnatural as a coca-cola soda mixed with water.

Dr. Jekyll's Angover Cure

Family: Potion (Consumable)

Quality: C.

Effect 1: Grants immunity to mental Ailments for 1 minute per milliliter.

Effect 2: Cancels shapeshifting effects for 1 minute per milliliter.

The gentleman's antidote to anger and accidental full moon transformations. Potential side effects include acne, blandness, and a nagging sense of existential emptiness. Keep it away from suicidal comedians!

Basil wasn't certain that temporary ailment immunity was worth the loss of his sense of humor, which had taken many hits lately. "All shapeshifting effects?" he asked. "Does that include my werebear transformation?"

"Seems so," Vasi confirmed with a sad face. "Please don't abuse it. I like your fur."

"Well, it'll make for a nice ace-in-the-hole until we find a better option." Basil helped his girlfriend store the potion inside glass bottles. "An item granting me complete ailment immunity would negate all the downsides of All For One."

"Hopefully, the next bird on my path will drop one," Plato said. "By the way, what's a rakshasa? Seems I can transform into one now."

"I've heard of them while doing research on Kalki," Basil said. "It's a tiger demon from Hindu mytholog—"

"You had me at tiger," Plato cut in with excitement. "Do they have stripes?"

"I... I think?" Basil replied with a raised eyebrow. "They're masters of illusions and man-eaters too."

"Illusions? They're magicians?" Vasi joined her hands. "That's great! Maybe you will count as a witch and trigger my Hag Coven Perk!"

"I won't let you eat Mister," Rosemarine warned Plato. "And maybe Miss Neria too, because I like her. Everyone else is edible."

“So long as men keep worshiping me, I will spare them my wrath,” the cat replied with pride. “Let’s go with Rakshasa.”

“The System says Rakshasa *Kitten*,” Basil pointed out. “You might end up smaller than you already are. And Carabas is a reference to the puss-in-boots. It could make you a better swordsman, or even a noble.”

“Mmm... true, I should hedge my bets.” Plato wagged his tail. “Yo dog, do you have an essence left? It unlocked a new metamorphosis for the big plant over here, hasn’t it?”

“I’m not sure it’ll alter the current choices, but I guess we can check...” Basil grabbed the Artemis essence and presented it to Plato. “This is our last one.”

“Is it wise, Basil?” Vasi asked with a scowl. “Walter proposed to forge weapons with them for us, and Metal Olympus can track essences.”

“We crossed that bridge when Rosemarine ate Tamura,” Basil replied with a shrug. “And I would rather avoid relying on Walter for everything.”

The man had made his position clear. He didn’t care for Earth and would happily trade with mankind’s enemies without remorse. Walter Tye had been helpful so far and Basil trusted his professionalism, but the necromancer could always decide to abandon their world without a moment’s notice.

In the end, the party could only rely on each other in a pinch.

“Here we go...” Plato grabbed the essence sphere. “Uh, am I supposed to swallow it? It’s almost as big as I am.”

“You can try to lick it really hard,” Basil teased him. “Can’t taste worse than your behind.”

“At least I don’t have to rob supermarkets for toilet paper like you primates.” Plato licked the essence, with the sphere brightening and disappearing into the cat’s chest. “Tiger god, here we go!”

Cait Sith Plato absorbed the [Essence of Artemis]! Plato unlocked a new divine metamorphosis (level 82 required).

Plato waited a moment, before frowning in disappointment. "Wait, that's it?"

"Seems so," Basil replied. "You can choose to become either a tiger kitten or a noble cat."

Come to think of it, why a kitten? Tigers had cubs, not kittens. Shouldn't tiger demons have those too? What was the reason for this odd naming choice?

Dismaker Labs wishes you a happy apocalypse!

Basil would never forgive the programmers for violating the rules of grammar.

"I'm already a noble," Plato argued. "Stripes are the new crowns!"

"Suit yourself," Basil replied before assigning his new level so Plato could do the same. Considering the large presence of undead enemies in Paris, he decided to continue on the path of the Deathknight.

Deathknight of the Sepulchre Level 2 Stat Gains: +1 STR, +1 AGI, +1 VIT, +1 SKI, + 1 MAG, +1 CHA, +1 LCK. You earned 40 HP and 15 SP.

Plato immediately glowed like the full moon, his body changing with the metamorphosis. He didn't grow in size like Rosemarine or Buggy before him, but the transformation was no less striking. The face of Basil's beloved cat changed to fit that of a tiger instead of the dwarf panther he liked to present himself as. His tiny legs gained a lot of muscle, moving from graceful to nimble and powerful. Although his eyes remained as golden as ever, his fur adopted a pattern of black with white stripes. His boots and hat morphed to adapt to his new physiology, although they seemed weirdly out of place on a tiny tiger.

Congratulations, [Cait Sith] Plato metamorphosed into a [Rakshasa Kitten] (Beast/Demon)! Plato learned the [Powerful Dao], [Manbane], and [Illusionist IV] Passive Perks, and the [Catnapping] Active Perk! His existing Perks have also been strengthened!

Plato's [Illusionist IV] triggered [Hag Coven]! You can learn and cast Coven Witchcraft Spells again!

"So cute," Vasi whispered as Plato looked at his mighty paws. She raised a hand, struggling against the urge to pet him. "Can I—"

“Look, but don’t touch!” Plato replied with pride. Basil immediately scratched him behind the ears. “Hey! Respect my authority!”

“Tigers love swimming, from what I’ve heard,” Basil said with a grin. “Should I throw you into a bath to check?”

“Do that and I will practice my new Manbane Perk on your back, like a punching bag.” Plato mimicked a boxing punch motion. “Paw, paw, paw!”

“Can you…” Vasi blushed in embarrassment. “Can you roar for me?”

Plato’s eyes snapped wide open as a dreadful thought crossed his mind. He cleared his throat, leaped on Rosemarine’s back, and stood atop the tropidrake’s head like Simba on Pride Rock. The tiny tiger stared at the sun, standing defiant and proud in the celestial light.

At that moment, Plato had never looked more kingly.

He glanced up at Basil and Vasi as if they were his subjects, gathered his breath… and opened his mouth.

A powerful sound echoed across the frozen wasteland.

“Meeeee!!!”

A mighty squeal to shake the heavens. A high-pitched cry that only the cutest kitten could muster. The kind of sound that drove the internet mad.

Plato stopped, his expression devoid of emotion. Vasi clapped to cheer him up, but that only embarrassed the cat. Basil wisely remained silent so as not to shame him further.

“This is my first time, I will get it right soon.” Plato gathered his breath once more. “Meeeee! Meeh!”

When no mighty roar erupted from his throat, the tiny tiger shouted louder, and louder, and louder. Ice cracked beneath Rosemarine’s feet and snow fell from trees. Yet Plato only succeeded in squealing higher.

“MEEEEEEH!”

Shellgirl's panicked voice came out of the Steamobile. "Is someone waterboarding Plato?!"

"Not yet!" Basil shouted back.

"Oh, okay!" Shellgirl replied, immediately calming herself. "Quiet then! Some high-income individuals are working here!"

Plato ignored the advice and kept squealing. No roar came out of his maw, no matter how hard he tried. Even Rosemarine looked sorry for him.

"Do you know when Rakshasas enter puberty?" Basil asked Vasi, struggling not to laugh.

"I don't know," his girlfriend replied with a bright, happy smile. Her hands were joined in prayer.

"I just hope they're late bloomers."

"Damn it!" Plato cursed as he collapsed to his knees. "Damn it, Mufasa! MUFASA!"

Chapter 27: Man vs Paris

They reached Paris by sundown.

The second most beautiful city on Earth—after Sofia, the great capital of almighty Bulgaria—Paris was a shining beacon of culture. One couldn't walk for a hundred meters there without stumbling on a monument. From the Champs-Élysées to Montmartre and the Sacré-Coeur, almost every corner of the city looked like a shiny postcard.

In spite of its beauty, Basil himself had never liked the city. Paris was a human anthill, with more than ten million people on a territory that could hardly afford a fraction of that number. The city's inhabitants were constantly stressed and unhappy, with many burning out within years before leaving for the countryside. Paris was all the glories and excesses of civilization rolled into one explosive package.

Even so, Basil couldn't help but feel a pang of sorrow as the city's ruins came into view.

As the BuzzBand party had warned him, a sea of sand now covered the region. A vast desert of dunes began where the snowy wastelands stopped. Temperatures rose by thirty degrees when the Bohens crossed the border between the two, and a dark green hue soon polluted the sky. The frozen stream the Bohens had been following turned into a dry bed full of shipwreck husks and half-rusted cars. Basil assumed that this was what remained of the Seine River.

Desolate streets and the ruins of buildings lay half-buried among dunes. Modern housing projects and eighteenth-century houses alike had both fallen into disrepair, their windows shattered by sandstorms and their walls ravaged by the searing heat. Plumes of fire rose from rare craters of glass, as if the flames of the underworld escaped to the surface. No oasis offered comfort from the wasteland; all water sources in the city had dried up as far as Basil could tell.

As for the dungeons, they could be seen from leagues away.

The tallest and most recognizable was, as expected, the Eiffel Tower. Yet it had clearly gone through an architectural redesign since Basil's last visit. Already tall, the monument now soared through the skies; its peak resembled a gigantic tesla coil whose power generated

thunderclouds at its apex. The tower's four foundations had transformed into mighty pylons of steel and gears, like the feet of a monstrous, colossal, archaic machine. Pipes and turbines released white smoke all around the dungeon, shrouding it in mist.

Another monument stood tall in defiance on the opposite side of the empty Seine River. The Louvre Pyramid, once barely twenty-meters tall, now surpassed the Great Pyramid of Giza in size and greatness. Arcane symbols covered its smooth obsidian surface. Basil recognized the Eye of Horus among them, alongside Greek letters and Roman numerals. The structure appeared to absorb light itself, like a dagger of darkness rising straight from Hell's bowels.

Compared to these two titans, Notre Dame appeared small but no less threatening. The cathedral had grown in size and dreadfulness, its once-inspiring architecture now a twisted Gothic nightmare of steel spikes and black stone walls. Tentacled shadows danced behind stained glasses the color of blood. Gargoyle dragons watched over its towers, ready to swoop down upon the first intruder.

Any of these dungeons would have been cause for concern. The field-effect covering the city was nothing more than the cherry on the top.

Pluto's [God-Field: Ditis Pater] changed the field to [Tartarus].

- *[Soul], [Corrosion], [Fire], [Earth], [Darkness], and [Mythic] elements are strengthened.*
- *[Wood], [Water], and [Light] elements are weakened.*
- *Healing effects are halved and chances of suffering from [Insta-Death] are doubled.*
- *All creatures that die in the Field will rise up at sundown as mindless [Undead] Types.*

"Spooky," Plato rasped at Basil's side. The former housecat had broken his voice after practicing his roar for too long. "I take back what I said. This place is not a good litterbox."

"Gee, you think?" Basil deadpanned back as he watched the sky with binoculars. The duo had taken position atop a ruined hospital in the Val-de-Marne to better observe the area. The whole place had been crawling with zombies and skeletons, but none of them could survive a swing from Basil's halberd. "This place is a goddamn warzone."

Rosemarine had trailed the Seine River from the south before stopping in the Val-de-Marne, a few hours away from Paris itself. Approaching any closer would be suicide. Sphinxes patrolled the skies above the Louvre Pyramid, while red-skinned, wingless demons riding atop bat-winged mechanical gliders did the same for the Eiffel Tower. Basil half-expected Marvel to sue the latter over copyright infringement.

Androsphinx

Level 27 [Beast/Avian]

Faction: Metal Olympus (Psychopompos)

Steamfiend

Level 24 [Artificial/Fiend]

Faction: Apocalypse Force

Considering the Steamobile's size, the group would be noticed and intercepted in short order the moment they moved inside the city center. The situation on the ground wasn't any better. Paris' streets were littered with bones and skulls, some of them moving on their own. Basil watched one unlucky undead blow himself up by accidentally walking on a trap rune drawn in the sand. Rusty bus wrecks and monster chokepoints blocked many paths.

"It's like Dax all over again, but a hundred times worse," Basil complained as he lowered his binoculars. "Every single monster in this city is stronger than Steamslime."

"At least half of them are birds or undead," Plato replied. "You hunt the latter and I'll take care of the former."

"I would rather that they don't notice us." Basil checked his cat's new and empowered stats once again. "And you can help with that."

Name	Plato (Rakshasa Kitten)
Type	Beast/Demon
Faction	Homeowner Revenge Association (The Bohens)
Experience	229,684/250,000

Immune	Resist	Weak
All illusion effects, Mind.	Soul, Wind, Wood, Darkness, Mythic, Ailments.	Beastslayer, Demonslayer, Corrosion, Metal.
Level	Health Points	Special Points
36	1500	730

Strength	Agility	Vitality	Skill
19 (C+20%)	55 (A+20%)	22 (C+20%)	55 (A+20%)

Magic	Intelligence	Charisma	Luck
37 (B+20%)	24 (C+20%)	31 (C+20%)	54 (A+20%)

Physical	Mind	Soul	Corrosion	Metal	Wood	Life	Support	Ailment
-	Strong	Strong	Weak	Weak	Strong	-	Strong	Strong
Fire	Water	Earth	Wind	Frost	Lightning	Light	Darkness	Mythic
-	-	-	Strong	-	-	-	Strong	Strong

Passive Perks	Active Perks
Sharp Claws	Focus Up
Somnonapper	Windfang
Birdbane	Catnapping

Nine Lives	N/A
Swordsmanship I	N/A
Powerful Dao	N/A
Manbane	N/A
Illusionist IV	N/A

Personal Perks:

- **Sharp Claws:** *Plato's claws inflict SKI-based damage. He gains advanced proficiency with unarmed attacks, fangs, and claws (x2 damage, +10 Crit).*
- **Somnonapper:** *while under a [Sleep] effect, Plato recovers HP as if he benefited from the [Regen] positive ailment. Additionally, his body will act on its own to dodge attacks and retaliate.*
- **Birdbane:** *Plato's attacks with natural weapons inflict [Birdslayer] damage (x3 damage against [Avian] Types).*
- **Nine Lives:** *When Plato would die, he instead benefits from an [Auto-Revive] effect bringing him back to life at critical health; this also purges Plato of ailments. Plato can be revived eight times before the Perk becomes inactive. 6/9*
- **Swordsmanship I:** *Medium proficiency with swords (x1,5 damage).*
- **Powerful Dao:** *Plato can run on vertical structures, and even ceilings so long as he remains in motion. Additionally, the length of his jumps is doubled.*
- **Manbane:** *Plato's attacks with natural weapons inflict [Manslayer] damage (x3 damage against [Humanoid] Types).*
- **Illusionist IV:** *The Rakshasa's mastery of illusions transcends schools of magic. Plato can learn and cast spells up to Tier IV from any school of magic, but only illusion-related spells.*

Active Perks:

- **Focus Up:** 30 SP, [Support]. Buffs Luck, Skill, and Crits chances for five minutes.
- **Windfang:** 60 SP, [Wind], Technique. Plato can unleash a sharp blade of wind with any bladed weapon, claws and fangs included; proficiency bonuses apply depending on the weapon used (base [Wind] damage 100, +30% crit).
- **Catnapping:** 50 SP, [Support]. Plato can designate a foe within his line of sight. On a successful luck check, all the enemy's buffs are transferred to Plato as if they had been cast on him in the first place.

All in all, Plato's metamorphosis had granted him an enormous boost in power and versatility; though Basil suspected he would have traded it all for a noble roar.

"You should train with Vasi and learn illusion spells while I figure something out," Basil said. "We'll have a tough fight on our hands."

"Are you giving me homework again?" Plato cleared his throat, his voice filled with mock outrage. "After I killed so many birds so that you might sleep without worry? After dirtying my paws with blood and sand for your sake?"

"It's not homework if you enjoy it," Basil replied with a smirk.

"See? See? You admit to feeding off my pain." Plato wagged his tail. "Honestly, is the situation really so bad? You wouldn't ask me to train otherwise."

"Let's just say we'll need more prep work." Basil raised his binoculars and looked west.

"Infiltrating the catacombs will be a challenge, let alone the Louvre Pyramid. Your illusion spells could make the difference."

"You should have started with recognizing my peerless talent before asking me to do chores," Plato joked, his eyes set on the pyramid dungeon. "Are we sure the hippie is inside it? For all we know, he turned tail and left for another city. Hopefully somewhere without snow."

Basil summoned Kalki's conch shell from his inventory and played a few notes. Plato winced in response, much to his owner's annoyance.

"I'm not that bad," Basil protested.

"I wouldn't wish your recital on a dog," Plato replied.

"I'll let you record my song for bullying purposes," Basil joked back before following through with his melody. As per Walter Tye's magic, a shining arrow of light materialized above his head. It reminded Basil of quest markers in games.

The arrow turned around slightly and pointed straight at the Louvre Pyramid.

"You know," Plato said. "As far as hints go, that one is surprisingly straightforward."

"We had to pay for it," Basil replied with a grunt as the arrow disappeared. "Maybe you'll find a spell that will let you grow a mane."

"Or an illusion to disguise your awful singing," Plato shot back before fleeing back into the hospital. "See you later, slavedriver."

Basil smiled and summoned documents from his inventory. The first was a sketch of the catacombs gifted to him by BuzzBand, the other a map of Paris. Although the latter wasn't up to date, Basil used his current observation position to compare it to the current reality.

Paris was no stranger to roadblocks and traffic jams, but the city's transformation had only worsened the situation. Every path Basil observed with his binoculars were either blocked or crawling with monsters. All those above ground anyway.

The metro seems like our best shot for now, Basil noted as he examined the maps. If we take line 8 and then 6, we should reach the Denfert-Rochereau station. It's right next to the catacombs, so we'll just have to dig our way inside.

This path should allow the Bohens to access the pyramid without being spotted by flyers, though Basil couldn't tell how the situation looked underground. BuzzBand's members warned him that the catacombs crawled with undead and considering the city's current state, he would have bet a hand that monsters took over the metro tunnels too.

More worryingly, Basil had yet to see other humans so far. The Apocalypse Force employed Players, but he didn't see any of them among the forces protecting the Eiffel Tower. Perhaps they were hiding inside the dungeon or gathering their strength somewhere else.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” Basil muttered to himself as he studied the Eiffel Tower. Mechanical monsters worked on building tesla coils on the building’s metal legs. “Are they upgrading the dungeon somehow?”

“Mister, Mister!” Rosemarine called out. Basil walked to the roof’s edge and looked down. His tropidrake had buried most of the Steamobile under a sand dune, except for the entrance. “I’m almost done!”

“Good job,” Basil congratulated her from above. With the Steamobile so well-camouflaged, Fire Seeds should be enough to take care of it while the rest of the party infiltrated the pyramid on foot. “We’ll entomb the entrance later.”

“It will be quieter than a tomb,” Rosemarine chirped. “I will stash our victims in a coffin of steel and sand.”

“You have my permission to eat them before they become undead,” Basil replied with a smile. “Let’s skip the burial step.”

“I love you so much, Mister,” Rosemarine replied before licking her fangs. Aww... adorable.

“A bit shameful, but understandable.” Zachariel’s voice and the sound of flapping wings echoed behind Basil. The angel dropped the invisibility effect as he landed on the roof. “I am ready to report, Sir.”

“What’s the situation on the ground?” Basil asked. He had sent the angel, Shellgirl, and Bugsy to secure the area around the hospital.

“I believe we have found a suitable location for a Lair capable of sustaining a Teleportation Circle. A strange cavern called, I quote, ‘Maisons-Alfort Les Juilliottes’.”

“The metro station?” According to the map, it was located right between the unemployment and the cotisations offices. “Only the foulest of monsters would dare to make it their home.”

“A level 25 scorpion monster did, but we had no issue dealing with it.” Such a feat would have been noteworthy in the past, but by now Basil’s team didn’t even receive experience from it. “Our mutual friends are hard at work reinforcing the area in preparation for claiming it as a Lair.”

“I’ll ask Rosemarine to spawn Fire Seeds to help you,” Basil replied as he glanced at the sky. The sun would disappear beyond the horizon within an hour or so. “Let’s finish this before nightfall. According to the field, the city will turn into a *Walking Dead* rerun soon enough.”

“I am not familiar with the reference, but I agree.” Zachariel nodded sagely. “If we can create a teleportation bridge with Bordeaux as the general asked, we could summon immediate reinforcements.”

“Hopefully,” Basil agreed. “But I would rather assume that we’re on our own for now. It beats being disappoint—”

Congratulations, Players of Earth!

A notification appeared in front of Basil’s eyes, immediately ruining his mood. “Is Christmas early too?” Basil snorted. “Or is it a surprise Thanksgiving?”

*Thanks to your hard work, you have unlocked a new **[Incursion]** event! The kids’ gloves are coming off!*

Damn it.

Basil’s jaw clenched as he read. The message wasn’t unexpected after Nessia’s warnings a few weeks back, but it still complicated matters.

*As a reminder for those who missed the first one, **[Incursions]** are worldwide phenomena where Earth temporarily connects to Trimurti System-compatible universes. Rifts will transport Players, monsters, dungeons, treasures, and even landmasses from other worlds!*

***[Incursions]** are time-limited and centered around rifts; check the closest location with your Logs option. Experience gains will be boosted and extremely rare items will spawn within the rifts’ vicinity.*

*Thanks to your hard work, the **[Level Barrier]** has now been raised to 60!*

“Sixty?” Basil choked in horror. “Is that a typo?”

"I read sixty too, sir," Zachariel replied grimly as he watched his own screen. "This is... bothersome."

Oh right, and Paris had a minor weather problem. Before Basil could wonder how and why they jumped from a level limit of 25 to 60, the System somehow managed to pile up another bomb atop the pile of bad news.

Players, monsters, and dungeons up to level 60 will be able to cross over! Existing dungeons will also increase in difficulty!

The [Incursion] will begin in 72 hours and last for a full Earth week (168 hours for those who can't count)! You can't miss it, but you can survive it!

Dismaker Labs wishes you a happy apocalypse.

The head start was welcome, but the event's length caused Basil's blood to freeze in his veins. He reread the message twice, to make sure he hadn't misread.

The first question that crossed his mind was: what had Dismaker Labs' board been smoking? What kind of magical drug could make a *week-long interdimensional invasion* look like a good idea?

The second was, did they even control the process? Did anyone?

"A week," Basil whispered in shock. "A week."

The next Incursion would last for a *full week*.

The last one took five hours to end, during which tide after tide of monsters emerged from the rifts. Even Basil's team hadn't managed to slay all the creatures that spawned out of Dax's portal.

He doubted that all the creatures going through it would reach the maximum level, but if waves of monsters in their thirties or forties crossed over...

"What the hell were they thinking?" Basil wondered out loud. As if on cue, the stars shone brighter in the greenish sky. A golden circuit started to slowly link them together, as it did once in Dax. History was repeating itself. "How could they hope to survive this?"

“They did possess great powers,” Zachariel pointed out.

“Not enough to beat a party in their thirties,” Basil pointed out. “Unless... unless they expected to grow in power with the dungeons.”

That was the most likely explanation. When Ronald claimed Château Muloup, his level was set to align with his dungeon’s. He would only grow in power with Incursions.

It was the laziest method to gain power, one that demanded next to no effort except waiting for time; no doubt the board would flock to it. Pluto’s control over the Louvre Pyramid all but confirmed it.

“Pay-to-win users will be fine as always, but everyone else...” Basil shook his head. “Three days of calm followed by a week-long storm...”

Mankind was tethering at the edge, struggling to rebuild. The next Incursion would destroy all its progress and eradicate what was left of civilization. So few would survive...

“Sir, all is not lost,” Zachariel argued, though his trembling voice betrayed his doubts. “If we can destroy this city’s dungeons, perhaps we can slow down the process.”

Yeah, right, they still had time. “We need to capture Pluto within that time frame,” Basil replied. “If he administers the Neutotower network or part of it, we can force him to sabotage the Incursion before it begins.”

Hopefully.

It was a long shot, but Basil didn’t see any other alternative. He opened his Logs to check the closest rift. His System map showed him a swirling vortex located right above the Eiffel Tower.

Rift Destination: *Famine’s Wasteland.*

Ruling Faction: *Apocalypse Force.*

Max Spawn Level: *60.*

Bonus: *Experience gains are increased by 50% within ten kilometers of the rift. High-quality items will randomly appear within its vicinity.*

Field Type: *Desert.*

- *[Fire], [Earth], [Wind], and [Light] elements are empowered.*
- *[Wood], [Water], and [Frost] elements are weakened.*
- *[Sandstorm]: The [Sandstorm] weather condition will generate spontaneously at random intervals.*

Basil silently turned to face the Eiffel Tower. Thunderclouds gathered at the top of its tesla coil alongside crimson particles. No doubt would the rift snap open once the countdown reached its end.

*You have a new message from: **[Apollyon, Horseman of Famine]**. You can check it in your Logs.*

Basil opened it without fear. It was short and to the point.

APOLLYON: I told you, Bohen. I am coming. For you.

Basil glared at the Eiffel Tower, imagined it burning like a candle—like his house—and then forwarded his answer.

BASIL: Bring it, bug. I'll send you where you belong.

BASIL: Under my heel.

Chapter 28: Man vs Coffee

Metro 2033 had primed Basil for underground adventures.

Taking place after a nuclear war, the video game series—adapted from a book Basil had never gotten around to reading—showcased a society of survivors struggling in dense subway tunnels, with tribal factions fighting over supplies in an epic struggle rife with moral ambiguity. Basil had expected to kill neo-nazis with his right hand and strangle Marxist-Leninists with the left.

Yet reality turned out to be a disappointment, even after it started running on video game logic.

The dungeons' magic that turned Paris into an Egyptian exhibit affected its metro too. The underground was still the tangled maze of narrow passages, steep escalators, and train rails that Basil had learned to despise since his last visit to the city many years ago. Disappointingly, the changes since had been largely cosmetic: hieroglyphs appeared instead of ads plastered on the walls, and the smell of dry rot replaced the musty odor of the Parisian people. Fire Seeds dusted away a layer of sand covering the various train platforms. As for the vehicles themselves, naught but rusty husks remained of the once thriving fleet of subway trains.

No human pillagers had taken refuge underground, nor ambushed the party.

“We’ll build a gym here, to keep the rabbits healthy,” Buggy explained as he and Shellgirl gave Basil a tour of the ‘facilities.’ The two hadn’t wasted time clearing up the metro station. “It’ll be right between the spa and the tennis court.”

“Tennis?” Basil asked absentmindedly. The news about the Incursion occupied his mind and he could barely focus on the current discussion. “Why tennis?”

“Because a golf field would intimidate middle-class shoppers and scare them away,” Shellgirl explained as if it made any sense. “I’ve read in a book that tennis is more popular with average human income earners, and since Paris is the most developed region in France, we’ve got to hook these fishes by the balls. The tennis balls.”

Basil had always known that once the nuclear dust settled, only tennis players would survive to rebuild civilization. The world was just that unjust.

“But that’s in the far future, Boss,” Bugsy said as they walked past a train platform. Vasi helped Plato train with illusions on the other side of it. “For now the priority is the chicken coop.”

“Of course,” Basil replied, before freezing in place.

A snack vending machine stood right next to a coffee dispenser, both leaning against a stone wall covered in hieroglyphs. The sight alone was strange, but neither device showed signs of having been ransacked by desperate survivors. A quick glance at them confirmed Basil’s worries.

Muggy (Caffeine Mimic)

Level 21 [Artificial/Slime]

Guild: Homeowners Revenge Association (Shellgirl World Company).

Snackmaster (Snack Mimic)

Level 21 [Artificial/Slime]

Guild: Homeowners Revenge Association (Shellgirl World Company).

“A coffee machine mimic?” Basil shuddered. “Now that’s just evil.”

“Oh, I haven’t introduced you to our new recruits!” Shellgirl waved a hand at the two machines.

“This is Muggy and the stacked boy is Snackmaster! I found them in the tunnels and pitched them well!”

“Hello, Mr. Bohen!” the coffee machine said with a young boy’s voice. Eyes appeared above the device’s selection screen. “I’m so happy to join the Shellgirl World Company!”

“Yeah, it’s grinding time.” The snack machine’s delivery box opened to reveal teeth. “We’ll show you our resolve, sir!”

“I’m just the major shareholder,” Basil deadpanned. “Shellgirl is the managing partner.”

“That’s right, I’m the brain and he’s the mortgage,” Shellgirl gloated. “Now Partner, hear me out. These boys can produce real food and drinks after eating money. And who needs food and drinks nowadays?”

“Everybody?” Basil asked with a sigh.

“Exactly!” Shellgirl chirped. “Once the teleporting gate opens, humans with deep pockets will come out! We force demand to meet supply!”

“With a five percent cut!” the coffee machine chirped.

“I spent my time eating anyone passing by, but then Shellgirl told me I could make money without my food fighting back,” Snackmaster said. “You know what they say, steal from a human and you’ll be fed for a day. Teach him to steal for you, and you’ll be fed for a lifetime.”

“That sounds pretty smart,” Basil agreed. The longer he examined the coffee machine’s selection, the less he managed to resist his caffeine addiction. “Can I put in an order?”

“Muggy, this is your chance.” Shellgirl patted the coffee machine. “Try to pitch him as if he were a client!”

“I-I, I’ll give you a wish if you take a cappuccino!” The coffee machine let out worried sounds.

“I... I accept all currencies except rubles!”

“It tastes like vodka,” his snack machine twin said. “Pay me with it and I’ll vomit a live grenade.”

“Duly noted,” Basil replied before slipping old euro coins into Muggy’s hole. The coffee machine made a strange sound that sent shivers down his spine. A cup appeared in the detector and started to fill up with precious black liquid. It warmed Basil’s heart. Even if he were to die in three days, at least it would be with veins full of black, bitter liquid.

“So, uh...” Muggy’s words trailed off as the cup filled out. “Nice weather, uh?”

“If you call a giant rift in the sky threatening to exterminate my entire species nice, then yeah,” Basil replied sourly. He noticed Buggy and Shellgirl exchanging uncomfortable glances at his side. “It’s ‘nice’.”

“Oh, oh, that’s rough, buddy.” The coffee machine clearly struggled with small talk. “I struggle with future anxiety too. I always wonder when the next high-level monster will emerge from the tunnels to eat me.”

“How do you deal with it?” Basil asked. “The anxiety?”

“By brewing coffee,” the mimic replied. “I find purpose in simple things.”

Steaming hot milk dripped from the machine as Basil watched on in silence. The white liquid melted within the tight confines of the cup, tainting the bitter blackness of coffee brown. Basil couldn’t help but think of something else as he observed the scene unfolding before his eyes.

“I’m finished!” Muggy declared with pride. He sounded vaguely exhausted by the effort. “I hope you’ll like it! I poured my heart into it!”

Basil wondered if the mimic meant that literally as he seized the cup.

“Be gentle, Partner,” Shellgirl whispered. “You’re his first client.”

Basil Bohem was a coffee addict. Caffeine fueled his body and soul more than water. Yet for the first time in his life, he looked at a cup with apprehension rather than hunger.

“Y-You don’t like it?” Muggy asked in panic.

“It’s hot,” Basil said. He immediately regretted the turn of phrase. “I’ll drink it later.”

“Oh, okay. Take your time.” Muggy’s eyes closed in happiness. “And uh... about your question, can I suggest something?”

“Sure,” Basil replied absentmindedly.

“The world is a very complicated place. That’s what makes it scary, I think.” The coffee mimic let out a sound that sounded like dripping water. “When I was born a few months ago, everything felt so big and strange. I didn’t know what to do. So much stuff happened around me and I had no idea how to deal with it. So I stopped trying.”

“You can’t just ignore everything happening around you,” Basil pointed out. At least, *he* couldn’t.

“No, no, ah, I’m terrible at this…” Muggy paused a few seconds until he found the right words. “It’s not that I ignore all the complex stuff, it’s that I focus on the small things I can truly change; not the things that I *think* I can change. I can’t beat the high-level monsters around the city or clean up the tunnel… but I can brew coffee. If each cup I create brings happiness to someone, then it’ll have made a huge difference in the long-run.”

“I think the same too!” Buggy chirped happily. “Even if they walked over it, a fence will still slow down an invader for a few seconds. It might seem meaningless, but it could give a rabbit precious seconds to escape!”

“I don’t know what a rabbit is, but sure!” Muggy replied. “Small simple cups add up into big black puddles, see what I mean?”

“I do,” Basil replied. A little. Although he hadn’t expected that kind of philosophy from a sentient coffee machine, he felt a little happier from listening to the creature. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Muggy replied. “I’m always here if you need to talk!”

And like that, the mimic had earned its first repeat customer.

“Are there mimics for every home appliance?” Basil asked as Buggy and Shellgirl continued on with the visit. He heard the two mimic machines exchange tips to help clients feel better as he left them behind. Basil found it strangely uplifting.

“Almost,” Shellgirl replied. “We’re very good at adapting to new markets. At this point, the chests are probably extinct.”

“Many monsters in the tunnels were eager to join us rather than fight,” Buggy added. “The Incursion message spooked many of them.”

A wise choice. With the huge jump in power from the first Incursion to the second, weaker monsters faced a choice: either they struggled to earn as much experience as possible within the next three days… or they banded together for safety. Quantity was a quality all of its own.

“Shellgirl, Buggy.” Basil cleared his throat. “Why are you doing this?”

His two friends tensed up. “Doing what?” Shellgirl asked, pretending not to know.

“Apollyon will cross over the portal in three days flat. The next Incursion will kill millions unless we can stop it, something which may be entirely beyond our power.” Basil sighed. “So why this circus about tennis courts and adventurer economy? Shouldn’t you focus on more important matters?”

He didn’t want to scold them, not now, but he was at his wit’s end.

“We are focusing on what’s important, Partner,” Shellgirl replied with surprising seriousness. “Namely, lifting your spirits.”

Basil frowned in confusion, so Buggy went on to elaborate. “Shellgirl and I spoke after receiving the Incursion message, Boss. We thought you would appreciate a good distraction.”

“I appreciate the gesture,” Basil replied. “But we don’t have the time for it.”

“Look, Partner, we aren’t blind.” Shellgirl crossed her arms and stood her ground. “All that stuff about Apollyon, gods, Kalki, Dismaker Labs, and souls and whatever, it’s been weighing on your mind since that fight in Château Muloup. But you don’t *share* that weight.”

“Of course I don’t,” Basil snapped in frustration. At the end of the day, he was the leader of his little group. He set his party’s direction and his morale affected everyone else by osmosis. He couldn’t afford to look worried or confused, lest it become contagious.

“Boss, I admire you, I truly do,” Buggy said with worry. “But I have to tell the truth. Your behavior... It’s unhealthy. You take on all our fears and sadness on yourself until you drown in it.”

“You only really open up with Plato, and Vasi now that you’re dating her,” Shellgirl pointed out. “We want to help too.”

“You already do,” Basil reassured them. “But trying to change my mind isn’t the way to go—”

“It is!” Buggy snarled.

His sudden outburst snapped Basil out of his melancholy and made him step back in surprise. “Buggy...” he whispered, but the centimagma wouldn’t let him finish.”

“Boss, I have to set my foot down on this. Everything changed since the house was destroyed, I get that. Things will never return to how they were before. Our happier times are behind us.”

Bugsy let out a sigh of smoke.

“But there are happy times ahead of us too,” he said. “There are happy times happening now. That’s why we moved from one side of this human country to the other. Not to survive, but so we can live happy moments. Shellgirl and I wanted to remind you of what we’re fighting for, Boss.”

“Someone had to.” Shellgirl smiled kindly. “Vasi and Plato do their best, but we have to pick up the slack too. You said it yourself. This is a democracy. We all have to contribute or else it doesn’t work.”

“I...” Basil opened his mouth and closed it immediately. The wise opened their mouths because they had something to say, and the fools because they had to say something. Bugsy’s words had given him pause.

Indeed, it felt like a lifetime since Basil had left the house and his simpler life. Each new fight, each conflict had broadened his horizon and increased the scope of his war against Earth’s invaders. Basil had looked at an ever-increasing picture, until he forgot how much he enjoyed the smaller details.

Maybe Muggy was onto something. Maybe Basil needed to take his eyes off from the vastness of the universe when it overwhelmed him.

“Partner, I’ve realized something as we traveled,” Shellgirl said with a hand on her chest. “I’ve sold items to humans and bought others from monsters. And while I love money and grinding it out, neither is an end in itself.”

“Now you jest,” Basil teased her.

“I know.” Shellgirl chuckled, although her eyes showed her inner thoughts. She spoke from the heart. “What I wanted most of all was to make friends. To do something other than fight everyone I encounter, as this System demands.”

Basil had suspected as much for a while, so it didn't surprise him much. But to hear Shellgirl say it still shook him. He looked at her and remembered their first meeting, when she showed up at his house unannounced to peddle wares and wouldn't take no for an answer.

How much she had changed since.

"That's why I took these two in." Shellgirl glanced at her fellow mimics. "They're like me, small little monsters who don't have it in their heart to be *monsters*. They deserve our help too."

"Monster lives matter?" Basil said with a smile. "I'm kidding. I get it."

"You better." Shellgirl smirked. "It's not always about saving humans. Other lives count too."

Especially since many of these monsters were reincarnated humans in the first place. Basil briefly wondered if Shellgirl's maturity came from her past life, before realizing otherwise. She had survived an Apocalypse Force culling and came out of the experience wishing to become something more than a mindless killer.

Each monster was its own individual, unrelated to the past. Her wisdom was all her.

"Yeah." Basil nodded to himself. "Yeah, we'll make the world better. For humans and monsters alike. And we'll find happiness somewhere along the way."

"That's the spirit," Shellgirl said. "It's not always about business."

"I'm with you, Boss," Bugsy chirped. "Every step of the way."

Basil felt warmer inside, and not just for the coffee cup in his hand.

After this heart-to-heart chat, Shellgirl led the ground to a railway tunnel. Fire Seeds finished binding together a great ring of stone spanning the subway entrance. Zachariel traced runes of power on its surface.

"A Stargate prop?" Basil mused. "Is that truly necessary?"

"Perhaps not, Sir," Zachariel replied as he added the final symbol in a long sequence. "But Lair features aren't an exact science. All details help."

"Alright, it's my big moment." Bugsy gathered his breath. "Claim Lair!"

Bugsy registered the Lair: **Metro Station Maisons-Alfort Les Juilliottes**

LP: 36

Faction: Homeowners Revenge Association (The Bohens)

Field Type: Industrial.

- *[Corrosion], [Metal], [Fire], [Water], and [Lightning] elements are empowered.*
- *[Soul], [Wood], and [Wind] elements are weakened.*
- *[Improved Processes]: Buffs and positive effects last longer.*

The same Field Type as René's house. He hoped the mimics would grow attached to this station too.

"Teleport Circle, I, II, III!" Bugsy shouted. The ring of stone immediately started to glow as the feature activated. Basil drank his cappuccino while everyone watched the runes glowing on their own. "It's working!"

Space bent within the ring's confines and rippled like water. The surface took on a blue hue, much like a very famous TV series. Basil glimpsed vague reflections of a cathedral hall and stained glass on the other side.

Armored soldiers soon walked out of the functioning portal, Neria Elissalde first among them. To Basil's surprise, General Leblanc followed after the Major. The French leader had come not with a chest full of medals, but a bulletproof vest.

"Congratulations, Bugsy," Basil said before offering a military salute. "General? You came in person?"

"Of course," the old man replied before shaking Basil's hand. His hold was firm, but warm. "You have taken great risks to reach this place and help establish a foothold, so I came to congratulate you in person. What kind of war commander does not visit the front now and then?"

The cowardly kind. Basil was glad that at least some authorities rose up to the challenge rather than staying safe at the rear.

"I am glad that you all made it through to Paris in one piece," said the General as he surveyed the area. "Is your dragon outside?"

"She's keeping watch over the entrance, since she can't fit inside the tunnels," Basil replied. "I've designed a workaround, but since it'll weaken her I intended to keep it for later."

"We'll relieve you." The General turned to a few of his soldiers. "Go outside and establish a defensive perimeter."

"Yes, Sir," the soldiers replied before moving towards the exit in short order. Their firearms glowed with the power of runes. More of their comrades crossed the portal to occupy the metro station.

"How many soldiers did you bring?" Basil asked.

"Not much," the General admitted with a scowl. "The new Incursion forced me to reassess my plans. Our allies report rifts forming all across Europe."

Basil could read between the lines. Since the chances of preventing the Incursion were slim to none, the army needed to deploy forces to secure other population centers rather than focus on Paris. Basil couldn't fault them. Blowing up dungeons and capturing Benjamin Leroy were both long shots.

"I sent you as many squads as I could afford to." General Leblanc turned to face Neria. "The Major will be in charge of them."

"Unfortunately, it will take us a few days to bring our heavy equipment through the portal," Neria said, her arms folded. "We should be ready by the day of the Incursion, but we'll be undermanned until then."

"So we'll infiltrate the pyramid on our own," Basil decided. He had already planned as much without expecting support. "Apollyon will enter our world through Paris' portal in three days."

"Oh, we'll welcome him properly." Neria smiled. "We're bringing heavy artillery. We'll shell the bugs with lead and death."

"I love the sound of that," Shellgirl commented with a grin. "I can't wait to eat Apollyon."

"I thought you were a vegetarian?" Bugsy asked in confusion.

"I will make an exception for him," the mimic replied, her arms folding. "That hornet deserves it."

"It's payback time," Basil said. "One way or another, he won't escape Paris alive. I swear it."

The General nodded in agreement. "We must prevent the Horseman of Famine from crossing over if we can, and if we fail, destroy him before he can establish a foothold on this side of the rift. His demise will be a crippling blow to the Apocalypse Force."

"What about the Unity?" Basil asked. "Anything new from their side?"

"That's the great unknown," General Leblanc conceded. "The ISS is positioned above Paris in a stationary orbit. I suspect they have learned of Apollyon's arrival and intend to intercept him once he crosses over. We have plans in place to shoot down the ISS if necessary, but I've decided to hold off for now. Orbital missiles are a trump card we can't afford to overplay."

Neria's expression turned grimmer. "Basil, I will be on standby if you ever need to activate... you know what."

The Baguette.

The nuclear activation device remained safely in Basil's inventory for the entire trip to Paris. He had considered using it to blow up the Louvre Pyramid from afar and be done with it, but Kalki's presence inside the dungeon complicated matters.

"Can't use it yet," Basil said. "Not until Kalki is safe and sound. Even then, I'm not sure it would destroy the dungeons. These things can recover from almost any damage unless the core server is destroyed."

"There is another alternative," the General pointed out. "Rifts work both ways, correct? If we fail to prevent the portal above Paris from opening, we can simply send the package through. It would deal a powerful blow to the Apocalypse Force."

It would be one way to off Apollyon for sure. Yet somehow Basil doubted it would be as easy to pull off as it sounded.

“I won’t judge,” General Leblanc said. “As I told you in Bordeaux, Bohen, you and Major Elissalde have carte blanche to make the call.”

“I hope we won’t have to use it,” Neria admitted. “But if the situation worsens... we might not have a choice.”

“Yeah, I agree.” Basil nodded. “Alright then, we’ll be on our way to the catacombs then. We’ll stay in touch through the Logs to coordinate.”

“Before you leave, young man, I have some good news I wanted to impart on you.” Much to Basil’s surprise, both General Leblanc and Major Elissalde smiled at him. “It’s confirmed. She is alive.”

Basil’s heart skipped a beat. He had a pretty good idea of who the General was speaking of, but he still felt compelled to ask. “Who?”

“Your mother, of course,” the older man replied.

How strange how two simple words could weigh so heavily on a son’s mind. They rang in the back of Basil’s mind as his comrades turned to look at him with unreadable eyes. His facial expression didn’t change, but his mind worked furiously to process this new information.

“Aleksandra Bohen, wife of the late Dragan Bohen, mother of Basil Bohen and currently working in Varna’s suburbs as a grocery shopkeeper,” Neria listed. “That’s her, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Basil replied. His throat suddenly dried up, and he struggled to come up with an answer. “Yes.”

“Your countrymen showed their mettle,” General Leblanc said with a hint of respect. “A large guild of them, the Swords of Saint George, has managed to maintain order in the eastern side of Bulgaria. Their leadership informed me that your mother was evacuated to a safe zone soon after the System’s arrival.”

The news filled Basil’s heart with pride. He always knew the proud Bulgarian people would triumph over anything.

Yet, as much as it shamed him, a part of Basil had already expected his mother to have perished in the apocalypse. She was a middle-aged shopkeeper on her way to retirement, not a

soldier. Basil doubted she ever unlocked a fighting class of any kind. In a way, it had made it easier for her son to process the apocalypse. He couldn't fear for his mother's safety if he had already lost her. Out of sight, out of mind.

He had been mistaken. His mother had survived against all odds.

Basil wasn't sure what he felt at this realization. He hadn't spoken to his mother in a long, long time, though he still cared for her. None of their issues nor disagreement could change the fact that they were family.

"Can I talk to her?" Basil asked. His own words surprised him. Six months ago, he wouldn't have uttered them.

"Not today, young man," the General replied. "Sadly."

"But soon," Neria promised. "I'm working to establish a line of communication. I owe you that."

"I... I would be thankful." Basil nodded sharply. "Thank you, Neria."

Basil expected the threat of the next Incursion to fill his heart with doubt. Instead, he peaked with newfound resolve. His friends were there for him, and he would live to talk to his family again.

No matter the cost.

Chapter 29: Man vs Catacombs

The tunnels were grinning at Basil.

He almost missed the cold, sterile walls of the Paris underground. There was no one beneath the city's concrete, no water or people—only dreadful silence. The transit system had fallen into disrepair, leaving its tunnels empty and almost safe to journey through. It should have been a sign that something terrible frightened monsters away from the city's depths, but the party progressed through them nonetheless. They had rested and prepared as much as the ticking clock would allow. They had traveled through the subway, used Bugsy to dig tunnels whenever they encountered a roadblock, and finally found a way into the catacombs three hours into their search.

In doing so, they had left the comfort of civilization for the world of the dead.

Corpses formed the catacombs' foundations. Walls of skulls supported arched ceilings of bones, kept barely illuminated by ephemeral ghostlights. The place felt neither cold nor warm; the air was dry and thick with dust. Strange noises often echoed through this maze of death: pained cries, cracking bones, and the sound of an invisible wind blowing in the distance.

"Still nothing?" Basil asked Bugsy as he and the centimagma advanced at the group's vanguard. His fiery halberd provided a measure of light, as did a flame floating inside Vasi's opened hand. "We were told this place was crawling with undead monsters."

"I detect footsteps a few tunnels ahead, Boss," Bugsy whispered back, his voice so low that Basil could barely hear him. "But they're few and far between."

"I smell dust and rot everywhere," Plato warned behind Basil. Although the cat was usually sent ahead of the group to scout, the current terrain made it a risky proposition. Basil had seen enough *Indiana Jones* and *Mummy* movies to know that underground tombs always included trapdoors and closing walls. The party couldn't afford to split up. "This place gives me the creeps."

“Wait for me,” Rosemarine protested as she closed the march. Once as long as a bus, she had shrunk to the size of a large alligator. “I miss open spaces...”

Rosemarine’s size had presented quite the challenge for Basil: the tropidrake was too big to fit into the tunnels, but also integral to the party’s composition and a trusted teammate. He had considered switching her for Zachariel—who remained at the Lair base with Neria—before finding a different solution.

His *Jekyll & Stein* alchemy manual had once again proved its weight in gold. One of its potions, *Gulliver’s Drink*, allowed the user to temporarily shrink in size for hours at the cost of halving physical stats for the same duration. Basil managed to craft three doses, enough to let Rosemarine accompany the party into the catacombs. Somehow, dwarfism had made her even cuter.

Basil had nicknamed this form *Chibimarine*.

“How far are we from the dungeon?” Vasi asked Shellgirl, who was busy examining the team’s maps.

“Close,” Shellgirl replied. “We need to take left at the next crossroads and then right. We’re almost to the quarry.”

Which, according to BuzzBand’s map, was the junction between the catacombs and Pluto’s dungeon. Basil suspected that the Louvre’s plaza was right above their heads.

“We have progressed so far and yet to face opposition.” Vasi shook her head. “I can’t believe our foes wouldn’t send anyone to patrol the underground.”

“Me neither,” Basil said grimly. “The catacombs aren’t exactly a state secret either. We should have encountered resistance by now.”

Basil’s eyes darted from one wall to another. The skulls and bones making up the foundations often formed ghastly designs of broken hearts, arrows, and Christian crosses. He stopped upon noticing fingerbones assembled into a sentence.

Lasciate ogni speranza, voi que entrate.

“Abandon all hope, ye who enter here,” Basil translated. “How charming.”

“Be wary, handsome,” Vasi warned him. “I disabled a few trap glyphs as we walked. These words can trigger curses if spoken aloud.”

“Duly noted,” Basil replied, only for Buggy to freeze in place. “What is it?”

“Enemies incoming, Boss,” the centimagma warned, his antennae touching the ground as he spoke. “Two of them, maybe more.”

Basil cursed. Their luck had to run out at one point. “Can we avoid them?”

“I don’t think so, Boss,” Buggy replied. “They’re in our way.”

“All right, then let’s finish them off quickly before they can sound the alarm.” Basil almost welcomed the interruption after the monotone, underground journey. “Everyone, time to buff it up.”

“Be thankful, I shall grace you with my new illusion powers!” Plato joined his palm and activated his new sorcery. “Mirage!”

“Good work, oh king of cats,” Vasi said before casting her favorite spell. “Hasten.”

“Motivate!” Shellgirl added.

The buffs empowered Basil and swiftly spread to his team.

[Mirage] status! Your chances of dodging Physical attacks are doubled for three minutes!

[Hasten] status! Your speed is doubled for two minutes!

Your accuracy and critical hit chances have been increased for five minutes!

[All for One] shared your buffs with your allies!

A pity Basil couldn’t drink Vasi’s mind-protecting potion yet. Since it canceled shapeshifting effects, it would disable Rosemarine’s chibi form and immediately return her to normal size. Hopefully, he wouldn’t need it until they reached the pyramid.

The enemy appeared at the end of the tunnel.

Basil blinked in surprise at the sight. Instead of a monster, a little human girl no older than ten stood in the party's way. She was white and immaculate from her feet and dress to her skin and eyes. Her facial features were blurry, to the point Basil struggled to recognize her face.

[Monster Insight] cannot work on this target.

"Who are you?" Basil asked, raising his halberd for battle. "Doesn't matter if you look underage, I'll hit you anyway."

"Poor choice of words," Plato joked, causing Vasi to chuckle. "She's too old for you anyway."

Before Basil could utter a clever retort, the white girl vanished as swiftly as she appeared.

"Huh?" Shellgirl asked. "What was that?"

"I didn't hear her coming," Bugsy apologized. "I'm sorry, Boss."

"I couldn't read her stats," Vasi said. "She must have been an illusion."

"Nah, I can see through those," Plato replied. "As creepy as it sounds, she was real."

"Quiet, all of you," Basil whispered. "Bugsy said two monsters are nearby. They could be—"

"Who's there?" a voice called from the next tunnel.

Listening. Basil cursed as two shambling mummies walked into sight, their bandages wrapped around jewels and golden funerary masks.

Mummy Guardians

Level 30 [Undead/Humanoid]

Faction: Metal Olympus (Psychopompos).

Immune: Soul, all ailments.

Resist: Frost, Earth, Darkness, Mythic.

Weak: Deadslayer, Manslayer, Wood, Life, Water, Light.

The new vanguard of the Franco-Egyptian fashion circuit, these monsters showcase the latest trend in funerary practices. Undeath: don't settle on lifelike.

Oh, and they had rifles.

"I told you, Seti!" one of the mummies rasped. "I heard vermin!"

"Shoot them!" its companion shouted. The monster raised its weapon at the Bohens, his finger twitching on the trigger. "Shoot—"

Basil and Buggy closed the gap between them in the blink of an eye. Their bodies blurred from the sheer speed, surprising the mummies before they could open fire. Basil sliced one in half in a single swing, head to groin, while Buggy crushed the other's skull with his mandibles.

"Basil, above you!" Plato shouted a warning.

Basil looked up to see a scythe phasing through the ceiling.

The blade fell as swiftly as a guillotine, but Basil's Hasten buff let him dodge. The scythe cut through the ground, and its wielder revealed itself as a cloaked specter with a skull for a face. As Basil pivoted to strike back, shouts echoed through the tunnel. Bedsheet ghosts with flames for eyes and shuttered mouths emerged from the walls to strike with blackened hands of solid shadows.

Basil cursed his lack of foresight. Of course underground catacombs would be teeming with ghosts! Since they were intangible, neither Buggy nor Plato's enhanced senses could detect them!

Deathscythe

Level 29 [Undead]

Faction: Metal Olympus (Psychopompos).

Tomb Hunter

Level 18 [Undead]

Faction: Metal Olympus (Psychopompos).

Basil moved too fast to make full use of his Monster Insight Perk, and he didn't need it. Their enemies were all Undead Types; that fact alone spelled their demise.

The scythe monster swung his weapon in an attempt to behead Buggy before the centimagma could recover from his surprise. Basil parried the blow, their blades locking. Buggy immediately attempted to back up his friend by striking the specter, but his mandibles harmlessly phased through its incorporeal substance.

"Physical attacks won't help," Vasi warned as she blasted a ghost with fire and fury. Shellgirl stored the maps in her inventory before firing ice projectiles in all directions. Plato struck with blades of wind as more specters emerged from the walls. "Use fire and magic!"

"Pick a god and pray, strangers," the reaper taunted Basil as it raised its scythe for another strike. "You're outnumbered."

"Perhaps." Basil swung his halberd with all his might, cut through the scythe, and sliced the undead spirit in half. The undead could only stare in shock as the Soulbound weapon shredded its incorporeal form. "But you're outmatched!"

Supereffective hit! Critical hit!

One blow was all it took.

By the time the reaper had dissipated into a cloud of smoke, Basil was already moving on to the next target. His Soulbound halberd tore through one ghost after another, slaying them in one blow. Having recovered from his surprise, Buggy switched to his fiery breath and blasted one ghost after another with it.

"Mister, Mister!" Only Rosemarine struggled to pull her weight, as the lack of luminosity prevented her from using her beam attack. She was reduced to fruitlessly snapping her jaw at enemies she couldn't harm. "I wither in the dark!"

"Let's move to a larger room!" Vasi suggested. "The walls and tight space favors them!"

"To the crossroads beyond!" Shellgirl shouted.

Empowered by Hasten, the party crossed through the tunnel with dozens of lesser ghosts hot on their tail. The specters failed to catch up to them, and the group swiftly reached a hall of skulls where four paths crossed.

Vasi and Buggy immediately welcomed their pursuers with a sea of flames, dispelling the weak ghosts in a torrent of fire. Half a dozen reapers emerged from the walls to replace them.

So much for infiltration. They had fallen right into an ambush.

“All right, fine, you don’t want to play a stealth game?” Basil summoned his laser pistol from his inventory, lifting his halberd with his left hand and his firearm with the right one. “I’m up for a hit ‘em all!”

“Another kill count competition, handsome?” Vasi mused as she gathered flames in her hand. “I’ll win again.”

“Shadowscythe!” a reaper snarled in response. A volley of black sickles materialized from its fingers and flew straight at the Bohens.

Empowered by their buffs, the party dispersed across the hall to dodge the attack and struck back with relentless speed and ferocity. Basil’s eyes struggled to keep track of his faster allies’ movements, but he didn’t need to worry for them. Plato dodged projectiles and scythes alike, his blades of wind cutting through bones and specters like tissue paper. Vasi and Shellgirl stood back to back, each of them unleashing fire and ice in one direction. Buggy activated Agility Up and became so fast that his body turned into a red blur. Only Rosemarine struggled to fight back without her lightbeam, though she managed to dodge attacks and run circles around the ghosts.

As for Basil, his world could be reduced to a single System message.

Supereffective hit! Critical hit!

Supereffective hit! Critical hit!

Supereffective hit! Critical hit!

The words repeated with each fatal blow that he landed. Basil’s build, once all over the place, now showed its emerging potential. The buffs provided by his allies enhanced the strengths of

his other classes and hard-earned equipment, allowing him to dish out lethal blows left and right. Every monster that met his blade dropped dead—or deader—in short order.

Two surviving reapers stood back from the chaos, spooked by the one-sided massacre. “How many buffs do they have?” one of them asked in shock. “How could they...”

“They’re too strong,” its comrade rasped, its ghoulish visage twisted into an expression of abject fear. “We can’t gain any ground!”

“Then let’s bury them under it!” Another reaper moved towards a wall, its phantom hand phasing through a skull at the center of a Christian cross design. “Alone with the dead!”

Basil immediately realized the danger and rushed at the reaper. The other remaining scythe-wielder moved to intercept him, and although a halberd swing slew it in one blow, the delay allowed its undead kindred from completing its task.

The skull’s orbits shone with a bright blue hue, and a ‘clicking’ sound echoed through the tunnel. The walls trembled with a roaring noise. A layer of dust fell onto Basil’s head, a warning of the disaster to come.

“Boss, the ceiling is collapsing!” Buggy warned.

Those cowards!

“No recall or intervention can work in this place!” the ghost declared with a burst of wicked laughter. “You will never see the sunlight aga—”

Vasi shot the specter with a fire blast before it could finish its sentence, dispelling it.

“Follow me!” Buggy shouted, rushing through a tunnel on the left with his antennae touching the ground. “This way!”

“After him!” Basil shouted as the Bohens followed their ally. Buggy charged through the maze of tunnels, trusting his Tremorsense to guide the party through them. Skulls fell from the ceiling and Basil deflected them with his halberd before they could hit him.

The race lasted more than a minute, forcing Vasi to cast Hasten on her boyfriend again to keep the team up to speed. Basil heard a loud crack behind him, and looked over his shoulder to see

the tunnel collapsing behind Rosemarine and Plato. Both cat and tropidrake rushed as fast as they could to escape an incoming cloud of dust and debris.

Bugsy took a corner, but Basil blinked upon seeing that it led to a wall of skulls. "Dead end!" he shouted in alarm.

But Bugsy didn't slow down. In fact, the centimagma cast Agility Up once again as he charged headfirst into the wall. His mighty body shattered skulls and bones on impact, blowing a hole for the party to escape through.

Basil didn't hesitate. He stored his pistol back in his inventory, grabbed Vasi's hand, and leaped with her through the hole.

The landing on the other side wasn't very glorious. The party fell from a small height upon one another, with Basil crash-landing on Bugsy's back and serving as an unexpected cushion for his girlfriend and cat alike. The tunnel collapsed behind them, with a flood of bone debris closing the hole behind them.

"Ugh..." Basil coughed dust as Vasi rolled off his back. He glanced around himself, and to his relief, all his team had made it through the catacombs unharmed. "Is everyone all right?"

"I'm fine, Boss," Bugsy replied before rising back up. "I didn't feel a thing."

"Speak for yourself." Plato scoffed. His black fur was covered in dust. "I'm dirty! Dirty!"

"I'll heal you, Mister Plato," Rosemarine said before glowing brightly. The room they had landed in was better lit than the catacombs, allowing her to use her Perks. "Sunbath."

The healing light cleared away Basil's exhaustion as his buffs ran out and the System awarded them experience.

Congratulations, your party earned 970,000 EXP (54000 for you). You earned two levels (total 38).

"Thanks for the landing pad, Basil," Vasi whispered as she helped her boyfriend rise back to his feet. "Your back is very soft, you know? I could get used to it."

“Please don’t make it a habit,” Basil grumbled. At first look, his party had landed in some kind of ancient underground quarry. A hall of stone large enough to house an airport opened before them, with dizzyingly tall pillars of stone holding a dark ceiling over ten meters high. Burning hieroglyphs covered the walls and repelled the darkness with bright light. “Good job, Buggy. Your quick thinking saved us all.”

“Oh Boss, you’re making me blush,” the centimagma replied with happy eyes. “It was nothing.”

“No need for false modesty, Buggy,” Shellgirl said with a grin. “We owe you our lives.”

“One of them at least,” Plato said. “But how did you know this path would be safe?”

“I, uh...” Buggy scoffed in embarrassment. “I sensed the walls were very porous in the last tunnel over. Considering the local architecture, I guessed that it meant they bordered the quarry.”

“So you knew because you’re an architecture nerd?” Plato deadpanned.

“What’s a nerd?” Rosemarine asked naïvely. “How does it taste?”

“Either bitter or very sweet,” Vasi joked. “So... is this the quarry we were looking for?”

“If you ask me...” Shellgirl raised a finger at a distant structure. “My merchant sense tells me this is our place.”

Basil’s gaze followed her lead.

As weird as it looked, a seven-floor modern building of concrete stood at the quarry’s center. Shaped like a three-sided star, the structure supported the ceiling alongside the stone pillars. The remains of petrified trees and empty ponds surrounded its gates of steel. Thousands of stained glass windows covered the façade, preventing outsiders from seeing the horrors inside. In spite of being located deep underground, the building appeared strangely well-preserved.

A bronze sign written in both English and French loomed over its entrance.

UNESCO

United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization

“The UNESCO HQ,” Basil whispered. The place where it all began. The building Kalki desired to visit above all else.

Dungeon: *Louvre Pyramid*

Level: *Variable.*

Faction: *Metal Olympus*

Field Type: *Tartarus.*

- *[Soul], [Corrosion], [Fire], [Earth], [Darkness], and [Mythic] elements are strengthened.*
- *[Wood], [Water], and [Light] elements are weakened.*
- *Healing effects are halved and chances of suffering from [Insta-Death] are doubled.*
- *All creatures that die in the Field will rise up at sundown as mindless [Undead] Types.*

As BuzzBand had warned, the Pyramid had assimilated the UNESCO into itself. Basil suspected that ascending through the building’s floors would lead them straight into the Louvre’s halls.

Level variable? Basil gritted his teeth as he read the dungeon’s stats. *Of course these cheaters won’t play by everyone else’s rules.*

“Looks like we exorcized the ghosts,” Shellgirl noted. The path to the catacombs was closed by a hill of dirt and broken bones, and with it, their escape route. “That, or they’ve decided to cut their losses and flee.”

“We should assume the worst, sad as it sounds,” Vasi said. “One of them might be warning their master as we speak.”

“Agreed, let’s move before reinforcements arrive.” Basil looked up at the windows. The building appeared empty and silent, with no enemy to welcome his team outside its walls. Yet he felt an invisible pressure on his shoulders.

The disturbing sensation of being watched.

Chapter: Man vs Shadows

The UNESCO House had seen better days.

Once a respected beacon of culture in a city famous for it, the building had been turned into a dusty Egyptian museum. The walls had aged centuries in the span of weeks, their ochre paint crumbling in some places. Oak shelves and furniture formed a rich Baroque decor covered in dust. Oil lamp flames flickered on the ceiling

Since the central elevator had transformed into a pillar of stones and bricks, the party was forced to explore the ground floor instead of moving straight to the summit. Plato followed the smell of old books and dusty paper, swiftly leading the ground to a vast underground library. Massive rows of shelves full of grimoires, scrolls, and other documents sprawled out before the group.

“So many books,” Shellgirl said. “It’s even bigger than Dax’s library!”

“The UNESCO public archives,” Basil whispered upon recognizing the room. “Bugsy, do you sense any threats?”

“Not on this floor, Boss,” the centimagma replied. “But I sense vibrations above us.”

“Enemies?” Vasi asked sharply.

“No, I don’t think so. It’s more diffused, like...” Bugsy squinted. “Like our house’s generators.”

Basil frowned in confusion. The dungeon’s power had removed any electrical system from the UNESCO building, from lightswitches to computers. Why would an Egyptian tomb cosplay require electricity?

“Let’s follow these noises,” Basil said. “They should lead us upstairs. Be on your guard, other ghosts might jump at us through the walls.”

“Can we take a few of these books?” Shellgirl pointed at the shelves of scrolls. “It just feels sad to leave these books behind. Some of them are spellbooks, no, even better... they’re *treasures*.”

“Careful, Shellgirl,” Vasi warned. “I sense magic in the air.”

“Traps?” Basil asked warily.

“Of course there are traps,” Plato deadpanned. “Look at this place!”

“Perhaps,” Vasi replied. “I wouldn’t rush in. Give me a few minutes to secure the area first.”

Basil nodded. They had survived a cave-in already, he was in no hurry to trigger another. “All right, let’s check this room carefully before proceeding. I’ll use that time to report to Neria.”

“Don’t forget to assign your levels too, Partner,” Shellgirl suggested with a grin. “More power, less headaches.”

A wise suggestion. Considering the number of undead monsters lurking in the area, Basil decided to progress further into his Deathknight class.

Deathknight of the Sepulchre Level 3&4 Stat Gains: +2 STR, +1 AGI, +2 VIT, +1 SKI, +2 MAG, +1 INT, +2 CHA, +1 LCK. *You earned 60 HP and 30 SP.*

Death’s Banner I (Active): *[Support], 10 SP per minute. Your faith empowers your party members, granting a [Deadslayer] effect (x3 damage against Undead types) to their attacks. Additionally, your allies are immune to the [Terror], [Zombie], and [Insta-Death] ailments so long as they benefit from [Death’s Banner].*

This ability will affect your Guild.

Basil had hoped for a Soulbound weapon upgrade, but his new Perk more than made up for the disappointment. If they had any sense, their undead foes would stay right in their graves.

The group split up to explore the library. Vasi and Shellgirl reviewed the shelves, with the former quickly deactivating trap hieroglyphs protecting the books; Plato and Buggy advanced carefully around the room, checking its walls; and Rosemarine faithfully guarded the rear. Basil opened his Logs subsystem and swiftly contacted Neria. The Major, Zachariel, and their team remained on standby in preparation for the Incursion, but they stood ready to assist the Bohens if needed.

BASIL: *We’re inside the UNESCO building. Place looks empty, but the path to the catacombs is cut off. We can’t retreat anymore.*

NERIA: Shit. Need a distraction? We can bombard the pyramid from outside, make a ruckus so you can slip through in the chaos.

BASIL: Thanks, but not yet. They haven't sent a big group to intercept us so far, so they don't consider us an urgent threat yet.

NERIA: All right, I'm on standby if you need assistance from outside the Pyramid. How's UNESCO from the inside?

BASIL: Packed with dust and books.

NERIA: Extract everything you can through the Guild Inventory. Since UNESCO cooperated with Dismaker Labs to install the servers, any document–shipment deliveries, contracts, blueprints–could help us. Grab them all.

BASIL: All? There are hundreds of books in this place, maybe thousands. How are we supposed to identify those that matter from the rest?

NERIA: Don't bother. Send them all. We'll ship them immediately to safehouses for investigation and sort them out on our end.

BASIL: Roger that, stay in touch.

Thank God the army would take over administrative duties. Basil loathed those from the bottom of his heart.

“Everyone, store all the books you can in the Guild Inventory,” Basil relayed the demand. “Any of them could be important.”

“You don't need to ask me twice,” Shellgirl replied greedily as she grabbed one book after another, the documents vanishing in her inventory. “Oh, business records! I'm always looking to study those!”

“Grab anything from 2020 and onward in priority,” Basil ordered. “Doubly so if it mentions Dismaker Labs.”

“Mister, can I sing a battle song?” Rosemarine pleaded. “I'm bored.”

This gave Basil an idea. He summoned Kalki's conch shell from his inventory, and started playing notes as Rosemarine hummed words to herself. "Bloodshed was my delight," she sang softly, "Bloodshed my heart of ice... bloodshed was my heart of ash!"

A pity Rosemarine couldn't access classes. She would make an excellent bard. As the conch shell melody echoed in the library hall, an arrow of light materialized above Basil's head. It pointed west, slightly inclined towards the ceiling.

"Diagonal..." Basil whispered in shock, interrupting his song. "It's diagonal."

"Boss?" Buggy asked in confusion.

"Kalki is in this building," Basil explained, pointing at the arrow. "If he were far above us in the pyramid, this tracker would look almost entirely vertical. The fact that it does not mean that he's in one of the floors above us."

"From that angle, he must be on the seventh floor or close," Vasi guessed. "What's on this floor?"

"A panoramic restaurant according to the maps," Basil answered. "But that was before the building became a dungeon. It could be a jail now for all that we know."

"Guys, check this!" Plato shouted. He and Buggy had stopped in front of an unremarkable stone wall. "This is the way upstairs!"

"You've found a secret passage?" Shellgirl asked with a frown. "I don't see anything."

"I thought merchants could smell falsehood from a mile away?" Plato taunted her back. "Look and learn."

The cat raised a paw and touched the wall. His fingers phased through other bricks as if they didn't exist.

"An illusion?" Vasi asked, whistling. "I didn't even detect it. How did you find out, oh king of cats?"

"I'm immune to illusions," Plato replied with pride. "I don't see a wall, I see stairs."

“Congratulations, Plato, you’re now our stairfinder general,” Basil mused. “Don’t abuse your privilege.”

“If you find any hidden chests, I’ll let you keep a ten percent finder fee,” Shellgirl added with a grin. She had finished storing all documents she could get her hands on, leaving the shelves empty. Since the number of stolen books surpassed the Guild Inventory storage capacity, Basil suspected that Neria removed them as soon as they appeared in her System folder.

“Fifty fifty,” Plato insisted, causing Shellgirl to choke in outrage. “What’s the point of having a monopoly if you can’t fix your prices?”

Basil rolled his eyes as his teammates argued over their ‘rates’ and swiftly walked through the illusory wall. A spiraling staircase of stone awaited him on the other side, illuminated by the faint light of torches.

The path led to the first floor and then the second, but the Bohens stopped for neither. They continued to ascend as far as the staircase allowed.

Plato, who had joined Basil at the team’s vanguard, suddenly froze in place. His reaction put the rest of the team on their guard. “You hear something?” Basil whispered, his halberd ready to strike on a moment’s notice.

“Unfortunately, I do,” Plato replied with an annoyed sigh. “I hear hippie music.”

Basil’s heart skipped a beat. He applied his ear to the nearest wall, closed his eyes, and focused. A flute melody echoed in the distance, barely audible. Without his high Skill stat, he probably wouldn’t have been able to notice it through the stone.

“A flute song,” Basil whispered. He had already heard this particular melody back in the Barthes. “Kalki’s song.”

It had taken them many months, but at long last the party had caught up to their old friend.

Unfortunately, the stairway stopped before they could reach the right floor. The steps of stone led the group to an archway of red bricks, with the number four written above it. “The fourth floor,” Basil said. “The secretariat.”

"I hear footsteps, Boss," Bugsy warned, his antennae touching the ground in alarm. "Heavy steps. A big, *big* creature awaits us ahead."

"They've rolled out the red carpet for us," Vasi guessed with a smile. "Let's not disappoint them. They've gone through the hassle of preparing a fine ambush."

"I hope I can bite our next meal," Rosemarine said. "When I evolve again, I will eat their souls."

"My new Perk should help with that," Basil said. "Death's Banner."

A shadowy aura materialized around him, before swiftly spreading to the rest of his party. Vasi followed through with the Hasten spell, Plato with his Mirage buff, and Shellgirl with Motivate. The enhancements empowered the team for battle.

The Bohens walked into the next room. Basil half-expected cramped offices and old desks, and instead walked straight into a strange art gallery. A massive exposition wing around fifteen meters wide and nine meters tall sprawled before them, its opaque, tempered glass walls covered in burning hieroglyphs; from its sheer size, this part of the building incorporated both the fourth, fifth, and sixth floors. Marble statues of Egyptian deities, from Horus to Anubis, stood in rows around a carpeted line. They watched the group in silence, still and sinister.

Plato sighed. "The statues are going to wake up and attack us, aren't they?"

"At least the Venus of Milo is armless," Basil mused. "Bugsy, Rosemarine, wreck them all."

"On it, Boss!" Bugsy replied.

"Yes, Mister!" Rosemarine added with enthusiasm. The two monsters immediately started tossing the statues from their pedestals, with Shellgirl wincing at each act of destruction. Although the task caused a lot of ruckus, better safe than sorry.

None of the statues fought back.

Basil carefully walked inside the gallery and noticed a bright red light at the end of it. The gallery linked up with two others at a crossroads, which was probably the center of the three-sided UNESCO building. A stream of red particles surged from the ground and to the ceiling above, so intense that Basil could barely see anything past it. When he approached closely enough, he noticed the shadow of a black tower beyond the forcefield.

“The neurotower,” Basil guessed. “This is the forcefield protecting it.”

“That’s impossible, it’s not even the entire structure!” Shellgirl replied. “The server would have to be *colossal!*”

“Hypathia told us that this dungeon served as a special node in the server network,” Vasi pointed out. Her eyes darted to the ceiling. “The neurotower must reach all the way to the Pyramid.”

Was Kalki trying to sabotage it? Basil could hear his melody through the ceiling. He glanced at his allies, who had finished breaking all the statues without issues. “Bugsy, you said you heard footsteps?”

“I do, Boss.” Bugsy glanced at the ceiling. “It’s right above us and moving in our direction.”

“Then let’s check the room for a pass—” Basil couldn’t finish his sentence. His eyes had noticed movement near the forcefield.

The little white girl from before had appeared again. Her specter materialized in front of the forcefield, before flickering away within seconds. She was gone in a blink.

“Now this is getting creepy,” Plato commented. “Was that supposed to spook us?”

“I’m not sure,” Basil replied with a frown. “I don’t like—”

“Boss, above you—”

The ceiling collapsed before Bugsy could utter his warning.

Fueled by Vasi’s Hasten spell, Basil and his allies immediately dispersed across the exposition wing. Debris collapsed from a hole above their heads and a colossal beast fell through it. The monster landed in the middle of the Bohens in a cloud of dust and a cataclysmic noise, the floor trembling from the impact.

When Basil wiped away the dust in his eyes, a massive hound stood before him. A dog more than twelve meters long and four meters tall loomed over him, its three heads roaring as one. Its eyes burned with hellfire, its fangs were made of sharpened steel. The fur was black as a starless night and its howl echoed with the sound of cackling thunder.

Cerberus

Level 37 [Beast/Demon]

Faction: Metal Olympus (Psychopomps).

Here was the miniboss. "I knew it would be a dog," Basil heard Plato complain. "I knew it."

And the Cerberus didn't come without reinforcements. Shadows rose from the broken statues in the form of humanoid monsters; creatures of solid darkness with jackals' heads and khopesh weapons.

Minions of Anubis

Level 28 [Beast/Undead]

Faction: Metal Olympus (Psychopomps).

Basil roared and charged into the fray.

The room immediately devolved into chaos. Cerberus attempted to trample Buggy and Rosemarine, who swiftly dodged. Plato leaped around the room, bouncing off walls and unleashed sharp blades of wind at the minions of Anubis. Vasi summoned her broom, grabbed Shellgirl, and carried her into the air to bombard Cerberus from above. The monstrous hound retaliated by breathing hellfire with his three mouths, forcing his enemies to run around the room or hide behind the debris.

Basil's halberd clashed with a minion's khopesh, shattering it and slaying the creature in one strike. Perhaps identifying him as the greatest danger, the other lesser monsters immediately swarmed him from all sides. Basil counted dozens of them, but it mattered not how many of them he slew. More popped up and prevented him from helping his allies.

"Out of my way!" Basil snarled as he wiped out three shadows in one strike. "I'll slaughter each and every one of you!"

"This intrusion ends here."

Basil looked up as a new challenger entered the fray.

A cloaked shadow descended from the hole in the ceiling and floated above Cerberus. The creature appeared as if made of darkness just like the minions of Anubis, but deeper, more sinister. Where the lesser monsters were tough as stone, the new entity was as vaporous and ethereal as blackened mist. Neither solid nor gaseous, this being's substance shouldn't exist in the world. Basil could tell so on a deep, instinctual level. It didn't *belong*.

The living shadow took a shape between a bat and a humanoid. Basil recognized spikes on its shoulders, vague hints of a horned helm, and darkened wings. The most disturbing part of its body was also the most mundane: two bloodshot and all-too-human eyes opened where the head should be, looking down on Basil from above. They were not burning flames or otherworldly orbs, no; they were two normal eyes staring at Basil in a sea of otherworldly darkness.

"I am your host, the pharaoh of this pyramid." The shadow declared with two voices: one deep as a festering grave, the other a faint whisper. "I am Pluto, Lord of the Netherworld."

Basil introduced himself by summoning his laser pistol and shooting the shadow in the head. The light burst went through the creature and hit the shattered ceiling on the other side. Dungeon particles were already gathering to repair the damage done to the architecture.

"An illusion, Leroy?" Basil taunted him. "How brave of you!"

"I can see him!" Plato shouted a warning as he dodged a blast of fire from Cerberus. "He's real!"

Then why couldn't I hit him? Basil gritted his teeth as he figured it out. Only his halberd could hit incorporeal targets, and Pluto remained far behind its range.

"So my suspicions were correct." The false god's red eyes glanced at Rosemarine, Buggy, and Plato. "You are the people who slew Hypathia and Tamura, aren't you? Have you come to take my life too?"

"That depends." Basil raised his halberd and pointed it at the floating shadow. He had to goad him into getting close and personal; "Where are the children you've abducted?"

"Safe from vicious men-at-arms such as yourself," Pluto replied with venom. "This is the abode of the innocent and the peaceful dead. You do not belong here."

“And you do?” Basil snarled as he parried a minion’s swing aiming for his head and cut it down in retaliation. “How many people have you oligarchs killed when you summoned the System? Your hands are drenched in blood! Your daughter would be ashamed of you!”

It saddened Basil to speak such cold words, but he meant them. Whatever loss Leroy had suffered, it didn’t justify all the horrors he had unleashed upon the world.

“What nonsense is this?” To Basil’s confusion, Pluto’s shadow showed no anger. If anything, the false god appeared confused. “Can’t you hear my Celia’s voice? Even now, she whispers to me. I can feel her love, a pure love that burns like the *sun*.”

He’s not like the others, Basil realized. Tamura and Hypathia breathed greed and pride, but they kept their heads on their shoulders. The glint of madness in Leroy’s eyes told another story. *He’s deranged*.

“Ah, Celia, I see it now. Yes, you are right.” The shadow observed Basil with frightening intensity. The fact his eyes were the only part of his ‘body’ moving only made Pluto all the more disturbing. “You are no common robber driven by greed. I see it in your heart. You have lost people too, and in your pain and anger you lash out at me. I should not condemn you so hastily, you poor misguided man.”

The shadow descended upon Basil as his minions dispersed. Basil raised his halberd, expecting a duel.

“Rejoice, Basil Bohen,” the false god whispered softly. “I forgive you.”

Sometimes, words could cut deeper than swords. Basil’s blood boiled in his veins. His vision turned red, and his halberd burned as if to echo his fury.

“You forgive me?” The sheer nerve of that man made Basil want to puke. “*You?* Forgiving *me?* For what, not killing you earlier?”

“I forgive your violence against me, and your misspent life of sin. I absolve you. I welcome you into a pure, better world.” Pluto’s shadowy wings expanded, their darkness enveloping Basil from all sides. “Where you shall suffer no more! Sin: Sloth!”

Realizing the danger, Basil immediately fled. But even his hastened legs couldn't outrun the gathering shadows. They spread to the ground under his feet, and he tripped on an obstacle he couldn't see. Basil snarled and hacked at the darkness with his halberd. Pluto hissed in response, but the sea of darkness only expanded further.

"Basil!" Vasi shouted. She turned her broom to rescue her boyfriend, with Shellgirl firing ice pearls at Pluto. The projectiles vanished in the dark as if absorbed by it.

"I'm coming!" Plato dashed at his best friend faster than the wind. He jumped into the darkness, swiping at Pluto's encroaching darkness. "Don't you dare touch him!"

It was for naught. Plato vanished in the shadows, and Pluto's darkness soon enveloped Basil as well. The false god's eyes closed until the blackness remained.

Man and cat were dragged into the night, and then they were gone.

Chapter 31: Woman vs Painting

The shadows gathered around her boyfriend and dragged him away.

Neither flames nor ice dissipated the encroaching darkness. Her spells melted in a black ocean that soon swallowed a quarter of the room. Basil, Plato, and Pluto vanished like stars into a black hole.

“Basil!” Vasi shouted her boyfriend’s name. She received no answer and aimed her broomstick at the shadows. “Basil!”

“Vasi, back off!” Shellgirl warned as she struggled to hold onto her waist. Her sticky fingers left slime traces on Vasi’s dress. “We’ll get swallowed too!”

Vasi didn’t care. She refused to leave her boyfriend behind, doubly so since his demise would spell her own. Drawing upon her coven’s powers, she summoned a murder of bloody crows from her fingers. The birds swarmed the blob of darkness, only to be absorbed within it alongside everything else.

Her attack caused a reaction though. The shadows condensed into a shrinking sphere within seconds. This strange black hole collapsed on itself and vanished as if it had never existed.

Basil, Plato, Pluto... all of them had disappeared without a trace.

Only the cerberus and his minions remained.

Damn it, Vasi cursed as the three-headed hound opened fire at her. One of its heads breathed a stream of flame at the flying witch, while the two others did the same with Buggy and Rosemarine. Both of them powered through the attack unscathed and bit the hound’s ankles, but Vasi had no choice but to zigzag in the air to avoid burning to death. *Damn it, damn it!*

“Boss!” Buggy snarled in anger as he coiled around the cerberus’ leg and crushed bones under his grip. The beast roared in pain in response. Vasi was fond of dogs and would have frowned upon Buggy’s action once, but she was in no mood for sympathy. “You’ll pay for this!”

“Mister!” Rosemarine let go of the cerberus and rushed to the spot where Basil had vanished. Minions of Anubis attempted to flank her, but she vaporized them with a quick sunbeam. Basil’s Deadslayer effect still empowered her. “Mister, where are you?!”

“Everyone, let’s take out the cerberus first!” Vasi shouted as Rosemarine fruitlessly scratched the ground, like a dog looking for a missing bone. “Shadowspikes!”

Shadows gathered under the cerberus and surged from the ground in the form of sharp spikes. Vasi’s spell gored through the monster’s belly, letting blood spill all over the gallery and narrowly missing Buggy. The cerberus let out a vicious roar strong enough to shake the room.

Vasi immediately felt her magic slip away. Her perception of time, accelerated by the Hasten spell, returned to normal in an instant. Her buffs vanished and her shadowspike spell dissipated.

Cerberus’ [Disruptive Roar] canceled all magical effects!

Then her broomstick started to lose altitude.

Vasi’s SP sustained her tool’s flight, yet she felt her connection to it waning away. Her expert, tightly controlled flight turned into a maddened crash course toward the gallery’s windows.

“I can’t turn it back!” Vasi warned Shellgirl with panic in her tone. “We’ll have to jump!”

“I’ve got you!” Shellgirl grabbed Vasi by the waist and jumped with her off the broomstick. The mimic booty pivoted to put herself between her friend and the ground. Her slimy body absorbed the impact as they crashed near a broken statue, softening the blow like a cushion and probably saving both of their lives.

It’s soft like a cloud, Vasi couldn’t help but think as her face landed right between Shellgirl’s ‘assets.’ I could sleep on them...

A snapping sound brought her back to reality. Vasi’s broomstick crashed against a stained glass window, cracked it, and snapped in half.

The sight filled Vasi with cold anger and sorrow. Her broom had been a constant companion even before she arrived on Earth; with her hut's destruction, it had been her only remaining memento of her homeworld of Outremonde.

This dog would pay for breaking it!

"Are you unharmed, girlfriend?" Shellgirl asked as Vasi rolled over her. The witch was drenched in slime. "Sorry, I'm always sticky when I'm nervous."

"Later," Vasi said as the cerberus growled at them, its three heads burning with hellfire. Vasi acted quicker and blasted it with a volley of ice shards, causing the vicious monster to recoil in pain.

Supereffective hit!

"It's vulnerable to Frost," Vasi guessed. "Shellgirl, help me—"

"Vasi, look!" Shellgirl cut her off, a finger raised at something behind them. "Rosemarine!"

Vasi glanced at the tropidrake, as her great shadow loomed over the gallery.

Rosemarine was growing.

The magical potion that had shrunk her to manageable size waned off in seconds, stripped away by the cerberus' roar. The tropidrake more than doubled in size, crushing two minions of Anubis under her weight. Rosemarine grew so large that she hardly fit in the gallery. Her tail cracked the stained glass windows as it waved from left to right. She faced the cerberus, with the standoff reminding Vasi of an alligator staring at a hound.

Although Vasi noticed a hint of fear in the cerberus' eyes, the monster remained steadfast. It roared with all three heads, shook Bugsy off its broken foot, and charged at Rosemarine on its remaining three legs. The two titans clashed and brawled in a vicious melee of teeth and claws, the ground shaking with each of their blows. The cerberus' charge pushed Rosemarine back, forcing Vasi and Shellgirl to roll to the side to avoid being trampled to death. The remaining minions of Anubis were crushed underfoot by the two giants after failing to escape.

The giant hound slammed Rosemarine against the neurotower's forcefield, its red energy flaring with crimson lightning. The tropidrake snarled in pain as she swiped the cerberus with her claws and left bloody gashes on its three heads.

"Target the legs!" Vasi shouted a command as she and Shellgirl stood back on their feet. They were swiftly joined by Buggy, all three of them unleashing projectiles on the cerberus' ankles from behind. The centimagma's flames licked the hound's fur without inflicting damage, but Vasi's ice shards and Shellgirl's cold bullets both shredded the cerberus' legs. The beast collapsed under its weight, which allowed Rosemarine to grab it with her clawed hands.

"Can dogs fly?" Rosemarine asked with murderous glee.

She threw the cerberus through the gallery's windows without waiting for an answer.

Vasi, Shellgirl, and Buggy ducked down to avoid a storm of glass shards. The cerberus' massive form flew through the dungeon's walls, shattered them, and fell from four floors into the quarry outside the UNESCO House.

"Look, it flies away!" Rosemarine shouted with joy. "Like a bird!"

The cerberus crashed heads-first onto the ground in a terrible crash. His three necks bent in a way that shouldn't be biologically possible and bones pierced their way to freedom through his fur. The beast's corpse crumbled under its own weight, dead and stiff. Piles of gold and loot materialized next to the cadaver and a familiar message confirmed its demise.

Your party earned 255,000 EXP (38250 for you). You earned a level.

*You cannot assign your new level until **[Basil Bohem]** does.*

The message, once an annoyance, came as a relief. Whatever happened to her boyfriend, Basil still lived. The party and Tamer connections remained intact.

For now.

"You aren't going to claim the treasures?" Buggy asked Shellgirl as the two observed the cerberus' remains through the broken windows. Dungeon particles were already starting to repair the damage done to the building.

“No time for it,” Shellgirl replied without hesitation. Money mattered less to her than friends. “We need to save the others.”

“Mister Who-Feeds-Me is gone,” Rosemarine whined, her eyes glancing at the spot where Basil and Plato vanished. The tropidrake was too big to fully turn inside the gallery. “Mister Plato too...”

“They’re both alive, Rosemarine,” Vasi reassured her. “And still in the dungeon.”

“I know we would have perished Basil if he had died, but how can you tell about the dungeon?” Shellgirl asked in confusion.

“The Neurotower’s forcefield is still up.” Vasi pointed at the protected metal structure. The battle hadn’t even dented its magical barrier. “Since Pluto is this dungeon’s Boss, the forcefield would have vanished if he had left its confines. Besides, I can still cast Coven spells; which means Plato survived too.”

Vasi opened her System screen, swiftly confirmed her teammates were still attached to the Party, and tried to contact them with the Logs feature.

[Mona Lisa] *blocked your message.*

“Mona Lisa?” Vasi asked in confusion. She had heard Basil mention it once, but couldn’t put her finger on which circumstances. “The name sounds vaguely familiar.”

“I’ve read about it,” Shellgirl said with a grin. “It’s the most expensive painting on Earth, nearly priceless.”

Of course Shellgirl would know that kind of thing. Considering how the Trimurti System often changed famous items into powerful artifacts, Vasi shuddered to imagine what kind of power the Louvre’s cultural treasures now possessed. From what Basil told her, the museum housed wonders from all across the world.

Bugsy glanced at Vasi. “What do we do next?”

“Why are you asking *me*?” Vasi asked with a frown.

“The Boss is gone and Plato is the right-hand cat,” Bugsy replied. “With both of them indisposed, *someone* has to take charge.”

Bugsy meant it as a compliment, but it offended Vasi to have a tiger cub ahead of her in his mental hierarchy; however cute Plato might have been.

“You think Plato would have made a better leader than my dear Vasi?” Shellgirl complained. “He licks his ass each morning and naps eighteen hours a day!”

“And you’re our senior member, Bugsy,” Vasi pointed out. “You joined the party earlier than any of us here.”

“But I’m a minion through and through,” Bugsy replied with humility. “You, though, you took charge when we were fighting the cerberus. You’re the best option, I truly think so.”

“I’m flattered, but...” Vasi crossed her arms. The idea of ‘taking charge,’ as Bugsy put it, made her feel uncomfortable. The witch was confident in herself, but she preferred to go along with the ride rather than bark orders. “I don’t think I’m the best option on the table.”

“Come on, you will do great, Vasi.” Shellgirl reassured her best friend by taking Vasi’s hands into her own. “I’m right behind you.”

“I can take charge, if you don’t want to,” Rosemarine proposed kindly.

Vasi silently looked up at Rosemarine, whose fanged mouth morphed into a ghastly smile. Memories of screams and blood echoed in the back of her mind, a terrible warning of massacres to come.

“It’s all right, Rosemarine.” All of Vasi’s doubts vanished instantly, and she forced herself to smile back. “I will bear the burden of command.”

“Awww, are you sure?” Rosemarine asked, clearly disappointed.

“Certain.” Like any good democracy, the real choice wasn’t about selecting the best leader of them all, but the least murderous. “But thank you all the same.”

With the matter of Basil's succession settled, Vasi glanced at the broken ceiling. Dungeon particles slowly repaired the damage, though the hole remained large enough that Rosemarine could easily fit through. Kalki's music echoed beyond it, strong and powerful.

"Let's follow the tune," Vasi decided. Pluto couldn't possibly leave Kalki unattended. If they found the bard, they could potentially lure their enemy into a trap... or at worst, trade him away for Basil. Vasi had nothing against Kalki, but her boyfriend's safety took priority.

After checking her broomstick, Vasi confirmed her Repair Crafting option remained active thanks to her Witch Brew Perk. A few seconds later, her favored tool pieced itself back together and she rode it once again toward the next floor. Rosemarine grabbed Buggy and Shellgirl in one hand each, rose on her back legs, and lifted them through the hole in the ceiling.

The seventh and last floor of the UNESCO half of the dungeon was, as expected, the panoramic restaurant. It was certainly the classiest area yet, with gold-laced walls, exotic wood decorations representing colorful sarcophagi, and candlelit tables. A magnificent window showcased the quarry outside.

However, ghastly details disturbed Vasi when she landed on the floor. Mummies sat around the empty tables, still and stiff. Each of them had a hole in the chest, as if they had been slain a second time recently. The Neurotower stood in the middle of the room, but a strange, floating painting was grafted into the forcefield; Kalki's song came from it. Vasi went on to check it *after* burning all the mummies to cinders for safety's sake.

The painting showcased a party set in a city of marble columns and ancient statues. Hundreds of men drank wine around a banquet table, with a familiar figure sitting at the very center of the portrait: a young man with light brown skin and curled raven hair falling on his shoulders, playing the flute. A mighty feathered bird and a three-headed golden cobra stood at each of his sides.

"I've found Kalki," Vasi told the others as they walked to her sides. As for poor Rosemarine, she could only peek through the floor. "He has become art itself."

[The Wedding Feast at Cana]. You cannot store this item in your Inventory nor gather information from it.

Vasi carefully brushed her fingers against the painting. As she expected, her nails went through the paint as if it were a soft curtain of water. She immediately pulled her hand out.

"It's a portal of some kind," Vasi guessed. "Kalki is on the other side."

"Why is he staying inside?" Buggy asked in confusion.

"Because he has no choice." Vasi studied the painting carefully. Powerful enchantments protected it and shrouded its System features from her sight. "I doubt you can escape this trap if you fully cross over."

"Wait a sec." Shellgirl snapped her fingers. "Basil managed to contact our backup earlier."

"He did," Vasi confirmed, her eyes widening as she put two and two together. "The Mona Lisa didn't block communications back then."

"Exactly! So either the magical painting blocks communications within a limited range..." Shellgirl pointed at the painted portal. "Or the Logs feature failed because Basil was *inside* it."

Vasi nodded sharply. That made sense. The paintings were technically within the dungeon, but probably acted as private pocket dimensions. This way, Pluto could both maintain control over the pyramid *and* trap people within magical jails.

That meant Basil was in a separate painting from the one right in front of the party.

"Where was this Mona Lisa exposed?" Vasi questioned Shellgirl, who had read the museum's maps beforehand. "Hopefully Pluto didn't move it away."

"The Mona Lisa was placed on the first floor, according to the old maps," Shellgirl said, her expression thoughtful. "If the pyramid is right above us, since the Louvre has a ground floor and two basements... then it's four floors above us. We'll need to keep climbing for a while."

They couldn't afford to waste time. "Buggy, help me grab the painting," Vasi ordered. Her own firm tone surprised her somewhat. Taking charge was easier than she thought, especially when it was for the sake of her friends. "I can't store it in the Guild inventory."

"Yes, of course!" Buggy seized one side of the painting with his mandibles and Vasi the other with her hands. Neither the centimagma's strength nor the witch's finesse worked. The painting's frame was merged tightly with the Neurotower's forcefield and refused to budge.

"Argh, I can't hold it!"

“We’ll need to defeat Pluto if we want to move the painting,” Vasi said in frustration. “Entering it is risky.”

“Maybe if we send someone with a rope, they can grab Kalki and leave,” Buggy suggested.

“I doubt it would be so easy,” Vasi replied. “If one of us tries and is trapped inside, we’ll become easy pickings.”

“Oh, let me try!” Rosemarie coughed and spat out a Fire Seed. “Go, my spawn! Go forth to new land and bloom!”

“Good thinking, Rosemarie!” Shellgirl grabbed a dusty tablecloth off one of the restaurant’s tables, turned it into an improvised rope, and tied it to the Fire Seed. “Give a tug when you want us to pull you out, rookie.”

The Fire Seed immediately leaped into the painting, vanished through the portal... and the rope immediately severed behind it. The poor monster appeared among the characters in the banquet, right next to an urn full of wine.

“I hope she can sing like I do,” Rosemarie said. Vasi shuddered upon remembering the tropidrake’s last encounter with alcohol.

“It’s one way only,” Shellgirl replied sadly. “Why can his music travel back though? It makes no sense!”

“Perhaps some spells can cross the portal, but we don’t have the time to test it further,” Vasi said. “Let’s leave him behind for now.”

“Are you sure?” Buggy asked, slightly uncomfortable with the suggestion. “What if anything happens to him while we’re gone?”

“You’ve seen it yourself, nobody can damage the painting nor escape it,” Vasi pointed out. “He’s as safe as he can be, at least for now.”

“Yeah, Pluto won’t risk destroying the world by killing Kalki,” Shellgirl said before chewing her lip. “But Basil... he’s expendable.”

That was what worried Vasi the most. She didn't know why Pluto had kidnapped her boyfriend—perhaps he wanted to keep Basil as a trophy or interrogate him—but the madman could dispose of his captive at any time.

“Let's secure the Mona Lisa first,” Vasi decided. “We'll travel up through the dungeon and find the others. Rosemarine will stay behind to keep Kalki's painting, since she's too large to fit through the other floors.”

“Aww, abandoned again?” Rosemarine sulked. “I hope I will get smaller when I evolve.”

“Sorry girl,” Shellgirl said with an apologetic smile. “On the bright side, you can crush anyone approaching this way!”

To Vasi's surprise, Rosemarine didn't appear enthusiastic at all. “Slaughter means nothing without Mister's smile,” the tropidrake said sadly. “A massacre is like a cake. It's better when you share it.”

“We'll get him back,” Vasi promised. “I swear it.”

Pluto had made the worst mistake possible: he had forced Vasi to play the role of the paladin, saving her boyfriend in distress.

He wouldn't live to tell the tale.

Chapter 32: Man vs Specter

He woke up in his old bed.

A man never forgot his bed. The smell of the bedsheets, the holes left in the mattress, the crumbs of chips forgotten after a wild night of gaming... each were telltale signs of the way a human being marked his territory. So although Basil Bohem hadn't slept in it, he immediately recognized this bed for what it was.

Home.

“Basil, it is time.” Plato kneaded his best friend’s back. Basil felt the press of powerful paws through his scale and feather armor. “Time to wake up and get the hell out of here!”

“I’m sleepy.” Basil groaned, his face half-buried in the pillow. Tiredness clouded his mind, and the bed was so comfortable... “Come back never.”

“I wish you hadn’t forced me to resort to such measures, but suit yourself.” Plato cleared his throat and started to meow ferociously. “Meeeh....”

Basil sank deeper into the bed and plugged his ears with his fingers. His valiant resistance, however, was doomed to fail as Plato’s voice increased crescendo.

“Meeeh!”

It was the cutest, meowest cry of all; the result of generations upon generations of felines breeding the ultimate weapon to bring mankind to its knees. The screech to rule them all, and in the darkness of the internet, bind them.

“MEEEEH!”

“Enough!” Basil snarled as he bolted out of the bed. Plato bolted off his back with a Cheshire smirk. “You’re even worse than the last rooster!”

“That’ll teach you to mock me,” Plato replied, utterly unrepentant. “And I don’t have time to coddle you. We need to leave *now!*”

Basil groaned as he sat along the bed’s mattress. He massaged his temples and tried to put his thoughts in order. Chaotic memories flared to life in his mind. A descent into catacombs, then an ascent into a sea of darkness.

“Pluto.” Basil bolted to his feet in alarm. He glanced around him, quickly found his halberd near the bed, and grabbed it. His laser pistol was nowhere to be seen, however. He must have lost it in the battle. “Pluto!”

“I’m right here,” Plato said with a chuckle. “Sorry, that was a low-hanging fruit.”

“You know it’s a Disney dog’s name, right?” Basil observed his surroundings. The area he had woken up in was a carbon copy of his old bedroom, which Apollyon’s forces destroyed months ago. A Nintendo Switch even rested on the bedside table, ready to be used. It took Basil all his willpower not to turn it on. “Where... where are we?”

“Beats me,” Plato replied, his grin morphing into a scowl. “But, uh, brace yourself for the worst. You won’t like what you find outside.”

Basil opened his mouth to question him, only for a System notification to interrupt him.

Your party earned 255,000 EXP (38250 for you). You earned a level.

The others were still fighting somewhere.

“Okay, no time to waste,” Basil decided. “I don’t know why Leroy thought it wise to teleport us into a copy of my house than finish me off, but he will sorely regret—”

“Basil!” a familiar voice called from outside. “Woken up already?”

It had been years since Basil last heard this voice, old yet full of strength and wisdom. The voice of a man to whom he owed so very much and whom he had come to admire. To hear it again froze the blood in Basil’s veins in shock and denial. His fingers trembled, first in astonishment... and then in deep anger.

Basil stared at Plato, silently begging his best friend to tell him he was wrong. That this couldn’t be *him*.

“Yes.” Plato nodded sadly. “He’s outside.”

[Berserk] ailment resisted!

It took Basil all of his willpower not to enter a murderous rage, but he managed to keep it all together; enough to make an ordered plan of action.

“System, bring out the flamethrower,” Basil ordered. “I’m torching my house.”

The Field blocked your Inventory access!

“Monster Lair II.” Basil attempted to claim the area for himself. “Jardin Secret.”

You cannot claim another monster's Lair as your own unless you have killed them first.

So this confirmed it. The house, this whole place, was a trap set by Pluto.

“Ah, come on!” Basil snarled in rage as he vainly tried to access his Guild Inventory and then the Logs feature. “You’re killing me System, you know that? You’re killing me!”

Dismaker Labs wishes you a happy apocalypse!

Curse them all. At least his Party submenu showed he was still part of the Bohens team and the Homeowners Revenge Association Guild. This place hadn’t cut off all of Basil’s bonds with the outside world, it only prevented him from accessing them.

“Basil, young man, come out!” The Old Man’s voice called him out again. “The vegetables won’t water themselves on their own!”

Basil grit his teeth so hard that his jaw started to hurt. He grabbed his halberd and stormed out of his bedroom with Plato hot on his tail. They rushed through a copy of their salon and their kitchen, before walking into a lush garden near a river.

The Old Man sprayed the vegetables with a watering can, helped by an eight-year-old girl.

Basil ignored the latter, so mesmerized he was by the sight of the former. A perfect picture of the Old Man René stood before him, with his wrinkled skin slightly tanned and his kind eyes spry like a young man’s. He hunched a little, but didn’t use a cane to stand up; this was René from before the cancer, before the disease confined him to despairing in a bed. His white shirt and blue overalls neatly contrasted with his rounded René Magritte hat—the Old Man wore them as a joke few could understand.

“René,” Basil whispered in shock and disbelief. His halberd nearly slipped through his finger.

The Old Man smiled at his protégé. “Took you long enough, Basil.”

The sight of his white teeth, of his kindly expression, filled Basil with burning fury. A storm of anger clouded his mind as he fathomed the sheer magnitude of Pluto’s insult, of cruel a ploy the false god had played.

[Berserk] ailment resisted! It was a close call!

Basil swung his halberd at the illusion in the blink of an eye.

The little girl screamed in fear and the false René gasped in shock, but Basil paid them no mind. He struck the copy in the neck, hoping for a quick beheading.

His halberd bounced off the illusion's skin.

The Field reduced damage to 0!

Basil stared at his weapon in confusion, then immediately added his new excess level to Deathknight of the Sepulchre. He hoped it would strengthen his Soulbound weapon, and it did.

Deathknight of the Sepulchre Level 5 Stat Gains: +1 STR, +1 AGI, +1 VIT, +1 SKI, +1 MAG, +1 INT, +1 CHA. *You earned 40 HP and 15 SP.*

Elemental Orb (Active): *Variable element, 60 SP. You can throw a deadly orb of elemental energy from your hand; you can choose the elemental affinity of the orb, but it must be an element in which you have a Strong affinity (Base damage 130 of the selected element). This power is the equivalent of a Tier VI Spell.*

Your Soulbound Weapon [Croque-Mordeuse] increased in quality (current rank: A)! It gained the [SP Eater] effect: any attack inflicted with this weapon will reduce the target's SP by an amount equal to the damage inflicted to HP.

"Elemental Orb: Fire!" Basil raised his hand at the fake René and a sphere of hellfire burst out of his fingers. The flames licked the old man's skin and clothes without inflicting damage. They did no more harm than a summer breeze.

This time, the fake René regained enough presence of mind to counterattack.

"Idiot!" The false René threw water from his can at Basil and drenched his face. It didn't hurt, but the drops felt cold on his skin. "Are you on drugs?"

"I've asked myself the same question many times," Plato mused. He sighed as Basil raised his halberd again. "Dog, it's useless. I already tried. My claws can't cut through *anything*, not even the grass."

After his halberd bounced off the old man's chest again, Basil was forced to concede defeat. Whatever this place was, it prevented violence from happening. Perhaps he should use status ailments? Would poison work?

"What is this about?" the false René asked, the little girl hiding behind him. Basil finally paid attention to her. She looked around eight, with Arabian features and dark brown skin. She wore tiny overalls matching the fake René's. Basil briefly mistook her for the girl that haunted the Pyramid, before realizing the features didn't match. "Did you have a nightmare or something?"

"You're not real," Basil spat in fury. It was one thing for Pluto to capture him, but to make a mockery of a dead friend? That slight wouldn't stand! "You're a fake."

"Dog, I wish he was," Plato said. "I can't see through him, and he smells like René too. Whatever he is, he's no illusion."

René glanced down at the Rakshasa Kitten in puzzlement. "Talking tigers," he muttered to himself. "Somehow, that's the least strange thing I've seen yet."

"All felines can speak, Mr. René," the young girl said. She moved to pet Plato behind the ears while giving Basil a wary gaze. "They're so smart and kind."

"I like her," Plato said with appreciation. "She gets me."

The little girl giggled in amusement. "I have a cat," she said. "A kitten as cute as you are."

"Now you are pulling my leg," Plato replied before puffing his chest. "I'm in a league of my own."

"Then you're a mimic," Basil told the false René. "Or an android."

"Now, you've played too many games, young man." The false René shook his head. "But it's all right. I'm still not convinced that this place is real either. Could be a dream for all I know."

"Maybe *you're* the robot," the little girl accused Basil. "That's what a Terminator would say!"

Basil clenched his fists in quiet sorrow. "I watched the real René die."

The memory would remain forever etched in his mind. The old man's last weeks had been a slow descent into bedridden weakness and tiredness. A few days before his demise, René couldn't walk alone even with a cane. Basil had to take care of him day and night.

"Ah." The false René scowled, and the little girl with him whitened like snow. "A dying dream then."

"So you don't deny it," Basil said sharply. "You acknowledge that the real René perished."

"I think I did croak, yes," the fake old man said sorrowfully. "My memory is fuzzy, but I remember closing my eyes near the river with you. When I awoke, I was back at the house and the world had changed drastically. But I don't think I'm a dream, no. My life felt all too real to me, young man."

Basil trembled in anger. How could Pluto know this information? Had he read his mind? "What were your last words to me?" he asked the illusion, this... mockery. "What did you tell me then?"

The Old Man looked at the sky with a face full of sorrow. "I asked to see the sunset one last time, near the old shrine, but I collapsed before we could make it to the place in time. You laid me under a tree and watched the sun vanish beyond the river with me and Plato. That silly cat didn't make a sound then."

Plato looked away, silent as a tomb.

"And then..." René locked eyes with Basil, his gaze heavy with nostalgia. "I said that you were the son I wish I had. And I still think so."

His last words wounded Basil deeper than Apollyon's darts and all of Metal Olympus' attacks combined. He flinched as if slapped in the face. He lowered his halberd and found he no longer had the strength to raise it again. The old man's words had snuffed out the flames of his anger.

"Pluto read my mind," Basil rasped. René should have reincarnated according to Walter's theory on souls. It... it didn't make sense for him to be here. It didn't make sense! "That's the only explanation. That bastard read my mind and created you to torment me."

"Mr. Pluto is not like that," the little girl argued. "He is kind and generous."

"Believe what you want, Basil." The fake René sighed. "Metaphysics aren't worth fighting over."

Such kindness... why did it feel so sad then? Basil could hardly bear to look at the false René, so he glanced away. He immediately noticed that the world beyond his house's garden was nothing like the Barthes. A vast, lush landscape expanded the river before receding into icy mountains. Dozens of children played tags near winding paths and a distant bridge. The sunlight was pleasant, the sky a pale shade of green.

As he watched the kids play around, Basil suddenly realized that they were the children Pluto abducted into his pyramid. The bastard kept them imprisoned inside this realm, perhaps hoping one of them would turn out to be his daughter reincarnated.

"What is this place?" Basil asked softly. The landscape felt somewhat familiar, though he couldn't put his finger on why.

"I'm not sure." The false René shrugged. "It's a strange land that doesn't make sense. No violence registers here, and I see numbers floating before my eyes sometimes. I feel neither hunger nor thirst, or even fatigue. I'm as spry as a teenager."

"It's a good place," his child companion summed it up. "A safe place."

"I arrived here after Aya and the other children," the fake René explained. "I fished you and the tiger cub by the river an hour ago. You just dropped from the sky looking like Conan the Barbarian."

"An hour?" Basil choked. They had lost an *hour*? His team could have been wiped out in half the time since!

"You've always been a sound sleeper," the fake René said with a chuckle. "I wasn't so certain heaven existed, but maybe that's what happened? We all died and ended up here. Would explain all the weird stuff going on."

His child companion looked down, her gaze hollow and sad. Whether she was truly a girl or a mimic, Basil didn't have the heart to push her further.

"Plato and I are alive," Basil said with confidence.

"How can you tell?" the old man asked while raising an eyebrow in skepticism.

“The System registers us as alive in the Party menu,” Basil replied. René stared blankly at him, clearly struggling to comprehend his words. “Plato has six lives left too.”

“That’s too few for my liking,” Plato complained.

René glanced down at the Rakshasa Kitten in confusion. He seemed to be putting two and two together. “Plato?” he asked. “Is that you, my dear?”

“Who else, you old buzzard?” Plato wagged his tail. “I know my stripes dazzle the eyes, but surely you should have recognized me earlier.”

“I’m...” René scratched the back of his head. “I’ve stopped trying to make sense out of this situation, but this is a bit too much.”

“This is all Pluto’s fault.” Basil glanced at the little girl. “Where is he? You’ve clearly met him.”

“Mr. Pluto brought the other kids here,” the little girl said, avoiding Basil’s gaze. After the first impression he had made, he couldn’t blame her for remaining on her guards. “He gave us toys and played with us.”

“Played?” Basil frowned. “Past tense?”

“He... Mr. Pluto hasn’t come in a while. Not since Mr. René arrived.” The old man patted the girl on the head, who smiled in response. “He’s funny.”

“I do my best to help,” the fake René replied with a chuckle. “Though I admit I wasn’t expecting to run a nursery in my afterlife.”

“Mr. Pluto wasn’t feeling well,” the girl said, her smile fading away. “I could tell. He always brought us girls gifts, which made the boys jealous, but then he stopped all of a sudden. He started to ask us the same question over and over again. It... was scary.”

“What question?” Basil asked, though he had a good idea of the answer.

“He asked me if I knew a girl called Celia. When I said no... he started crying and fled to the beach. We haven’t seen him since.” Aya bit her lip, her eyes full of sympathy. “Mr. Pluto looked so sad back then... I hope he is all right.”

Personally, Basil hoped Pluto had fallen on a holy sword and spared him the trouble of killing him himself; but to each their own. “Where’s the beach?” Basil questioned her further. “I need to have a word with that man.”

“The beach?” The little girl scowled at Basil. “You aren’t going to hurt him, are you?”

“No,” Basil lied through his teeth. The child didn’t buy it.

“Don’t worry,” Plato told the girl. “I’ll stop this big monkey man from acting mean.”

“You will?” the girl asked naïvely.

“I’m a tiger,” Plato replied, as if it settled the debate. “I never lie. I swear it on my stripes. You wouldn’t call a cat a liar, would you?”

“Mmm... okay.” Like any child, the girl couldn’t resist Plato’s kitten stare. “The beach is beyond the ice mountains and the snowy peaks. Mr. Pluto doesn’t let anyone in, but maybe he’ll make an exception if you ask nicely...”

Or more likely, Basil would jury-rig a bomb from whatever supplies he encountered on the way and blow the path open. “Thank you.” Basil nodded at the girl in gratitude. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Aya.” The little girl smiled cheerfully. “A, Y, A, Aya! Like the band!”

“I swear it to you, Aya.” Basil put his hand on the child’s head. She almost recoiled at first, but his gentle touch soothed her worries. “I’ll get you out of here, one way or another.”

“Oh... all right...” The child nodded slowly. “I would rather that Misha comes here to play, but... I hope I’ll meet her again soon.”

The fake René, who had watched the scene in silence, crossed his arms. “Basil, what is going on?”

“I don’t have the time to explain,” Basil replied harshly. “Plato, let’s go.”

But the Old Man’s mimicry wouldn’t drop the matter. “You’ll have time to tell me on the road. I’ll drive you to your destination.”

"I'll walk," Basil replied. This... creature? Mimic? Whatever it was, its presence made Basil uncomfortable. It resembled the old man a bit too much. The quicker they left him behind, the better.

"You're in a hurry, no?" The false René smiled. "It'll be faster with the Kangoo Renault, and I've got the keys."

Damn, this illusory world even had a copy of the Kangoo? What a way to twist the knife further...

"Oh, can I come too?" Aya asked in excitement. "I love car trips!"

"I wouldn't recommend doing it in winter," Plato said with a shudder. "I hate winter so much..."

"We don't need a ride, thanks," Basil replied, a little colder than before. He made a step towards the river, only to stop upon realizing his best friend wasn't following him. "Plato, come on."

"It would be faster with the Renault, Basil." Plato glanced at the false René, and then back at his best friend. "And however you deny it... I think you need this."

"To what, revive the past?" Basil snorted. "It's gone."

"Not revive the past," Plato replied calmly. "To make peace with it."

Basil frowned and then locked eyes with the false René. The mimicry held his gaze, his hunched back now stiff and resolute. The imitation was as stubborn as the original.

"Fine." Basil threw in the towel. "To the Kangoo then."

Chapter 33: Man vs Memory

The trip was as uncomfortable as the landscape was beautiful.

The false René took the wheel the way the real one hadn't in years. The Renault Kangoo drove through a green landscape worthy of an Italian countryside postcard. The area felt incredibly familiar to Basil for a reason he couldn't put his finger on, but also unnatural on a closer look. The leaves of the trees on the path followed a uniform design, and the wind smelled of oil paint. The snowy mountains beyond were as lifeless as icicles. Everything about this strange world smelled of trickery and deception.

Then why did its inhabitants feel so earnest?

"So..." The fake René coughed as he warily observed the snowy road through the northern mountains. Although there were no other cars around, the Old Man drove conservatively and safely. "The world has ended, but people are still here?"

"Yes," Basil replied absentmindedly, his eyes turned to the landscape outside. Plato and Aya played a game at the back of the car, with each of them throwing back and forth a small ball at the other. They were on their third, after accidentally throwing their first two out of the car.

"And everything works like one of your video games?"

"Yes," Basil replied. He had conveniently avoided mentioning Dismaker Labs' role in the disaster. Since Aya seemed so confident Pluto was a good person, she would probably react with denial and obstruct them; at this point, all Basil wanted was to leave this place and find his team as soon as possible.

"And you say you were fighting mummies and three-headed dogs in a pyramid's basement, which also happened to be the Louvre?"

"We didn't get past the UNESCO HQ, but technically yes."

"And bugs burned down the house?"

Basil sighed in despair. "Yes. I swore a blood oath over it."

The fake René scoffed. “Again?”

“We all did,” Plato said at the back. “Even the plant. Especially the plant.”

“I see,” the Old Man muttered.

“You’re taking this well,” Basil said in suspicion. The real René would have been mad at losing the home of his dreams.

“I live in an exact copy, and walls matter less than the people living between them. What matters is that you all survived.” The fake René nodded slowly. “Your tale is quite elaborate for a fantasy. You should write a novel about it.”

“I wish it was a dream,” Basil said sharply. No matter what Plato had said, this trip was starting to sound like an exercise in patience and frustration management. “Believe what you want.”

“Oh, I believe you.” The old man chuckled darkly. “After everything that happened, if you had told me aliens and demons were behind everything I would have taken your word for it. When nothing makes sense, everything does.”

What an elegant way to sum up the apocalypse so far.

“In truth,” the fake René said with a low, soft voice. “I’m proud of you.”

The illusion said it so earnestly, so candidly, that Basil almost believed him on the spot. He clenched his fists in anger. “You’re proud?”

“Aren’t you?” the fake René smiled warmly. “You have saved hundreds of lives, maybe thousands. Defeated monsters and demons, tamed a dragon, and slain living gods. If even half of what you said isn’t an embellishment, then you’ve proven yourself a hero twice over.”

Basil didn’t respond. He had always wanted to hear these words from the original René, but the fact the praise came from the mouth of a fake left him with a bitter taste in his mouth. He kept his hand close to his halberd, half-expecting the other shoe to drop at any moment.

The fake René briefly glanced at him, his gaze faltering with sorrow. He didn’t ask any other questions afterward.

The path took them beyond snowy mountains and to the frontier of the illusory world. Literally. The icy ground stopped in front of a greenish-blue wall representing the sky joining with the earth. The fake René parked the car nearby and Basil stepped out of it first in his haste. He moved to the border of this fantasy land, his hand pressing against a solid wall. He felt oil paint under his nails, as if the sky itself was a giant portrait.

“This is some *Truman Show*-levels of mind bending weirdness,” Basil muttered to himself.

“On the bright side, I can officially mark the sky as my territory,” Plato said as he joined his best friend with the others. “I’m tempted to open the pee pipe and let the domination fluids flow.”

“I brought a litter in the car hold,” Aya replied cheerfully. “And cat snacks too!”

“Ohoh, truly?” Plato licked his lips. “I haven’t eaten good ones in weeks!”

“Don’t get distracted, Plato,” Basil said sharply. He didn’t see any beach around, so he was starting to wonder if they had been lured into a trap. “Where is this portal you spoke of?”

“Right there,” Aya replied, pointing at a spot on their left. “You can see the frame.”

Basil squinted at the painted false sky, and quickly understood what the little girl meant by *frame*. A wooden archway stood embedded into the border of the false world, barely standing out from the rest of the structure. The space inside it was blue instead of pale green, and when Basil approached it, he smelled the odor of the sea. He pressed his hand against the surface, his fingers phasing through as if crossing a painted veil; the air was cooler on the other side, saltier too. This portal reminded Basil of an optical illusion portrait.

“Mr. Pluto wants to see you,” Aya said with a smile. “That means you must be the good guys.”

“Of course we are,” Plato deadpanned. Somehow, Basil could tell what he was truly thinking: that there was no good person on the other side.

“It’s like we’re inside a painting or something,” Basil said as he pulled back his hand. “Are there other portals like this one?”

“Not that I know of,” Aya replied before touching the portal. Unlike Basil, her hand failed to get through it, much to her disappointment. “Oh... he won’t let me in.”

“Let me try,” Plato said as he peeked through the portal. His head vanished into the painted veil while the rest of his body remained behind. After a few seconds where Basil started to worry for his health, the tiger cub pulled back from the doorway. “Mmm.”

“What did you see?” Basil asked with a frown.

“Another giant litter full of sand,” Plato replied with a shrug. “Each one is bigger than the last, if you ask me. I hope we’ll get a wish with the last one.”

The fake René examined the portal for a few seconds, before trying his luck at crossing it. His hand stopped against the painted surface, unable to penetrate it. “Hello, is there someone inside?” he asked, knocking on the portal as if it were a door. “Can you let us in?”

“Do you think Pluto will open the portal if you ask nicely?” Basil deadpanned.

“Politeness can take you farther than violence, young man,” the fake René replied calmly as he kept knocking. “I would rather follow you and see the world outside for myself, so yes; I am asking nicely.”

Having an illusion of his father figure following him around was the last thing Basil wanted, but he did wonder why neither the fake René nor Aya could cross this portal. Was it yet another trap?

The System provided an answer, but not the one Basil expected.

The dead cannot escape Naraka.

For once in his life, Basil would have wished for a happy apocalypse. He stared at the notification in silence, struggling to apprehend its implications.

“Basil?” René asked in concern. “Is something wrong?”

“I’m...” Basil gazed at the Old Man with fresh eyes. It... it couldn’t be. It was impossible. “I’m... I’m fine.”

“You are not,” René said, frowning in worry. “Basil, what’s bothering you?”

That you might be real, Basil thought. That this is purgatory.

Plato sat on the ground, silent as a tomb. He had figured it out, perhaps because he had received the same message. He stared at a confused Aya and then at the snowy mountains.

How many people inhabited this... afterlife?

"Aya?" Basil asked, praying to be wrong. "Has anyone else in this place been able to cross this portal?"

To Basil's sorrow, she shook her head. "I told you, Mr. Pluto doesn't let anyone in. None of my new friends can enter it."

"Except us," Plato whispered.

"I'm jealous," Aya admitted with a smile. "But I'm glad Mr. Pluto is letting someone through. He shouldn't stay alone."

"Yeah..." Basil turned his back on them to focus on the portal. René's gaze had suddenly become unbearable. "I guess that's for the best."

"Basil," the Old Man said.

Basil didn't have the courage to face him. He kept his back turned, something moist building up in his eyes.

"Once you step through this door, you will never come back here," René guessed, his voice soft.

"No," Basil admitted, wiping out his tears before anyone could notice. Plato was unnaturally still, and just as shaken as his best friend. "I don't think I will."

"I see..." René let out a sigh. "Must you go so soon? We've barely reunited. I know you have a duty to fulfill, but..."

"I have to go," Basil replied. Why did the words sound so weak in his throat? "I must."

Basil glanced at the fantasy landscape around them, at the snowy mountains beyond which awaited the house of his dream. He knew it was all a trap to ensnare him, but he couldn't shake off the nostalgia he felt at the sight.

“This realm is what I wanted more than anything once,” Basil admitted. He turned away from the portal and found the courage to face his deceased mentor. It felt like staring at the sun, but he owed the Old Man that much. “A peaceful life without worry.”

“But you do not desire it anymore?” René guessed. “You yearn for something else now.”

“I was a coward.” Basil had come to realize as much through his travels. “I told myself I was escaping the rat race, that I was done playing by society’s rules, but it was a lie I told myself. In truth, I...”

He struggled to find the right words, but René waited patiently for him to get them off his chest. The Old Man had always been a patient listener, and death hadn’t changed his predisposition.

“I was scared of failure,” Basil admitted. “Of disappointment.”

Basil had bunkered away in the wilderness rather than persevere. He had given up, tried to keep his head down, and cruise through life. *But even if you ignore the world, it certainly won’t ignore you*, Basil thought grimly. *Running away incurs a debt to reality and one day it is repaid. One way or another.*

“I can’t run away this time,” Basil told the only true father figure he ever had. “I won’t. As much as it scares me, it’s not about me anymore. It’s about the world. I’ve got friends waiting for me outside. People who will die if I stay in this... if I stay here.”

“People will die even if you leave, Basil,” René replied calmly. “I do not demean your achievements, far from it. But you are not Atlas. If you try to bear the world’s burden on your shoulders, you’ll only end up crushed under it. I fear you may be putting too much pressure on yourself. I know you. You will break before you bend.”

“Perhaps my efforts won’t amount to much,” Basil agreed. “But if each Bulgarian told themselves that, we wouldn’t have won independence. We wouldn’t have shaken off the Ottomans and the communists. Maybe I won’t make a big difference... but a small contribution is still better than none.”

Too many lives depending on his actions today. Vasi, Buggy, Shellgirl, Rosemarine, Kalki, Neria... and so many more. Basil had the duty to stand with them.

“I see.” René nodded slowly to himself before looking down at Plato and petting him on the head. The tiger cub purred happily in response. “Watch over him then, would you? Make sure he doesn’t get too deep into trouble.”

“I’ll try, but I make no promises,” the Rakshasa Kitten replied with a chuckle. “He hunts down problems like I do birds.”

“As is his wont.” The Old Man smiled sadly, before facing his adoptive son. His voice broke halfway through his confession. “A part of me is sad to see you go, Basil... but the rest of me is proud that you’ve found your way.”

The last sentence was said with such earnestness, such candidness, that it left Basil speechless. The young man felt something warm in his eyes, which he couldn’t suppress this time.

Before he knew it, Basil had closed the gap between them and dropped his halberd. His arms closed around René and held him tightly. The Old Man gasped in surprise at the hug, but quickly returned it.

“Fuck,” Basil muttered. The Old Man felt so warm to the touch, so solid and real. “Fuck.”

“I’m sorry,” René apologized. “I’m sorry I can’t follow you further. I wish I did, but... I guess that’s what de Gaulle meant when said that old age is a shipwreck. My time is done, but you can still swim to shore.”

“I’m...” It was a herculean struggle for Basil to let René go, but he did; slowly, gently. “I wish I could stay here longer. I truly do.”

“I understand,” René replied with a sad chuckle. “Don’t be sorry, Basil. Every man and woman has his own wars to fight. I’m lucky I could see you again at all.”

“Mister Bohem, Mister Plato?” Aya joined her hands shyly. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” Basil whispered. He couldn’t deny a last request.

“If you meet my cat, Misha, can you give her a message? She’s golden and small and adorable and lived with me in Tunis, you can’t miss her.”

She might as well have described millions of cats, but neither Basil nor Plato had the heart to point it out to her. "What message?" the Rakshasa Kitten asked quietly.

Aya looked down at her feet. "That it wasn't her fault."

Such a short sentence, and yet one that implied so much.

"We will tell her, if we meet her," Plato promised with a paw on his belly. "I swear it on my stripes and feline pride."

"I do too," Basil promised. "On my honor as a Bohen."

"Thank you." Aya smiled brightly. "I hope we'll meet again someday. You're rough outside, but nice inside."

"I hope so too," Basil said, though he knew better. After one last glance at the Old Man, he recovered his halberd and turned to face the portal.

"It'll be easier if we do it quickly," the feline whispered to Basil as he joined him. Plato wasn't one to cry, but his eyes were heavy with sorrow. "Without turning back."

Basil nodded slowly and took a step forward.

"Go forth, young man, brave cat," René said as Basil and Plato crossed the gate. "Show 'em your mettle."

He would.

For an old friend's sake.

The first step was the hardest of them all; the second was easier, but only barely so. Basil and Plato crossed the painted veil into another world, into an endless beach of granular sand glittering under a pale white sun. A calm, soothing sea of blue paint expanded as far as the eye could see. Only silence and a gentle breeze welcomed the duo.

Benjamin Leroy's daughter had perished in Tunisia during a terrorist attack. Basil wondered if it was the beach where she breathed her last, forever frozen in time.

"I do not understand you, Basil Bohen."

Basil looked up, his hand tightening on his halberd. A shadowy form materialized in the sky, floating above the duo. Plato drew his blade and pointed it at the creature.

“Why did you leave?” Pluto, no, Benjamin Leroy asked. The confusion in his maddened eyes was only too human. “You’ll only find pain outside. You cannot save the world of man.”

“Can *you*?” Basil rasped.

“I already am,” Leroy replied with what could pass for enthusiasm. “I will absorb all souls into Naraka. The living, the dead, all will be united in a perfect world, a better world, without pain nor sorrow. No one will mourn, no one will grieve. All will be right on Heaven and Earth.”

Basil listened to his empty spiel. They sounded so familiar to him. He had invented many excuses to cover up an ugly truth too.

“What are you hiding from?” Basil asked, his question as sharp as a sword.

“Hiding?” Leroy let out a light chuckle. “I am in front of you. Don’t you see me? Do your eyes deceive you?”

“This place, this pocket dimension, whatever you call... it’s a fantasy,” Basil pointed, his halberd raised at the godly shadow. “What’s a fantasy’s purpose but to escape reality? What are you running from?”

The answer became obvious the moment Basil’s words left his mouth. Benjamin Leroy had committed all his crimes to achieve a clear, simple goal. He wasn’t after power or wealth like his comrades. His atrocities had been committed in love’s name.

Basil remembered what Aya had told him, how the false god broke down after asking the same question over and over again. This false world was exactly what Basil had wanted once. A refuge to escape the most dreadful fear of them all.

Failure.

“You’ve failed, haven’t you?” Basil guessed. “You couldn’t bring her back.”

The false deity winced as if slapped in his shadowy face.

“You’ve made a deal with the Devil.” Basil failed to suppress a brief pang of sympathy for the madman before him. Having run away himself, he understood Leroy’s plight only too well. “And he shortchanged you.”

Leroy’s eyes were the only thing human about him, and they couldn’t lie. When Basil caught the brief flash of anger in them, he knew he had guessed correctly.

“You couldn’t own up to your fuck-ups,” Plato rapped, his voice dripping with disgust. “You created a fake paradise to soothe your own guilty conscience!”

“But it only made things worse, didn’t it?” Basil raised his halberd at Leroy. “Watching children like Aya, the spitting image of what you thought your revived daughter would look like, dead because of your actions... it must have been a slap in the face. You’ve ruined the world and killed millions of innocents... and you did it for *nothing*.”

A black eclipse obscured the sun, turning it black as sin. Streaks of crimson tainted the sky, and the painted sea started to boil. As for Leroy, the false deity’s eyes began to burn with an otherworldly, ferocious glow.

And most importantly, the painted portal vanished behind the Bohens.

“You just couldn’t bear the guilt. So you ran. You ran away from reality, from the truth, because it was the easy way out.” Basil sighed, both out of scorn and sympathy. “Madness is a coward’s last refuge, I suppose.”

Leroy snapped to action with fury by expanding his shadowy wings. Flames came alight within the darkness of his body like stars in the night sky.

“Phlegethon Flame!” the false god snarled.

Fiery stars fell down to earth, scorching the sand to glass and sounding the horn of battle.

Chapter 34: Woman vs Sword

The undead Great Sphinx of Tanit collapsed, the hole in its chest bleeding ice spikes all over the marble floor.

Vasi allowed herself a breath of relief. The remains of a mummy warlock burned against a dark stone wall close to her, the smell of roasted flesh and smoke rushing to her nose. "I think it's over," she said. "Good shot, Shellgirl."

"That was a close one," Shellgirl admitted as she emerged from behind a stone sarcophagus. Her last ice bomb, thrown from behind her cover, had slain the sphinx before he could finish charging up his beam attack. "Are you okay, Buggy?"

"I'm fine, thank you for asking," the centimagma replied atop a mountain of dead scorpions, each of them the size of a pony. His entire body was covered in sting wounds, though his innate resistance to Ailments had spared him from poison. "I wouldn't mind a healing potion though."

"I've asked Neria to send some through the Guild Inventory," Vasi replied before examining the sphinx's corpse. It was the second time they had killed the creature. First, it attacked them as a living statue, and then in the shape of a monstrous undead seconds after they slew it. Same with the scorpions. "Just in case..."

It cost her some of her precious SP, but Vasi incinerated the sphinx's corpse to ensure it would never rise again. This time a message appeared to confirm the battle's final end.

Your party earned 200,000 EXP (20,000 for you).

So many deaths, and it didn't even earn them a level.

Dismaker Labs wishes you a happy apocalypse!

Vasi was starting to understand her boyfriend's frustration with the System's customer service.

"Here, Buggy," Shellgirl said as she poured a potion down the centimagma's throat, healing his wounds. "Ready to continue?"

"Yes." Buggy nodded and pointed at a hieroglyph-covered wall with his antennae. "I sense stairs behind it."

Yet *another* secret passage? Vasi was growing tired of them. Her group had entered the pyramid after leaving the UNESCO HQ, ascending one floor after another; it started well, with the Reception Hall being a strangely peaceful sanctuary guarded by weak monsters easy to dispatch.

The situation worsened as they climbed further. Although the Louvre Pyramid held surprisingly few defenders—Vasi assumed most were fighting the Apocalypse Force outside the dungeon’s walls—she couldn’t say the same for the traps and puzzles. Poisoned darts fired inside corridors, hidden pits full of spikes, dead end tunnels, hidden passageways, and of course, the ever-popular rolling boulder... Vasi thought she had seen it all.

The witch had been almost elated to be confronted by an actual sphinx when they reached the Egyptian wing instead of yet another contraption. At least she could hit monsters back.

“Let me check,” Vasi said as she examined the walls. The hieroglyphs on the surface formed a nine-per-nine series of tiles and flipped when touched, revealing different symbols underneath. However, they returned to normal whenever she touched two at once. “These signs form a sequence somehow.”

“Oh, let me try!” Shellgirl started flipping the tiles, and Vasi started to see a pattern in the symbols. “Some of them are identical!”

“I believe we must memorize the location of each symbol and then pair them up,” Vasi guessed. She usually loved riddle games, but they were too pressed for time to enjoy this one. “Perhaps we can force our way in like with the previous puzzles.”

“Can we avoid it, if possible?” Buggy pleaded. “Skipping the last puzzle almost caused the ceiling to fall on top of us!”

Unfortunately, it seemed dungeon designers didn’t take visitors breaking through closed doors well. “We can try,” Vasi said with a shrug. “This one doesn’t look too hard—”

The sensation of new power infusing her bones, and a worrying System notification, interrupted her.

[All for One] applied ***[Mirage]*** and ***[Death’s Banner]*** to you.

All for One? A glance at her allies confirmed to Vasi that they were all affected. She opened the status screen in alarm and checked Basil's stats.

His HP bar was no longer full.

"They're fighting," Vasi realized in panic. "Basil and Plato are fighting."

"Must be Pluto," Shellgirl voiced the most likely possibility. "Big B finally pissed him off."

Worry seized Vasi's heart as she stared at the wall. She briefly considered completing the puzzles in quick succession, before realizing that she didn't have the patience for it. "Bugsy, please break the wall," she all but ordered. "We do not have time for puzzles anymore."

"Ugh, okay... for the Boss." Bugsy groaned. The centimagma pushed dead scorpions out of his path, took his distance, and gathered momentum. "Step aside, girls! Agility Up!"

Vasi and Shellgirl moved out of the way as the centimagma charged through the hieroglyph puzzle, shattering stones and uncovering a hidden staircase beyond it. The ceiling trembled in response, but the trio rushed through the steps before it could collapse on them and ascended to the next level.

The floor above the Egyptian exposition began with a crossroad leading to two different wings of the dungeon. The room, unlike the tomb-like levels the group had struggled with before, espoused a medieval theme familiar to Vasi. Fortified walls of stone bricks and chiseled pillars held the gray ceiling over a floor of polished wood.

Rows of wondrous items occupied the room, each of them encased in shells of glass. Golden statues of saints and holy virgins stood next to silver chalices, ancient swords, enchanted tapestries, great armors of steel, and kingly crowns of jewels. Each of these items exuded magic, to the point Vasi couldn't resist examining a few. These century-old relics radiated power, almost as much as the legendary weapons in Walter's exhibit.

One of them, however, inspired awe and wonder above all others: a sword with a golden pommel stood in the middle of the exhibit, its blade radiating like the sun itself. The sheath was encrusted in jewels each more precious than the last.

Joyeuse, Sword of Charlemagne

Family: Weapon Artifact (Sword).

Quality: S.

Power: +15 SKI.

Crit: +20%

Accuracy: 100%

Effect 1: [Royal Privilege]: Joyeuse can only be wielded by an individual with royal blood. Joyeuse will strike down unwelcome wielders with holy wrath.

Effect 2: [Sacred Sword]: Inflicts an additional 30% [Light] damage piercing through Resistance.

Effect 3: [Dragonslayer]: Inflicts Dragonslayer supereffective damage against the [Dragon] Type (x3 damage).

Effect 4: [Longinus]: Inflicts the [Brand] ailment on a successful hit, preventing the victim from recovering HP until the ailment is removed.

Effect 5: [Song of Roland]: when Joyeuse lands a killing blow, it sings for one minute; the wielder and his allies inflict 50% additional damage so long as they can hear the song. Each killing blow renews the song's duration. The song's duration is increased if Joyeuse is within ten meters of [Durandal, Sword of Roland] and/or [Curtana, Sword of Ogier].

The mythical sword of Emperor Charlemagne, who truly needed humor in his life. Paraded by French Kings and used in the famous Song of Roland to slay Baligant, Emir of Babylon and dragon of the east, Joyeuse has unhappily gathered dust for the last several centuries. Somebody gives this murder weapon a hug!

Charlemagne? The name sounded like the Holy Kingdom of Gardemagne, a mighty nation of Vasi's world once ruled by a paladin god. Did this artifact come from her homeworld?

"Who is this Charlemagne?" Buggy whispered in awe as he joined Vasi, utterly entranced by the sword's radiance. "Was he the Boss of this place before Pluto?"

"I've heard of him," Shellgirl said. The merchant was more well-versed in the lore of this world than her friends. "He was a great paladin king who ruled the continent of Europe in ancient times."

"So a Superboss?" Buggy guessed.

The story felt familiar to Vasi. She had heard Earth and Outremonde were mirrors in many ways, and this sword reminded her of representations of All-Sun, the sword of the light god Mithras. She wondered how good Basil would look with a weapon such as this.

Shellgirl shattered the glass protecting the sword without warning, startling Vasi. "Shellgirl, what are you doing?" she asked. "We don't have time to grab everything shiny!"

"Are you kidding?" Shellgirl replied with a grin, her hand greedily grabbing Joyeuse's pommel. "We're going to fight a living shadow and a holy blade falls in our lap! It's the perfect sign—AHH!"

Shellgirl let out a scream of pain as the sword burst with light, burning her hand. The mimic dropped Joyeuse in pain and Vasi, acting on instinct, caught the sword before it hit the ground.

Vasi realized the danger only after her fingers closed around the pommel. Her fear, however, quickly turned to surprise. The gold felt warm to the touch, like a gentle hearth's fire. Her fingers didn't burst into fire as Shellgirl's did. She raised the one-handed sword as easily as a feather.

"Ouch," Shellgirl complained as she massaged her sticky fingers. "Vasi, be careful!"

"I'm fine." Much to her own surprise, in fact. "How strange. Why am I not affected?"

"Could you be..." Buggy held his breath. "A *princess*?"

"Of course not," Vasi replied with a shrug. "I'm a witch, not a noble brat in her tower."

But Buggy, always the innocent mind, wouldn't let the idea go. "Maybe you're a king's secret bastard, hidden at birth for your own safety because of an ancient prophecy!"

"Or not to split the inheritance!" Shellgirl suggested with a pained grin, a suggestion which Vasi thought equally unbelievable.

“Well, they do call my mother the Queen of Witches...” Vasi mused. She imagined bequeathing the sword to Basil, like a lady with her knight. That would be amusing.

A green glow surrounded the group, wiping away their fatigue and healing Shellgirl’s wounds.

[Monster Cure II] healed you!

“Oh, nice!” Shellgirl rejoiced. “Looks like Basil sent us help!”

Vasi didn’t share her friend’s joy. Basil should have no way of knowing how his allies were faring, so the only target for his spell should be his cat.

“Basil is healing Plato,” Vasi guessed in alarm. “Which means whatever is fighting them is a credible threat to both.”

With time working against them, Vasi examined signs on the walls pointing at various wings. The one on the left was called *European Paintings*, and the one on the right was titled *European Arts*. The group moved towards the former, with Buggy scouting at the front.

As per the sign, this wing of the pyramid contained a gallery sprawling as far as the eye could see. The exhibit showcased countless paintings on white walls, under a dusty ceiling of hardened multicolor glass. Each picture looked more twisted than the last; the frames grew roots into the walls like parasitic trees, while the painted works’ lines were ever-shifting like troubled waters. First came images of wars and tragedies, then foul beasts and demons. Others were drawn in an abstract style, showcasing maddened, bent figures screaming in silence.

“That’s a lot of priceless paintings,” Shellgirl noted as she examined the closest painting, *‘The Coronation of Napoleon.’* The picture showed an assembly of skeletons watching the ascension of a crowned ghost in a dark, gloomy castle. Shellgirl brushed her hand against the structure, the painting shifting at her touch. “I can enter this one!”

“Each of these paintings must lead to a different room,” Vasi guessed. “Don’t touch any of them. One could trap you inside itself.”

“Well, according to the map, the Mona Lisa should be further up ahead,” Shellgirl replied as she pulled out her hand. “We can’t miss it, it takes up an entire room.”

“Girls, beware!” Buggy shouted a warning. “I sense movement coming from the walls!”

Vasi gritted her teeth and backed off as some of the portraits started to bleed paint. Humanoid figures of solid black paint walked out of the portraits by the dozens, each of them with nimble legs and unnaturally long arms. A vicious grin full of sharp fangs formed on their hideous, eyeless faces.

Painted Sorrow

Level 26 [Demon/Elemental]

Faction: Metal Olympus (Psychopompos).

“Go help the chief!” Buggy declared as he faced the creatures, fire building up between his mandibles. “I’ll hold them off!”

“Very well,” Vasi said with little hesitation. By now, she knew her friend’s valor and abilities. “Hasten!”

“Motivate,” Shellgirl added.

Their buffs swiftly empowered Buggy, with the Centimagma charging into the fray at blinding speed. He crashed into the quickest target in a flash, turning it into inert paint spilled all over the floor. Vasi and Shellgirl advanced into the gallery as their friend covered their rear.

As Shellgirl guessed, it didn’t take them long to find the *Mona Lisa*; or at least, a painting titled as such. The frame stood embedded in a black wall of thorns at the exhibit’s center, so small Vasi doubted she could fit through it. The ghastly picture represented the shadowy form of Pluto staring at onlookers, one dark hand over the other. A fantasy background stretched behind his blackened hood, all under a crimson sky.

“That’s not what it should look like,” Shellgirl noted, disgusted by the sight. “How outrageous, to ruin such a fair piece of art!”

“This is the right painting,” Vasi said. The portrait radiated as much oppressive power as Tamura and Hypathia. “This artifact is the source of Pluto’s powers.”

Most importantly, she sensed the same aura that once surrounded Hypathia coming off from the portrait. Plato, who had inherited her essence, was fighting for his life inside it.

“Basil, I’m coming,” Vasi said as she applied her hand to the portrait. The oily paint felt disgustingly slimy to her fingers, and yet harder than diamond.

Entrance denied by [Pluto, Lord of the Netherworld].

“Damn it,” Vasi cursed. “Pluto won’t let us enter it!”

“We’ll just have to force our way in then!” Shellgirl suggested. She raised her tentacles at the portrait. “Let’s see if this painting’s got insurance!”

Vasi stepped away as Shellgirl fired half a dozen ice spheres at the corrupted Mona Lisa. The projectiles bounced off the wooden frame and thorn wall without inflicting damage, but also melded into the cursed paint when they touched it.

You cannot destroy: [Mona Lisa].

Vasi had vaguely hoped that damaging the painting would free her boyfriend trapped inside, but the notification shattered her hopes.

“Do I keep firing, Vasi my, dear?” Shellgirl asked in dejection. “What if I painted something over the portrait? Wipe off that silly black hood with white streaks?”

“At this point, we might as well try,” Vasi whispered with a frown. “But you gave me an idea.”

Pluto could prevent the living from entering his painted lair, but Shellgirl’s ice projectiles entered it just fine.

Since Vasi couldn’t send reinforcements... she would have to send supplies.

Leroy rained down fiery stones from the sky.

The beach had long been transformed into a wasteland of smoking craters and fuming holes, one projectile at a time. Basil struggled to run across the minefield to dodge the latest

bombardment, his hands sweating from the heat and relentless pressure. Plato ran after him, his tail having caught fire from a previous attack.

“Elemental Orb: Water!” Basil snarled as he materialized a liquid projectile in his free hand, throwing it at Leroy. The false god blinked out of existence in a burst of blackened smoke and reappeared a few feet away in the air. Basil took it as a good sign; if Leroy felt the need to dodge attacks, then whatever Field effect canceled damage in his paradise was gone.

Leroy retaliated with a shadow orb of his own. The projectile, as large as a small house, fell down towards the Bohens at incredible speed and exploded on the ground in a cataclysmic blast. Plato managed to dodge it by leaping away, but Basil was thrown back by the blast. He rolled on the sand and nearly fell into the boiling waters along the shore.

“Basil!” Plato shouted in alarm. “Get up!”

“What’s wrong, Bohem?! Off your game?!” Leroy snarled, his eyes burning with fury. “Dark Calling!”

Basil rose to his feet right as the ground began to tremble beneath his feet. Sensing the danger, he leaped away right as a ghostly hand larger than him emerged from the sand. Its bony fingers closed on empty air.

Unfortunately, Leroy reappeared next to Basil before he could regain his footing. “Thanatos Ray!”

The false god’s eyes lit up and two beams of energy burst from them. The lasers hit Basil in the chest, pierced through his armor, and burned the flesh underneath. Eldritch energies consumed his skin and exposed the ribs underneath to the air outside.

369 [Soul] Damage! [Insta-Death] negated by [Death’s Banner]!

Basil snarled in pain as the blow threw him backward; his Perk spared him from a quick death, but not from the searing pain.

“Dwarf tiger to the face!” Plato shouted as he flanked Leroy. Blades of wind swirled around his claws and sword both. “Windfang!”

Leroy let out a shriek as he failed to teleport in time. The cat's magical wind shredded through his cloak of shadow and left marks in the false god's body of insubstantial darkness. He retaliated with more beams, but the feline adroitly leaped around to dodge.

Basil charged back to help his friend, swinging his halberd with the strength of a possessed man. His weapon hit only sand as Leroy teleported away above the boiling sea. "Coward!" Basil snarled. "Come here and fight!"

Leroy responded by expanding his shadowy wings. "Night Reign!"

A humongous flock of shadowy, bloodthirsty bats erupted from his body and flew straight at the duo. Basil formed an elemental orb of fire and threw it straight at the incoming enemies. His attack exploded in a burning blast of flames on contact and killed the flying rodents.

Warning: You have exhausted half your SP!

"I don't know how long I can keep this up!" Basil warned Plato, before gritting his teeth as fiery stars materialized in the sky above them. "He's *tough!*"

Not only was Leroy better at using his abilities than his colleagues, teleporting to dodge attacks and unleashing attack after attack with no time for breathing room, but the absence of two-thirds of Basil's team complicated matters. He hadn't realized just how much he had come to rely on their buffs and support in battle until today.

"He's got to slip up at one point!" Plato replied as the duo started running for their lives to avoid a bombardment. "Distract him! Invisibility!"

Leroy reappeared right in front of them in a shadowy cloud of smoke, before Plato could fully vanish from sight. "Hecate's Disruption!"

A blast of blue light washed over Basil and Plato, turning the latter visible and stripping the former of magical protection.

Your buffs have been lifted.

God Jesus Marie Joseph! Basil thought in abject terror as Leroy's eyes shone with eldritch power. With no Death's Banner and the Field effect active, a direct hit might be *fatal*. Time

slowed down, his heart pounding in his chest as Leroy followed through with his instant-death attack. “Death’s Ban—”

“Thanatos Ray!” Leroy snarled first.

“—ner!”

The beams surged from the false god’s eyes at lightspeed right as Basil activated his Perk. One laser hit the sand, but the other narrowly pierced through his left shoulder right as Death’s Banner spread through Basil’s bones.

180 [Soul] damage! [Insta-Death] negated by [Death’s Banner]!

A close call!

“You will not escape!” said the false god as his eyes brightened like Hell’s fiery heart. “Heca—”

“You’re the one fleeing!” Basil snarled as he swung his halberd before his foe could complete his spell. The coward teleported away, and Basil had to split from Plato to avoid a falling fireball afterward. “You would rather kill us than admit your wrongs!”

“Lies!” Leroy roared as he reappeared in the sky, looming over the beach; and far away from Basil’s range. “I can hear Celia’s voice! She is everywhere in this world, in my world! You are the ones who understand nothing!”

Basil prepared to utter a clever retort, when a blinding light obscured his sight. He half-expected another sneak attack from Leroy, only for the false god to turn his eyes at the sky in surprise. He appeared as confused as Basil himself.

A blinding blade of sunlight fell from the heavens and straight at Leroy. The false god moved away in surprise, the sword falling into the beach. Basil didn’t bother picking it up. Instead, he immediately used his enemy’s distraction to blast him with an orb of water. The projectile hit true, blasting Leroy and forcing him to teleport out of sight once more.

Warning: you have exhausted two-thirds of your SP.

“Plato, I can’t fire more projectiles,” Basil warned. With his SP so low, he needed to focus on keeping Death’s Banner up to protect them from instant death attacks. “Plato?”

Basil glanced at his best friend in alarm, worrying he might have been ambushed... only to realize the feline had decided to trade his fencing sword for a fancier weapon.

“Now, foul villain!” Plato declared, his golden sword raised towards the corrupted sky. It didn’t matter that the blade was longer than the tiger cub; in that moment, he still managed to look utterly badass. “Bow before your king!”

For the first time in his life, Basil was tempted to become a monarchist.

Chapter 35: Man vs Reality

The light of Plato's sword repelled Leroy.

"Argh!" The living shadow cowered from the blade's divine radiance as if he were physically hurt by it. "Stay away!"

Leroy materialized a shadowy sphere in the palm of his hand and threw it at Plato. The feline saw the attack coming, but instead of dodging, he simply sliced the projectile in midair. His sword dissipated the darkness like the sun repelled the night away in the morning. Leroy's eyes widened in shock at this new development.

Sensing an opportunity, Basil tossed his halberd at his foe like a javelin. Leroy didn't recover from his surprise in time and the Soulbound weapon sliced through one of his shadowy wings. It cut through the false god's incorporeal substance as if it were flesh, Leroy's screams echoing across the false world. Croque-Mordeuse's new ability allowed it to drain SP from its victims, and Basil watched on with satisfaction as his weapon's blade consumed some of Leroy's shadowy energies.

Supereffective hit! You have shaved off a fifth of [Pluto, Lord of the Netherworld]'s SP!

Basil's halberd continued its course in the sky. Leroy, believing he could seize an opportunity, materialized in front of Basil. "Thanatos Ray!" he snarled, his eyes shining with malice.

There was no way to dodge the attack at this distance... so Basil didn't. Gritting his teeth, he powered through the beams as they hit him in the chest, damaging his armor and burning the flesh underneath. The pain was indescribable, but Leroy didn't maintain the pressure for long. His eyes soon returned to normal, filled with confusion.

Only when Basil teleported his Soulbound weapon back to his hand, as his Perk allowed him, did the false god realize his mistake.

"Ah!" Leroy screamed in pain as Basil swung his halberd through his chest once, then twice. The Deathknight repaid each wound he had received back in full. His blows drained Leroy of life and magic.

Supereffective hit! Supereffective hit.

Leroy teleported a few feet away and formed a sphere of dark energy to retaliate, only for Plato to get the jump on him by striking from behind. The tiger cub's light blade cut through the shadow like paper and forced Leroy to teleport away.

"Run, run like a bird!" Plato taunted as he chased after the false god. Leroy teleported in short bursts while vainly trying to snipe the feline with his eye beams. "It makes no difference to me!"

Basil raised his halberd to join the chase, only to wince in pain. He glanced at his fuming, hole-covered chest and covered his wounds with one hand. The battle had taken its toll on him. His SP was too low to sustain more long-range attacks and magical suppression fire.

A miracle fell from the sky, as if answering his prayer.

A flying broomstick descended from the heavens and landed peacefully on the sand near Basil. A bundle was attached to the tip. Immediately recognizing Vasi's broom, Basil rushed to open the package.

Two potions fell out of it and into the sand.

Relief supplies!

Basil immediately drank them while Plato kept Leroy occupied, not even bothering to check their effects. The pain in his chest dissipated and a few of his wounds closed on their own.

You have recovered 120 SP and 200 HP!

120 SP. That was enough to keep Death's Banner up for longer without sacrificing his defense.

Promising himself to make it up to his girlfriend if he managed to survive, Basil joined the fray. While Leroy was occupied keeping Plato at bay with lasers and shadowy spheres, Basil threw an elemental orb of water at him. The false god failed to teleport in time and was hit head on.

Basil expected Leroy to vanish once more. Instead, the false god's body started to undergo a strange mutation. The ethereal darkness making up his substance solidified. The creature of darkness became one of flesh, a demonic humanoid with batlike wings and elongated, clawed arms. Leroy's body appeared melded with armor of blackened steel, with metal spikes on the shoulders and a horned helmet making up the upper half of the face. The only human part of him was his pallid jaw and his unchanged eyes.

“What...” The false god rasped in incomprehension as he stumbled on the sand. “I can’t... my flesh...”

“What’s happening to him?” Plato asked. Wind swirled around his sword for a new counterattack.

“His incorporeal state isn’t a natural thing,” Basil guessed. “He needs SP to maintain it, and my halberd blows cut down his reserves.”

Leroy had relentlessly pummeled the duo with powerful magical attacks for minutes on end. No matter how large the SP reserves he could call upon, they weren’t limitless. He had forgotten to pace himself in his wrath and now paid the price for it.

Still, Leroy didn’t admit defeat. He let out a bestial snarl and flung his elongated arms like whips. Basil and Plato separated, each of them avoided a clawed hand by moving in one direction. Guided by battle experience won over many months of constant battling, the duo moved as one and flanked Leroy from both sides.

Seeing the danger, the false god extended his wings and took flight. A cloud of sand swallowed the Bohens, obscuring their sight. Clawed hands closed on Basil’s shoulders and suddenly dragged him into the sky.

“You can’t win this, Benjamin!” Basil shouted at Leroy before impaling him with his halberd’s spike. The false god hissed in pain as the weapon pierced his flesh, yet he refused to relinquish his quarry and gained altitude. “No more than you can bring her back!”

“What have you built, Bohen?” Leroy snarled angrily. “What have you created?! All your kind does is destroy!”

“I didn’t break the world!” Basil shouted back. Leroy opened his mouth wide, revealing rows of sharpened fangs. Basil raised a palm and shoved it between the false god’s lips. “Elemental Orb: Water!”

His projectile exploded in Leroy’s mouth, blowing off his fangs and lips alike. The false god released his quarry and Basil began to fall off more than twenty meters.

"I got you, Basil!" Plato raised his sword, channeled wind through it, and ran circles on the beach. His actions whirled a whirlwind into existence which softened Basil's fall. He still crashed into the sand, but got off with a few bruises rather than broken bones.

Leroy let out a hellish screech and dived down upon the duo. Quickly rushing back to his feet, Basil raised his halberd horizontally. "Plato!"

His tiger cub jumped on the flat side of his halberd's blade. Using his weapon like a lever, Basil threw his companion at their enemy like a projectile. Leroy extended his hands to catch Plato in midair, but the crafty feline swirled on himself and dodge. He hit the false god in the chest, impaling him.

The holy light burned Leroy until he lost control of his flight. Plato jumped off him right before he crashed into the sand next to Vasi's broomstick.

"Give up," Basil said coldly as he and Plato flanked Leroy from both sides. Even when covered in wounds and without power to fuel his spells, the false god refused to yield. "We don't want to kill you."

"We don't?" Plato asked in confusion.

"If we can help it," Basil replied. He locked eyes with Leroy, who had managed to rise back to his feet, his hands covering his chest wound. "Do you think your daughter would want you to throw your life away for nothing?"

"I'm doing this for her," Leroy shouted back, spitting blood. "I hear her! I hear her voice, spurring me on!"

"Oh, for the love of..." Basil planted his halberd in the sand like a flag. "Plato, stay back."

"Wait, what are you doing?" his best friend asked, his eyes squinting in worry.

"Beating some sense into him," Basil replied as he took a step forward. "Like Samson with the Philistines!"

Leroy swung his left arm at Basil in a vain attempt to keep him at bay. He missed. Basil lowered himself to dodge the attack and then punched his foe in the chest, right where Plato wounded him beforehand. The false god let out a hiss of pain on impact.

“Your daughter isn’t speaking to you,” Basil said, his voice brimming with pity. “That voice you hear? It’s your loneliness trying to fill the silence.”

“Shut up,” Leroy hissed as he held his bleeding chest. “I know... I know the truth.”

“Yes, you do.” Basil snorted. “And that’s why it hurts so much.”

He punched Leroy in the face with enough force to knock out a tooth.

“I want René to come back to life,” Basil said, before following with an uppercut. “I want Orcine to pull herself back together and Kuikui to return. I even want that old French Major back, so we can settle our differences once for all. I want my father to come back from the dead and stop being a raging alcoholic who threw his life away the first time.”

Leroy stumbled back on the sand and fell to one knee. Plato watched on, silent as a tomb.

“And I’m never going to get any of this.” Basil shook his head. “Because they’re all *dead* and they can’t come back. I can’t turn back the clock, Leroy, and neither can *you*. They’re *gone*.”

“You’re wrong.” Leroy stubbornly rose to his feet. “I can bring them back. I can bring her back! I just need more time, more data!”

“All you’ve created are phantoms trapped in a snowglobe while the world crumbles to dust,” Basil replied. “Half of whom you murdered in the first place.”

“If I can revive them, then it’ll be alright in the end.” Leroy raised his hands and tightened them into fists. “Once you’re gone, I’ll make everything right.”

“You can’t.” Basil dodged a punch, then another. Dismaker Labs’ former programmer had no experience in hand to hand combat, nor the strength left to present a challenge. “Even if you somehow manage to trap every soul on earth in this place, it won’t return their old life back to them. The Apocalypse Force, the Unity, your colleagues... they’ll keep killing. Keep hurting. One day they’ll find their way to this place and destroy it.”

Sensing an opportunity, Basil backhanded Leroy and forced him back. The false god touched his bleeding jaw, whimpering in pain.

“You can’t run away forever, Benjamin.” Basil had learned this lesson the hard way. “Think. Do you think that’s truly what your daughter would want for you? To hole up in a pyramid for the rest of your days? To waste your time running after an illusion?”

“You know nothing!” Leroy snarled back. Tears rained down his bloodied cheeks. “You don’t understand! If I fail... if I fail, it would have been all for nothing! The things I’ve done, the lives I’ve destroyed...”

He let out a screech of pain and despair.

“There’s no coming back!” Leroy exhaled. “No coming back from that...”

“That’s true,” Basil agreed. “You can’t ever fully make up for what you’ve done. That’s harsh, but it’s true.”

His words hit Leroy harder than his fists. The false god stood still, staring at the ground. Had Basil finally gotten through the walls he had built around himself?

“If you truly feel sorry for your crimes, then you must atone for them,” Basil said. “Truly atone. Not by covering up your mistakes as if you had never fucked up, but by making up for them in the real world. You’ve going to get out of this pyramid and help us *fix your shit*.”

“No.” Leroy shook his head in denial. “No, no, you’re wrong. I just have to bring them back. Yes, that’s right.”

“You can’t.” Basil inhaled sharply. “Summon her.”

“Summon...” Leroy looked up at Basil in incomprehension. “Summon her?”

“Your daughter,” Basil said, his voice sharper than a knife. “If you are so powerful, if that’s truly her voice you hear in your head, then surely you can compel her to appear. If you’re truly a god, then you will succeed.”

“I...” Leroy’s eyes widened in dread at the impossible task. “I... no, she’s shy, she...”

“Drag her here if you must,” Basil ordered, before losing patience. “Summon her!”

Leroy expanded his wings and attempted to take flight. He tried to run, to the sky, to nowhere. Basil didn't let him. He grabbed the false god by the leg and dragged him back to earth.

"Summon her!" Basil snarled. Leroy struggled to escape, but he lacked the strength to.

"Summon her! Bring her back!"

"I..." Leroy cried, his voice weakening. "I... can't."

The words were so weak, barely a whisper. Yet they carried the crushing weight of defeat.

Basil released Leroy. The false god didn't try to run away this time. The fight had gone out of him, snuffed out like a candle.

"I can't..." Leroy admitted, burying his face in the sand. "I can't... Celia..."

The wind blew between them, and the fake world collapsed in its wake. The crimson sky cracked open like an egg. The illusory sea washed away the beach into nothingness. The lies Benjamin Leroy had built around his heart collapsed one after the other.

"That's all there is," Basil said sadly, Plato standing at his side. "I'm sorry, Benjamin. But you'll have to live with it. As I did. As we must all do."

Basil saw pictures of people flashing before his eyes. René, Aya, Orcine, Kuikui, and so many others. They appeared to him in a blink, and then they were gone without a sound.

The reaper was an impatient force; it rarely waited for last words.

The world was swallowed by light, and Basil was no longer on a beach when he regained his sense of sight. Instead he sat on the cold hard floor of an art gallery, with his girlfriend kneeling at his side.

"Good to see you again, handsome." Vasi moved to embrace him and he welcomed her with open arms. Basil almost wondered if she was yet another illusion, but the way she held him tightly told him otherwise. It was her, entirely her. "So good..."

"Were you worried for me?" Basil asked with a thin smile, before kissing her on the cheek. "I received my lady's favor."

"I would have sent you a handkerchief to wear in battle, but I was strapped for time," Vasi mused with a smile as she broke the hug. "I hope it helped."

"It did." Vasi helped Basil rise back to his feet and he scanned the area with a glance. Shellgirl was pouring a healing potion down Plato's throat under the gaze of the *Mona Lisa* painting. Basil's halberd lay on the ground, next to Vasi's broom and Plato's newfound holy weapon. Rosemarine was nowhere to be seen, as for Buggy...

"I got him, Boss!" The centimagma's tail had coiled around a defeated Leroy. The false god's chest showed multiple bloody wounds. "He won't run away!"

Basil doubted Leroy wanted to. The false god's gaze was as hollow as his body was limp. He looked dead while alive, breathing yet crushed within. Smacking him back to reality had just been the final nail in his coffin.

Although Benjamin Leroy only deserved scorn for destroying the world, Basil couldn't suppress a pang of pity at his sight.

"Where's Rosemarine?" Basil asked, worried for his tropidrake.

"Keeping an eye on Kalki in the basement," Vasi explained.

This comment earned Basil's full attention. "You've found him?"

"He's trapped in the neurotower's forcefield," Vasi confirmed. "We had to leave him behind for now."

"We were so worried for you and Plato," Shellgirl admitted. "You can't fathom how many treasures we had to leave behind!"

"I can imagine," Basil said as he finally took the time to examine Plato's new sword. He immediately recognized Charlemagne's sword, Joyeuse. "Nice catch."

"A shame you didn't choose to wield it yourself," Vasi said with a smile. "You would look dashing with it."

"Not as much as me," Plato said before offering the sword to Basil. "Yo dog, wanna try it?"

Although Basil struggled with the idea of cheating on his halberd with a sword, he couldn't resist the urge to touch the holy blade's pommel. His fingers burned when they brushed against the golden sword, forcing him to pull his hand back. "Argh!"

"Ah, saddening." Vasi sighed. "Only those of royal blood can use Joyeuse in battle. And here I hoped you were a secret prince in shining armor."

"Sorry," Basil replied with a thin smile. "I'm the proud heir of a long line of dirt-poor peasants."

"Why can Mr. Plato wield the sword then?" Buggy asked in confusion.

"Why shouldn't I?" Plato asked back. "Look at me. I am the very picture of royalty."

Vasi grinned ear to ear. "Well, he is the king of cats."

"Meow, that's right," Plato replied with unbearable pride. "The tiger is king of the jungle, it is known!"

"I have my doubts," Basil mused. "But we can check that later."

They would need to settle Leroy's fate first.

The group gathered around the false god. Buggy dropped Leroy on the ground, with Plato and Shellgirl pointing their weapons at him. Basil didn't bother to threaten him with his halberd. The board member had clearly given up on life.

"How do we return the world to normal?" Basil asked sharply. "You helped design the neurotowers, didn't you? How can we use them to subvert the System?"

"You... you can't," Leroy replied, his voice brimming with guilt. "Once the Trimurti System initialized... the situation escaped our control. The Neurotowers summoned it to Earth and provided it with energy, but they do not control anything."

Basil had expected as much, but he didn't like hearing this information either.

"Your particular neurotower harvests souls from all over the world," Vasi pointed out. "If we destroy it, it will be a blow to the system."

Leroy shook his head in denial. "Destroying Naraka won't solve anything," he said. "Redundant neurotowers will take over to keep processing souls. The network will adapt to any unforeseen scenario. And if you destroy them all, the cosmic egg will crumble on itself."

"An egg?" Buggy squinted in confusion. "What egg?"

"When we activated the Trimurti System, our planet was trapped inside the seed of a new universe," Leroy explained. "This egg's shell... it acts as a Level barrier regulating who can get in."

"So the barrier is not a sphere," Basil whispered as he remembered the ISS' last transmission. "Shiva isn't holding a sphere in its palm, but an egg."

"Shiva... yes, that's an appropriate metaphor." Leroy chuckled weakly, as if laughing at a joke only he could understand. "Once an Overgod is selected, the cosmic egg will hatch to unleash them on the cosmos."

"But... What about the world?" Shellgirl chewed her lip. "Once the egg hatches, what will happen to it?"

"Depends," Leroy whispered back.

"On what?" Basil asked sharply.

"On the Overgod, I suppose." Leroy looked down at the ground. "We didn't plan for the aftermath. Either you win or you run. That was what Maxwell said. I didn't care about either... so long as I had her... and now..."

Leroy cried while Basil clenched his fists in anger. Whoever won, there was a chance the world wouldn't survive it.

"How do we halt the process?" Vasi asked with a frown. "How can we stop the competition?"

"I already told you, you *can't*." Benjamin Leroy looked up and stared at the witch with weeping eyes. "Don't you understand? There is no escape. The Trimurti System won't stop the competition until an Overgod is selected. It's the only way out. The wheel of death will keep spinning, one way or another."

Plato pointed his sword at Leroy. "All I hear is that you're useless to us."

Leroy showed no fear; only quiet acceptance of his fate. He kneeled and waited for death. "Send me to Celia," he said, closing his eyes. He looked almost pleading. "Send me to her."

Plato lowered the sword for the killing blow.

Steel clashed against steel, as Basil's halberd stopped his best friend's blade within an inch of Leroy's throat.

"Why?" Plato asked in confusion as he removed his blade. "He deserves death. You know that."

"You're wrong." Basil scowled. "He deserves worse."

Basil grabbed Leroy by the throat with one hand and lifted him above the ground. His high Strength stat showed its worth again.

"You think death will be your salvation?" Basil locked eyes with his enemy. Leroy was a broken soul, all but pleading for death. "I deny you this mercy. One way or another, you're going to help us fix the mess you've made. It's going to be a hard, thankless job, but you *will* do it; even if I have to drag you all the way through."

Leroy didn't answer, so Basil threw him on the cold hard floor.

"Don't expect applause or handclaps," Basil said with a scowl. "No angel is going to come down from heaven to tell you that you've been punished enough. Some people will *never* forgive you for what you've done, no matter how hard you try to make up for your sins. You'll have to bear this cross for the rest of your miserable life. But maybe, just maybe... one day you'll be able to look at yourself in the mirror, and forgive the person staring back at you. That's the best you can hope for, but that's already more than you deserve."

Leroy lay on the floor, defeated and silent. But he was listening. That was all that mattered.

"Let's go free Kalki," Basil said, before turning his back on Leroy. "We'll see how we proceed from there."

In spite of all his crimes, Benjamin Leroy had destroyed the world not out of greed or ambition, but parental love. Even in the depths of his madness, he tried to make up for his mistakes in a perverted, twisted way.

It earned him a little sympathy from Basil; but just enough to buy himself a second chance.

Chapter 36: Man vs Wisdom

“Are you sure of yourself, handsome?”

Basil glanced at Vasi as they walked down the stairs to the UNESCO building. He and his girlfriend closed the party’s march, while the rest of the team kept an eye on their prisoner.

Benjamin Leroy hadn’t made any effort to free himself from captivity. He walked alongside the team in utter silence, his gaze hollow and his back bent like an old tree. No monsters ambushed the team during their descent, although the Pyramid was probably still crawling with them.

None of the Bohens let their captive’s passivity lull them into complacency. All of them sent glances at Leroy from time to time, none more often than Plato. The feline kept his hand on Joyeuse’s pommel at all times, ready to cut down the false god at the first sign of resistance.

“He is dangerous and not all that stable,” Vasi warned Basil. “Letting him live is a gamble.”

“I know,” Basil admitted. Although he hoped the reward would outweigh the risks, he understood his wager could backfire spectacularly. “But he can’t turn his life around if he’s dead.”

“Do you think that’s even possible?” his girlfriend asked with skepticism.

“I believe so, yes,” Basil confirmed. “He’s not like Tamura or Hypathia, or even Maxwell. He understands that he has done wrong. He’s damaged goods alright, but he can still pull himself together.”

Basil couldn’t quite explain it himself. He felt it in his gut. Perhaps he saw a bit of himself in Leroy, or his brief stay inside the illusory world of Naraka had given him a glimpse into the man’s soul. Or maybe, just maybe, a part of Basil wanted to believe in the man’s better nature.

“I told you at the house that when faced with unrepentant evil, fire and brimstone really are the solution. That’s Old Testament justice. But the sequel has some good words too: *He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone.*” Basil shrugged. “When someone stumbles on the perilous path of repentance, I should help them stand back up and not trip them further.”

Vasi looked at him with a coy, enigmatic smile.

“What?” Basil asked.

“I find you more charming when you speak of forgiveness rather than punishment, my bear knight,” Vasi said with a chuckle. “Your better qualities shine through.”

“Thank you,” Basil replied, returning her smirk with one of his own. “And for being at my side. It helps, more than you know. Your deliveries saved our lives in the painted world.”

“I do not keep count, Basil,” Vasi replied. “But if you truly want to return the favor... I wouldn’t mind taking a holiday after we are done with our current Quest. Dungeon delving is exhausting. I think I need a break.”

That made two of them. “If we survive the Incursion, I’ll take you to Bulgaria,” Basil promised. “You’ll love it. It’s a beautiful place.”

“Are you planning to introduce me to your mother?” Vasi mused. “It’s a big step forward in our relationship.”

“Yeah, it is,” Basil admitted. “But I feel we’re ready for it.”

Vasi nodded slowly as they finally reached the dungeon’s neurotower, at the very center of a crumbling gallery larger than any other room Basil had yet seen. Rosemarine had been waiting there, slouching on the ground and keeping watch on a forcefield keeping Veronese’s *The Wedding Feast at Cana* trapped.

“Mister, Plato, you came back!” The tropidrake rose to her feet and immediately licked Basil with her elongated tongue. The contact wasn’t enjoyable at all, but Basil accepted it with a smile. Plato simply leaped away to avoid suffering the same fate. “I missed you so much!”

“Me too, Rosemarine,” Basil replied as he petted her on the head. “I’m glad to see you’re safe.”

Rosemarine noticed Leroy and promptly growled at him. “Is he a treat?” she asked. “Do you want me to eat him, Mister?”

“You already ate a god before, two would give you indigestion,” Plato mused.

Leroy finally raised his head, his gaze wandering from Rosemarine to Buggy and Plato. “How?” he asked. “How did you...”

“Kill your colleagues?” Basil asked with a shrug. “Your ‘friend’ Ashok prevented them from teleporting away.”

“Ah, that’s how it is…” Leroy let out a dark chuckle. “Ashok… he wanted to see his god. He told me this once. Money and power were a means to him, never an end.”

“His god?” Basil repeated with a frown, before glancing at the *Wedding Feast at Cana*. He quickly caught Kalki’s presence in the painting, as Vasi warned him earlier. “You mean the Trimurti?”

“Yes. He wanted answers. When I asked ‘to what questions’ he simply smiled and told me I wouldn’t get it.” Leroy laughed darkly. “I heard Maxwell granted him the power of Zeus because he couldn’t get Indra the Thunderer.”

“Tamura wanted Susano-o too, if I remember right,” Basil pointed out.

“Yes, he did.” Leroy sighed. “But summoning gods and binding them is an extraordinarily difficult task in itself. Each of them demands specialized resources, god-data. It was simply easier to capture essences from a single pantheon.”

Basil filed away this information in his mind for later, but changed the subject. Ashok was a long-term problem and they had more pressing troubles to deal with for the moment.

“Release Kalki,” Basil ordered Leroy.

“Yes… yes.” The programmer waved his hand at the forcefield protecting his neurotower, disabling it. The swirling energies protecting the dungeon’s core vanished, revealing a colossal tower of steel hidden behind it. Basil had never seen a server so large as this one. It crossed multiple floors and probably rivaled the greatest Egyptian obelisks in size. Red circuitry pulsed on its surface, thrumming with the power of harvested souls.

The Wedding Feast at Cana floated before the server before shining with magic. Its surface undulated like disturbed waters and vomited three shapes: a golden, three-headed cobra of magnificent beauty; a horse-sized hawk with a crimson, feline mane; and a handsome man of Indian descent with light brown skin, raven hair, and humble clothes. He looked up at Basil with eyes full of wisdom and innocence. Oh, and the Fire Seed that tested the pain before slithered out a short while afterwards, much to Rosemarine's joy.

“My friends,” Kalki said with a kind smile. The mere sight of it warmed Basil’s heart. “We meet again at last.”

“It wasn’t easy finding you,” Basil said as he offered a hand and helped him get back on his feet. The young man’s grip was weak... for a god. “You made us work for it.”

“Do you know how much we’ve suffered to reach you?” Plato complained. “We had to walk through snow and sand alike!”

“I see your travels changed you all,” Kalki mused as he glanced at the team. Almost every member of the Bohens party had undergone a metamorphosis since they had last crossed paths. “You are all greater and wiser.”

Kalki froze upon noticing Leroy, and his beastly companions instantly moved to protect him.

“What is he doing here?” Kalki’s bird companion, Garuda, threatened Leroy with his talons. The cobra simply hissed ferociously. “He’s the one who trapped us!”

“He’s beaten,” Basil reassured them. “And on parole.”

“You are making a mistake,” the bird replied. “This man has usurped a god’s power and tainted it with evil! This is sacrilege, a blasphemy—”

Kalki put his hand on his pet’s back, the bird falling silent immediately. Vishnu’s avatar took a step toward Leroy, without fear or contempt. He observed the programmer for a moment, the false god matching his gaze.

“I thought your heart was clouded by evil, but I was wrong.” Kalki’s eyes brimmed with sympathy, as if his gaze could pierce through the false god’s soul and see the man inside. “Beneath the skin, it’s all pain.”

Leroy looked away without a word.

“The god inside you does not fight back,” Kalki said. “I sense his thoughts in your heart. He understands your grief, as a fellow who has committed crimes in the name of love. He does not hate you.”

Leroy scoffed. “Lies.”

“Close your eyes and listen. The truth will appear to you.” Kalki smiled kindly. “You are not alone.”

Basil doubted a single therapy session would straighten out Leroy—the man had enough issues for a lifetime—but Kalki’s words seemed to affect him. The false god folded his wings, like a bat trying to keep itself warm on a dark, frozen night.

“I am glad to see you all again, and I am thankful for your help,” Kalki told Basil’s party. “But, if I might ask... what are you doing here? This place is a long way from your home.”

“Oh, it burned,” Rosemarine said almost absentmindedly as she petted her Fire Seed. “Bugs blew it up and we swore vengeance on their children’s children.”

“Oh.” Kalki winced. “I’m... I’m sorry to hear that.”

“What matters is that we survived,” Basil replied with a shrug. He would forever miss the house for what the place represented, but in the end, his party mattered more to him than his old home now. “We’ll rebuild it once the world is a safer place. And you’ll help with that.”

Basil opened his inventory and summoned a book he had stored in preparation for this moment.

“*A Short Introduction to the Veda and Hindu Religions*,” Kalki asked with a frown as he read the cover.

“Yes,” Basil confirmed. The original book had burned months ago, but General Leblanc was kind enough to provide a copy. “You came to this place searching for answers about your true identity. This book holds them.”

Kalki observed the grimoire with apprehension. Basil lent it to him, opening the book on the page mattering to Vishnu.

“I believe you’re Vishnu, one of the Trimurti,” Basil explained. “One of the three gods administering this system. Vishnu is usually depicted as sleeping on the back of the serpent Ananta Shesha or riding the great bird Garuda in battle.”

Kalki’s companions exchanged a glance. Neither looked surprised, nor in denial.

They *knew*. On some level, they already knew the truth. Perhaps not in these words... but they understood who they were on an instinctual level.

“Whenever evil and chaos threaten the world, Vishnu reincarnates as a human avatar to restore order,” Basil read the book out loud. Kalki checked the text, his expression indecipherable. “The tenth avatar is the one yet to come. Lord Kalki will descend upon the world at the onset of its darkest age, the Kali Yuga; an era of strife, corruption, and unrighteousness. Helped by his consort Padmavati, Lakshimi’s avatar, he will rescue the pure of heart from danger, banish evil, and usher in the universe’s regeneration.”

“As it happened before, so will it happen again,” Kalki whispered as he closed the book. The hippie stored it in his own inventory, perhaps to examine it later. “I see...”

“You already knew,” Shellgirl guessed. “I can see it written on your face.”

“I... I already suspected it. I did research, and our captor called me the Avatar of Preservation before he trapped me in this painting.” Kalki summoned a silver flute to his hands. The instrument brightened with power as the musician’s thoughtful smile faded into one full of sadness. “I had time to meditate inside this painting. I heard the souls flowing into this tower of steel. They called me to this place, praying for salvation. I was meant to guide these troubled minds to a better place. My song soothes their pain, but it can’t free them.”

Basil glanced at the floating *Wedding Feast of Cana*. Did it work like René and Aya’s prison? Had Kalki been dancing with tormented ghosts for the duration of his imprisonment?

“But hearing you tell this tale, Basil... it clears out the fog of my memory somewhat.” Kalki held his forehead with one hand. “I remember a place... a floating void full of shining eggs, each of them the color of a world. I... I think my duty was to take care of them. To make sure that the life within them would hatch safely.”

“Worlds.” All gazes turned to Leroy. His voice was a whisper, barely audible. “The Trimurti... oversees the destiny of countless worlds.”

“But I shouldn’t be here,” Kalki replied, shaking his head. “I am in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

He waved his hand at the neurotower, at this prison for souls.

“None of this is natural,” Kalki declared. “None of this should have happened.”

“It would have,” Leroy replied, exhaling as if letting a weight off his chest. “More than four hundred thousand years in the future, once the cycle of souls was meant to end and begin again.”

“The Trimurti System is a natural phenomenon?” Vasi guessed, reading between the lines.

“Once the universe ends, a single enlightened soul is allowed to transcend the cycle and recreate the world,” Leroy explained slowly. “Souls are purged and reborn, until the next iteration.”

“But the dead aren’t meant to suffer in coffins of steel,” Garud—or rather, Garuda—said with a glare. “You and your kindred have corrupted the cycle of nature and tainted this universe with foulness.”

“That’s why I was summoned to this world,” Kalki guessed. “To correct fate’s proper course.”

“Can you?” Basil asked, praying for a yes.

“I... I don’t know.” Kalki shook his head in sorrow. “I... I’m not whole yet. I can tell. I’m missing something entirely.”

“We summoned you in an improper form, so you wouldn’t be a threat to us,” Leroy whispered. “You and your female counterpart, the goddess Lakshmi.”

“You’re talking of Padma.” Kalki frowned at the false god, his innocence turning to quiet anger for the first time since Basil met him. “Where is she?”

“In Athens, under Ashok’s supervision,” Leroy replied. “We prepared a special dungeon to hold her.”

“Athens?” Kalki asked with a frown. “I know nothing about such a place.”

“It is Greece’s capital,,” Basil explained. “And located halfway across Europe.”

“What will happen once they meet?” Vasi asked Leroy. “Will it disrupt the System?”

"I'm not sure," the former programmer admitted with a cough. "But Maxwell didn't want the two to meet. We needed them alive and separated, or so he said."

"Their love will conquer the stars," Buggy whispered with dreamy eyes. "So beautiful..."

"So close, yet so far away..." Kalki whispered to himself, before glancing at Basil. "My friend, if I may ask—"

"We'll help you find your Juliet, Romeo," Basil interrupted him. Anything that disrupted Anton Maxwell's plans for the world was good for mankind, and Kalki kept walking from one mess to another. "Do you even need to ask?"

"I'm..." Kalki cleared his throat. "I do not wish to bother you, my friend. You have already suffered enough to find me today."

"Even if you weren't a comrade, your death would literally spell the world's demise," Basil pointed out with a shrug. "Can't let you travel without an escort."

"Can we at least take a plane this time?" Plato asked with a sigh. "I'm sick of wheels and roads."

"When I evolve, I will gain wings," Rosemarine chirped. "I will blind the sun and cast the land in eternal darkness!"

"Isn't Bulgaria close to Greece?" Shellgirl asked with a grin, ignoring the tropidrake. "I think I saw them close to each other on maps."

"They are," Basil confirmed. He didn't miss Vasi's smile. "We could make a pit stop there on the way to Athens."

Kalki bowed deeply, as did his companion. "I am forever thankful," he said. "How glad I am to meet someone like you."

It felt strange to have an amnesiac god bow before Basil. At least he wouldn't have to kill this one like the last two.

Main Quest: The Lotus of Remembrance, completed! Your party earned 1,1150,000 Bonus EXP (191666 for you) and the Lotus of Wisdom Quest Reward. You have earned four levels (total 43).

The Quest reward materialized in a flash of light, floating before Basil's eyes: a lotus as white as the purest snow. Basil seized it. The flower felt as light as a feather in his palm, yet warmer than morning light.

Lotus of Wisdom

Family: Artifact (Consumable)

Quality: S.

A lotus species cherished by Vishnu, the Preserver, it is imbued with the power to change without creation or destruction. Using this plant will allow a Player to alter their soul and reallocate their class levels. Stats and class accesses will remain unchanged, but Perks can be lost and replaced. The Lotus of Wisdom can only be used once by a single Player, after which it disappears forever.

Basil could only choke in surprise as he read. "I can respect my build?" he asked the System, struggling to believe his own eyes. "Change my classes?"

Within limits, and only once.

No pressure.

Like every good game storyline, the conclusion of one main question heralded the start of another.

New Main Quest: The Lotus of Love.

Recommended Level: 75+.

Help Kalki reunite with his eternal companion, Padmavati.

Reward: 13,600,000 Bonus EXP + Lotus of Completion.

"Looks like we need a GPS now," Basil said as he stored the lotus in his Inventory. "But we can't leave yet."

"You are worried about the Incursion," Kalki guessed, his expression twisting into a scowl of concern. "I have seen the message. Hard days await us."

“Can you help?” Vasi asked Leroy. “I understand that you cannot disable the Trimurti System, but we were told destroying dungeons would slow down or weaken Incursions.”

Leroy listened with a short, reluctant nod. “That is correct.”

“Now, Benjamin, you’re a programmer, a smart programmer,” Basil said, squinting at the false god. “Someone like you can’t possibly take a person like Maxwell at his word. Not without insurance. What’s your ace in the hole?”

“I... I put a killswitch program in the neurotower network,” Leroy admitted. “A... a remote detonator, if you will.”

Basil had guessed correctly. “How many of them can you destroy?”

“Not as much as you think,” the programmer admitted. “I am a moderator, not an administrator. My influence is limited. Dungeons claimed by Guilds or Factions belong to them now. The System will recognize their authority over mine.”

“So your programming spell can only affect unclaimed dungeons,” Vasi summarized. “And if you destroy too many, the world will collapse.”

“Can’t we find a balance?” Shellgirl suggested. “Destroy just enough of them to disrupt the competition, but not enough to blow up the world?”

“I... perhaps.” Leroy crossed his arms, his expression thoughtful. “If I destroy a third of them all... it will close most portals without condemning the network. Less strain on the bandwidth means less power is needed, fewer souls to the slaughter.”

“You would cancel this party?” a familiar voice asked. “After all the invitations we’ve sent to all corners of the multiverse?”

Basil froze and immediately summoned his halberd to his hand. Leroy’s eyes widened in abject terror, as he recognized the voice too. The group turned in at the source; a small, blurred shade at the very end of the gallery.

The girl.

The phantom girl the Bohens had crossed paths with in the Pyramid had appeared at the end of the gallery, so silently that none of them had noticed her. Although her features remained blurred, she looked unmistakable like a human child...

But her voice didn't fit her appearance at all.

"You disappoint me, Benjamin," 'she' said. "Of all my pawns, you were my favorite. The most clever, the most desperate. It was fun toying with you... always appearing at the edge of his vision, familiar yet unrecognizable. A constant reminder of what you had lost."

The shade grew, its features sharpening. An adult male stood where a lowly girl had been, clad in expensive clothes, his eyes hidden behind shiny sunglasses. His smirk widened, cold and cruel.

"But alas, this game has overstayed its welcome."

That sicko...

"Stay tuned, everyone," Anton Maxwell said with a small bow. "You won't believe your eyes."

Chapter 37: Man vs Horseman

Basil welcomed Maxwell with fire and brimstone.

“Elemental Orb: Fire!” He snarled as he snapped his fingers, unleashing a sphere of shining flames at Dismaker Labs’ CEO. The projectile surged across the room in a flash, harmlessly phased through Maxwell, and hit a distant wall in a violent burst.

“Let me try!” Rosemarine said before pouncing on Maxwell with her root hand. She slammed the ground beneath the CEO’s feet, but failed to affect him. The scene reminded Basil of the time she tried to attack ghosts in the catacombs. “Oh, not again!”

“A projection.” Basil scoffed in disappointment. “Of course.”

“What?” Maxwell cackled. “Did you really expect me to risk myself so brazenly? Oh sweet summer child.”

“What, afraid you’ll get killed?” Plato taunted him.

“Not by the likes of you, I can tell you that,” Maxwell replied with mocking confidence.

“Yet we’ve defeated most of your board,” Vasi taunted him back. “You do not intimidate us.”

“Yes, yes, I appreciate your help in downsizing my company. You can’t fathom how much I’ll save on dividends.” Maxwell glanced at each member of the Bohens. Although Basil couldn’t see the eyes behind his sunglasses, his small smirk betrayed a hint of interest. “I’ll admit, I never expected your lot would be the ones to take a stand on the matter. It’s true what they say. Surprises come from unexpected places.”

“Have you come to make small talk?” Basil raised his halberd at the projection. “If so, fuck off.”

“Why the rush?” Maxwell replied with a chuckle. “I thought you would jump at the opportunity for us to talk, Basil Bohem. Haven’t you been looking for me for a while?”

“To kill you for sure,” Basil replied. Oh, it would be such a pleasure to wipe off Maxwell’s arrogant smirk from his face... “A swift death is the best you can expect from us.”

“I would rather make it slow,” Rosemarine chirped while licking her petal lips. “With salt and pepper.”

“I would have loved to exchange business tips,” Shellgirl said, her tentacle-cannons pointed straight at Maxwell’s face. “But I don’t do toxic management.”

“My my, aren’t you a colorful lot.” Maxwell shrugged. “Fine by me. I came for the Avatar and Benjamin, not for you.”

While Kalki’s monsters immediately moved in front of their Tamer to protect him, Leroy glared at his former employer. “You lied!” the false god snarled. “You said you would bring her back!”

“No, no, Benjamin, I promised you the *power* to return your daughter to life. And I delivered. Look at you, you can raise corpses from the dead with a thought. All you had to do was pay a visit to your daughter’s tomb.” Maxwell grinned wickedly. “Which of course, you did.”

Leroy winced as if slapped. “It wasn’t her...” he muttered with haunted eyes. “It... it looked like her, but... a corpse without will...”

“See, my dear friend?” Maxwell scoffed. “I granted you your wish. Is it my fault if you worded it poorly? Perhaps you should have had a lawyer fill in the details.”

“You would have screwed him over even if he had,” Basil said angrily. This... this human-shaped thing clearly took delight in Leroy’s suffering. “I’ve seen your last board meeting’s recording. You intended to screw over your own team from the start.”

“My team?” Maxwell seemed to find the word laughable. “I was looking forward to seeing these fools self-destruct, but I didn’t force them to do anything. I sold them a rope. They could have done anything they wanted with it, and yet they chose to hang themselves.”

He contemptuously waved his hand at the neurotower, at this shrine of death and steel.

“I did not force people to build this device at gunpoint,” Maxwell said. “Workers placed the microchips for a paycheck without questioning their purpose, and their managers willingly activated them for a reward. It is your species’ boundless greed that brought you to the brink of extinction. You raise foolish men to power because you cannot be bothered to take charge of

your life and turn your planet into a trash can because you cannot live without petty comfort. You incurred a debt to the universe... and now it's time to pay up."

"Are you trying to claim the moral high ground?" Basil choked on the creature's hypocrisy. "You still gave the orders!"

"And what of you?" Maxwell pointed at Kalki. "You endanger the Avatar of Preservation by giving him false hope that he can save anyone, when in truth his efforts will be for naught. You know a stray bullet could bring this whole place down, right?"

Basil opened his mouth to counter that he was simply protecting a friend from danger, but Kalki interrupted him by putting a hand on his shoulder.

"You... you are the creature responsible for all of this," Kalki told Maxwell. "What are you? All I can sense from you is darkness, an empty night without stars. Are you the Kali of this world? A demon?"

"Ohoh, do you truly expect a straight answer from me?" The CEO shook his head. "So powerful, and yet so naïve. But I will tell you as much: I am that I am."

Not only was he arrogant, but blasphemously so. Perhaps Basil should have looked out to unlock an Inquisitor class, it would have come in handy.

Kalki's companion, Garud, grunted scornfully. "You have a pretty high opinion of yourself for a coward hiding in the shadows. You might steal and usurp the power of gods, but you will never *be* one."

"Why would I want to, my feathered friend?" Maxwell asked back. "Gods like your master are, well... dinosaurs. Proud and impressive, but it only takes a few years and sufficiently advanced technology to turn your remains into fuel for a greater purpose."

"I thought oil was made from marine life and algae, not dinosaurs?" Shellgirl asked with a frown. "That's what my books said."

"You are correct, my child," Maxwell replied calmly. "But my version makes for a better metaphor."

“What purpose?” Kalki asked with a frown. “I... I do not understand you. What do you hope to accomplish by throwing this universe into chaos? Do you intend to become an Overgod? For what? What end could possibly justify all this sorrow?”

“Haven’t you heard what I said?” the CEO scoffed. “Godhood is overrated. I do not seek the throne.”

Basil doubted he was telling the truth, but Kalki took him at his word. “Then what?” the Avatar of Vishnu asked. “What are you after?”

“He wants to open a portal,” Basil said with a scowl. “Is that what it’s all about? Returning home? Couldn’t you take mass transit?”

“You think I am bound by *necessity*?” Maxwell shook his head slowly, like a parent disappointed in a child’s answer. “Please, Basil. Do you believe a being of my age and knowledge wouldn’t have any other alternative? True, I wish to open a portal to a specific place and turn a tidy profit from this competition... but I didn’t need to make Incursions so deadly to achieve my aim.”

Basil’s fists clenched in horror as he came to a terrible realization. He couldn’t imply... that madman...

Rosemarine snapped her tail. “You don’t hurt squishies because you have to,” she guessed, her tone surprisingly quiet and cold. “You hurt them because it makes you happy. Like me.”

Vasi’s eyes squinted into a potent glare. “The destruction you sow is not a means to achieve your ends,” she raised, her fingers trembling in fury. Basil had never seen her so coldly angry. “It *is* an end in itself.”

[Berserk] *ailment resisted.*

“You psychopath...” Basil’s blood boiled in his veins. He had reached a point where he struggled to find his words and keep his mind clear. “So many deaths were made pointless... On *purpose*?”

“Guilty, guilty...” Maxwell waved a hand at the gallery, at the neurotower, at this dungeon built on the suffering of billions. “Do you understand now? This engine of steel does not crush souls beneath its wheel because it must, but because I *want* it to do so.”

Only now did Basil understand Anton Maxwell's motivations. His action made little sense, because there was nothing sensible about him. He wasn't motivated by greed or ambition, but by something baser.

The pursuit of happiness.

"There are a billion better ways to harvest magic and make death as pleasant as life," the CEO said, corroborating Walter's words. "There are Systems that peacefully help uplift their populations in levels without the need for bloodshed..."

For the first time, Maxwell showed his teeth; all of them as sharp as a wolf's maw of fangs. His lips morphed into the purest expression of joyful malice. The gleeful visage of cruelty itself.

"But where's the fun in that?" he asked.

It was all a game to him. The apocalypse, the wars, the chaos, all this pain, and sorrow... all for a minute's worth of entertainment.

Anger was like a black hole. It dragged you in with its powerful gravity, until you reached the event horizon. Beyond it, there was no light, no fire. Only the cold, bottomless emptiness of bitter hatred.

"I'll kill you."

The words flowed out of Basil's mouth like daggers out of a wound, cold and merciless.

"I'll kill you," Basil promised. It wasn't a threat, but a fact. "It doesn't matter where you hide, or how long you run. I'll find you, and then I'll kill you for the good of *everyone else*."

Maxwell put a hand on his chest and made a mock bow. "Be still my heart. If you would kindly bring the Avatar to me too, that would be great."

"We will meet in the flesh, yes," Kalki whispered, his eyes cold and determined. The peaceful and all-loving hippie he had been a few minutes ago having vacated the building. "But there will be no salvation for your kind."

"There is no such thing as salvation, foolish god," Maxwell said before turning to face Leroy. "Especially not for you, Benjamin. You helped create these towers, but all you did was follow

and improve on the blueprints I gave you. I too have a degree of control over them. I have been content to let you stew on your own grief, but if you try to spoil the great game we've started and ruin my fun... there will be consequences. Redemption won't be one of them."

Leroy answered with a bitter laugh. "I don't have anyone left to live for without my daughter, Anton. Your threats do not frighten me."

"You know nothing of fear," Maxwell replied, his tone as cold as ice. "I'm not sure you want to learn it."

"You're the one afraid," Plato pointed out calmly. "For all your bluster, all you do is bark and threaten. I've seen dogs with more bite than you."

"What I hear, Leroy, is that destroying the neurotowers will make him unhappy," Basil said, his halberd pointed at Maxwell. "And anything that annoys him is a win for the world."

Thankfully, Leroy shared the same feeling. The false god's eyes shone with a bright glow, the same as the dungeon particles.

"Input code: Laputan Machine," he whispered to himself. "Target: 33 percent of all unclaimed neurotowers, priority to those close to population centers."

The giant server supporting the Louvre Pyramid thrummed with power. Red energy coursed through its circuitry like blood in metal veins. The air grew charged with an invisible power, a cloud of otherworldly electricity. Basil could feel it in his bones.

More than that, his System information screen, which had become part of his vision for months on end... flickered. It faded in and out of existence as Leroy's program sabotaged neurotowers across the network.

"It's bugging," Basil whispered in joy. "The Trimurti System is bugging the hell out."

"Not for long." Maxwell scoffed scornfully. His sunglasses glowed with a malicious red hue.

"Don't say I didn't warn you."

The System quickly stabilized with a notification

Attention Players: Due to technical difficulties and bandwidth issues, the Incursion Event has been updated! Unfortunately, we cannot sustain enough rifts to kill everyone, and for that, we sincerely apologize. Thankfully, the remaining portals will open way ahead of schedule!

The Incursion countdown lowered accordingly, turning days into hours.

“I know conquest and war usually come before famine, but innovation is part of a good company’s culture.” Maxwell made a final bow and left some dreadful parting words. “I wish you a happy apocalypse.”

He vanished immediately afterward.

“It was him!” Basil snarled in fury. “It was him all along! He’s the one who wrote that message!”

“That explains so much—” Plato didn’t finish his sentence, as an earthquake suddenly shook the dungeon. “Ah!”

The gallery, no, the entire Pyramid started trembling. The neurotower reddened as if overheating and Basil immediately received a message from Neria through the Logs.

NERIA: What’s going on? Did you manage to destroy the server?

BASIL: More than one, but what’s the situation outside? The dungeon is shaking.

NERIA: I keep receiving messages from our forces. Most Incursion portals are closing, but... the one above Paris...

“What’s happening?” Vasi asked, holding onto Basil to avoid stumbling.

Leroy raised his hand and a holographic screen materialized above his open palm. “See for yourself.”

The holographic showed the world outside the pyramid. A cosmic array illuminated the night sky above Paris, its geometric pattern centered around the Eiffel Tower. The colossal dungeon surged with power even as the Notre-Dame nearby crumbled into otherworldly particles. Screaming ghosts danced in the dark clouds above the Eiffel Tower, fueling the portal.

“Sacrifices...” Kalki whispered as he held his forehead. “I hear them. Screaming souls slaughtered in hunger’s name.”

“The humans...” Vasi whispered. “Basil, you wondered why we hadn’t seen any humans in the Apocalypse Force’s forces in Paris... I think it’s them.”

Basil clenched his jaw. The traitors had been sacrificed to their dread master to strengthen the portal and summon a horror from beyond the universe.

As Maxwell had threatened, the rift above Paris wasn’t closing; it was growing larger, a shining portal into an alien realm. Worse, a colossal shadow became visible on the other side. The creature... humongous didn’t even *begin* to describe it. Although Basil could barely see anything except for a buglike body shape, its size alone left him speechless. The shadow was large enough to put most buildings to shame.

Ninety meters, Basil thought grimly. Maybe one hundred. Maybe more.

Basil guessed the creature’s identity long before the System confirmed it.

Apollyon, Horseman of Famine

Level 60 (70-10) Elite [Bug/Artificial]

Faction: Apocalypse Force.

Basil always knew he was in for a tough fight, but he would have lied if he had said the level didn’t make him apprehensive. Taking from Zach’s example, Apollyon was normally level 70 but took a penalty to enter Earth. Even at level 60... he remained a terribly powerful foe.

Basil had never faced a foe so powerful, nor so colossal. His entire team froze, some of them left speechless in dread and intimidation.

“Can you stop the bug from crossing over?” Shellgirl asked Leroy, forcing herself to smile. There was no better way to hide one’s fears. “It’s, it’s not that I’m concerned or anything, but...”

“I can’t close this portal,” Leroy replied, shaking his head in defeat. “My control over the network is fading away. I had to sacrifice Naraka to run my program, and soon this dungeon will return to dust.”

“What?” Shellgirl choked. “But what about the treasures? This place is full of powerful artifacts!”

“You should gather as many as you can,” Leroy replied as he closed the screen. “I’ll teleport you out before my dungeon self-destructs.”

“We will teleport out,” Basil corrected him. “You’re not going down with this place, Leroy.”

The false god sighed. “Believe me,” he said. “You’re the only one who cares.”

“He’s not,” Kalki protested. He smiled at Leroy, showing him something few would have spared for the man: a look of empathy. “Now is not your time.”

The false god looked at the real one in shock. “After I’ve trapped you, you still want me to live?”

“Yes, I do.” Kalki nodded kindly. “You were misguided. I do not hold it against you.”

That was what true divinity looked like: great power tempered with compassion rather than arrogance. It was enough to silence Leroy in a way Maxwell’s threats hadn’t.

“I…” The former programmer cleared his throat. “I… thank you.”

His help might make a difference… or maybe not.

“I’m not going to lie,” Basil told his team as another earthquake shook the Louvre Pyramid. “We’re up against the toughest foe we have ever fought so far. We have a few aces up our sleeves, but I’m not sure it’ll be enough to close the gap in power. If you want to sit it out… I won’t hold it against you.”

He already knew his friends’ answers, but he still felt the need to draw a line in the sand. He wouldn’t force anyone to jump with him into the oven.

“We both know you would fail without me,” Plato said with a shrug. “Someone has to keep you alive, or René would never forgive me.”

“Do you even have to ask, handsome?” Vasi chuckled. “I’m with you.”

“Of course I’m afraid, Boss.” Bugsy raised his head in determination. “But not of dying. Never of that.”

“What kind of captain abandons the ship in a storm?” Shellgirl asked with a chuckle. “I’m in.”

“I’ll slay the bug and plant my seed in its flesh, Mister!” Rosemarine promised joyfully.

Kalki joined in too. “I’m with you, my friend. To the last.”

“So are we,” his bird companion added, while the snake nodded in confirmation.

“Thanks, guys.” Basil smiled warmly, and then resolutely. With his party at his side, his fears evaporated like mist in the sunlight. “It’s time to fulfill our oath.”

The Battle for Paris was on.

End of Arc IV

Chapter 38: Man vs Starfall

Minutes before the Incursion began, Basil and Plato observed the battlefield one last time.

Paris' 7th Arrondissement, where the Eiffel Tower was located, was once one of the city's core administrative districts. Though the monster occupation of the city had damaged them and filled the streets with sand, most buildings were still standing. Basil had an easier time jumping from one roof to the next than walking around corners.

All of the city center's dungeons were crumbling on themselves. First, Notre-Dame had collapsed into a burnt out husk of its former glory, its neurotower destroyed by Leroy's program. The Louvre Pyramid had followed soon after. Of the mighty pyramid, only the ruins of the former museum remained. Shellgirl and Leroy had managed to smuggle out a sliver of its wealth before the disaster, but not as much as they would have liked. Thousands of art pieces were now either destroyed or buried under the place.

From what Basil could tell, the Eiffel Tower would share the same fate soon enough. Paris' last dungeon shone with the energy of harvested souls as earthquakes shook its foundations. Glider-riding demons and flying steam golems danced in the sky above its tip, awaiting Apollyon's arrival.

So were the Bohens.

The team and their allies had taken positions all around the city in preparation for the lethal battle. Vasi, Zachariel, Leroy, and his remaining loyal monsters flew in the sky above the Arrondissement, ready to charge into the fray the moment Apollyon crossed over. The former Board member still had many soldiers under his thumb, even with the loss of his dungeon: hundreds of sphinxes, undead, and scorpion-like beasts were deployed to deal with the Apocalypse Force and had answered his call to arms.

Kalki, for his part, rode his pet bird right above Basil himself to provide support. His mount carried a loudspeaker in its talons to amplify his master's bardic music. Buggy and Shellgirl had returned to the Steamobile to take care of the howitzer near Montparnasse, while Neria Elissalde had taken a position on the hill of Montmartre. Rosemarine and Kalki's other familiar

Ananta lay in wait for an ambush elsewhere near Boulogne, in effect encircling the Eiffel Tower dungeon from three sides with long-range artillery. Fire Seeds hid in ambush all around the city at key junctions.

And then there were the other reinforcements. Basil opened his log and contacted his allies halfway across France.

BASIL: Are you ready for transport?

COLONEL RONALD MCVEGGIE: We await the king's command!

That was the spirit. "Kalki, I'll begin summoning!" Basil shouted at his ally. "I need your best performance!"

"At once, my friend!" The bard played a melodious tune on his silver flute, his mount's loudspeakers amplifying the notes until they carried all across town.

Kalki's [Song of Rejuvenation] granted you an advanced [Regen+] effect. You will recover 1/16th of your HP and SP per minute so long as you hear the song.

[All for One] spread the effect to your allies.

Now empowered, Basil raised his hand and called upon the cavalry.

"One for All III!" he shouted for all to hear.

His soldiers materialized around the building one after another. Gargoyle warriors, lycan soldiers, and undead armor appeared in a flash of red lightning by the dozens. Although Basil now possessed almost eight hundred SP to spend, he burned through them even faster than Kalki's regenerative buff could keep up with. His soldiers possessed a level of twenty-five on average, so each squad of them demanded over a hundred points to summon. Basil alternated between using his Perk and drinking potions to keep up with the process.

Within minutes, hundreds of monsters associated with the Homeowners Revenge Association materialized around the building within minutes and spread around the Arrondissement.

“That’s a lot of mooks,” Plato noted as monsters rushed through the sand-covered streets of Paris. Each of them was armed to the teeth with either magical blades or modern firearms, courtesy of the French armed forces’ supply logistics. “How many do we have in store?”

“Around three thousand,” Basil replied. He could only summon a chunk of that number; the rest were needed elsewhere to secure other portals, and Ronald himself had to remain at the Château Muloup dungeon with a token force not to risk it away. The faraway dungeon would serve as a sanctuary for wounded soldiers capable of teleporting back to safety. “The spawn rate of dungeons is... insane.”

“Good thing we blew up many of them,” Plato said grimly. “You think it’ll be enough?”

“I don’t know.” Basil was an optimist, but a gulf of nearly twenty levels separated them from Apollyon. Tactics and numbers could only do so much to cover that chasm. He had to hope their advantage in buffs, preparation, and technology would prove enough.

Neria Elissalde forwarded him a message from halfway across town.

NERIA: We took positions the best we could, but we’re severely understaffed. We couldn’t get all the CAESAR artillery through the portal in time either. I’ve also been informed that the ISS has positioned itself right above the city.

Basil raised his head and stared at the sky. Although the rift and star circuit occupied most of the space above them, a bright star remained visible high above them. What was the Unity planning?

BASIL: Can it be destroyed if needed?

NERIA: General Leblanc has a missile ready, but as always we can’t tell what consequences will result from the ISS’ destruction. Send a message and we’ll shoot it down.

BASIL: We’ll wait a bit. With luck, the Unity will do our job for us.

NERIA: I doubt that... and is it truly wise to ally with Pluto? I know you said he was considering reforming, but I’ve seen too many repeat offenders to believe him.

BASIL: I think he is sincere. He has burned his bridges with Maxwell, and more to the point, we need all the help we can get. We can't really afford to be picky today.

NERIA: Perhaps you're right, but I would feel better if I could trust our new allies not to stab us in the back.

BASIL: He has helped close most portals. I think it counts for good behavior.

NERIA: It does, hence why I'm willing to trust you on this. I'm just skeptical that this alliance will last long.

Neria Elissalde's next message arrived a few seconds later than expected. Basil could almost imagine her gathering her thoughts before sending it.

NERIA: Basil, if needed... The new code is Zizou1998Petit.

BASIL: What code?

NERIA: The Baguette's code. If it comes to it, I authorize a first strike.

Basil paused a few seconds as he considered the implications. He would be lying if he said he hadn't considered using the neutron bomb to bombard Apollyon, but the weapon would devastate everything within a two kilometers radius. Radiation would contaminate the area for years afterward.

Paris might have been a ruin, but it was still the French nation's capital, the very symbol of their country. Retaking it would give people something they desperately needed in these troubled times: hope that things could improve. More than that, it remained full of unused resources that could turn the tide in Europe. Nuking it would be a tremendous waste.

More to the point, they couldn't get close enough to the Eiffel Tower to guarantee a close impact. They would have to lure Apollyon to a specific point; a dangerous task, especially since Kalki risked getting caught in the crossfire. Basil wouldn't have let the bard into the thick of battle if he hadn't so heavily insisted on participating.

BASIL: Are you sure? You know the consequences.

NERIA: Considering what we're up ahead... everything goes. Good luck, Basil.

BASIL: Good luck, Neria.

It was a long shot, but a man could always hope.

“It’s almost time, Basil,” Vasi warned from above, riding her broomstick at Kalki’s side. The Incursion countdown had fallen below five minutes. “If you want to use your lotus, it’s now or never.”

“Another time, perhaps,” Basil replied. “As much as I wish to switch Berserker for something else, changing my entire build right before a critical battle is more trouble than it is worth.”

Though he did have four extra levels to assign. Much like with Tamer beforehand, he went all in with the Deathknight of the Sepulchre class. The rush of new power infused his flesh with might and purpose.

Level 6, 7, 8 & 9 Deathknight of the Sepulchre stat gains: +4 STR, +2 AGI, +3 VIT, +4 SKI, +2 MAG, +3 INT, +4 CHA, +4 LCK. *You earned 130 HP and 65 SP.*

Death’s Banner II (Active): *[Support], 10 SP per minute. Your faith empowers your party members, granting them the following benefits as long as they benefit from [Death’s Banner II]: All their attacks gain the [Deadslayer] effect (x3 damage against Undead types); immunity to the [Terror], [Zombie], and [Insta-Death] ailments; they do not take damage from ailments such as [Poison], though it doesn’t cure them of it; and their critical hits will inflict [Insta-Death] on the victims. This replaces [Death’s Banner I].*

Lethal Vigil (Passive): *Nothing will disturb your vigil. You are immune to all status ailments that would either impede your ability to freely choose your actions (such as [Berserk], [Madness], [Charm]...) or physically acting at all (such as [Paralysis], [Sleep], [Petrification]...). Self-inflicted ailments, such as those activated by your Perks or equipment, will still affect you.*

Basil couldn’t help but smile mournfully upon seeing these new Perks. If only he had earned Lethal Vigil before encountering the likes of Tamura, it would have spared his team much grief.

“Time to buff, guys!” Basil shouted. “Death’s Banner III!”

“Such a chore,” Plato complained as he empowered Basil with a spell. “Mirage!”

"I'm used to it by now," Vasi mused before casting her own spell. "Hasten."

Layers of buffs and empowering effects spread from Basil to his allied monsters. His army became a blur as magic enhanced their speed and cloaked them in illusory veils. All for One was a misnomer; *all were one* would have been a better term. An entire army acted as a single organism infused with collective strength.

"Anxious, dog?" Plato asked as the countdown neared zero. He unsheathed Joyeuse, the sword glittering in the light of the portal.

"Au contraire," Basil admitted as he summoned his halberd to one hand and a new laser gun to the other. He glared at Apollyon's shadowy form in the sky with anticipation. "I've never been more ready."

The countdown hit zero and the Incursion shattered the world.

The giant rift above the city let out a terrible noise, the screeching scream of space itself. Reality itself wailed as magical energies tore open a hole between worlds. All windows in Paris which hadn't been destroyed yet exploded all at once, throwing glass shards in all directions. An invisible shockwave spread through the air and blew a strong wind into Basil's face. His flying allies faltered a bit, but held strong. A long time ago, this power would have brought them to their knees, but now their strength and determination allowed them all to stand tall.

The golden circuit of stars above the city glowed brighter as otherworldly energy fueled the rift. A pillar of purple energy descended from it and upon the Eiffel Tower, swallowing it whole until the dungeon became indistinguishable.

"Here they come!" Vasi shouted a warning.

The swarm emerged from the pillar of light by the thousands.

The buzzing noise of numerous Apollyon Drones drowned out Kalki's song as they entered Earth's dimension. They came like a flood of locusts, darkening the sky with their numbers. Other monsters emerged from the pillar in their wake: beetles the size of elephants and fielding cannons on their backs; giant red mantis' with sabers for arms; wasps with lasers for stingers.

Beetle Catapult

Level 28 [Bug/Artificial]

Faction: Apocalypse Force.

Red Mantis Sawdancer

Level 30 [Bug/Demon]

Faction: Apocalypse Force.

Death Wasps

Level 28 [Bug/Artificial]

Faction: Apocalypse Force.

A swarm of mechanized insects invaded Earth... and they were duly welcomed.

“Fire at will!” Basil shouted as loud as his voice could carry.

Neria’s troops fired the first shot from their position halfway across the city. A volley of missiles emerged from the city and carpet-bombed the area around the pillar. The famous Champ de Mars was swallowed in a series of explosions. Artillery projectiles, missiles, and bombs rained down from the skies, blowing out everything in sight.

The Steamobile’s howitzer opened fire as well, blasting the flying drones of Apollyon as they emerged from the rift. Leroy, Vasi, and flying monsters entered the fray. They moved like blurs empowered by their buffs, dogfighting the bugs with showy spells. The drones and flies reacted with dazzling lasers. Basil could hardly keep track of everything. The horizon had become a firestorm as far as the eye could see.

On the ground, Apollyon’s monsters spread in all directions and fired back with mindless zeal. The beetle catapults flattened empty buildings with constant bombardments, while their mantis allies were swiftly intercepted by Basil’s allied monsters in the streets. Chaos reigned, but hopefully, the swarm should remain contained.

“Basil,” Plato whispered in fear. “We’ve got a problem.”

Basil's eyes widened as Apollyon's shadow appeared in the pillar, growing larger, growing taller, growing deadlier. The Bohens' leader had estimated the monster's size as around a hundred meters beforehand, but as the monster grew closer to entering reality, he realized his guess was wrong by a long shot. The monster kept getting taller.

NERIA: Basil, the ISS is falling!

"What?" Basil looked up and blinked in shock. As Neria warned, the light of the ISS was glowing brighter and brighter, enough to be visible through the rift's eldritch energies. The spatial dungeon was falling off to Earth at incredible speed. "Those bastards..."

The Unity intended to drop the International Space Station on Apollyon the moment he crossed over. No doubt the impact would destroy Paris along the way.

"We need to shoot it down," Basil said as he opened his Logs folder. "Neria, I—"

The earth trembled before Basil could give the order. The colossal creature beyond the rift finally crossed the pillar of light and made its presence known.

Apollyon entered Paris with a triumphant roar.

The titan reminded Basil of a giant prehistoric insect cyborg. Apollyon was bipedal, his appearance a cross between a bipedal ant and a wingless wasp. Yet Basil couldn't see any hint of flesh or organic matter. A thick, purple cybernetic exoskeleton covered every inch of the Horseman of Famine's body. Circuits pulsed on his articulations and four glowing red lamp-eyes shone above deadly mandibles. His two arms and legs ended in claws sharp enough to slice through concrete, while a mighty flexible tail dangled out of its back.

The most prominent part of the monster's anatomy were a pair of colossal cannons resting on his shoulders. Both were wider than the Steamobile's howitzer and linked to Apollyon's head by thick steel gray metal cables. Red energy built up within them, ready to burst out and fire at a moment's notice.

And more than that, Apollyon was simply *colossal*. The creature was nearly half or two-thirds the Eiffel Tower's size, *twice* more than what Basil had expected. Apollyon loomed taller than any skyscraper in the ruined Paris. His steps shook the earth all the way from Basil's position as he walked down the Champ de Mars. His insect monsters instinctively moved out of his path to

avoid being trampled to death; their unnatural coordination reminded Basil of ants following a routine.

“An encirclement?” Apollyon’s powerful voice carried across the city as if amplified by loudspeakers. His words carried the strength of a monstrous conqueror and destroyer of worlds. “Cunning, but pointless.”

“That’s...” Plato, who was almost never afraid of anything, quietly lowered his sword. His eyes all but bugged out of his skull. “That’s a big, *big* bug...”

“He’s...” Basil found himself at a loss for words. He was no coward, but there was no beating around the bush. Fighting the Horseman of Famine would amount to dueling a mountain. His *fingers* were longer than Rosemarine herself. “My God...”

Apollyon stood in the middle of the Champ de Mars and raised his head. His four red eyes glared at the falling ISS without fear; only a vague look of annoyance.

“Charge.” The two cannons on Apollyon’s back gathered power in response to his command. Magical energy built up inside the barrels until they glowed like twin suns. Apollyon’s flying drones fled out of their line of fire in anticipation, as did the monsters engaging them in battle. “Gehenna Cannon!”

A red flash swallowed the world and set the clouds on fire.

The light that erupted from Apollyon’s cannons was so blinding, so deadly, that Basil and Plato had to cover their eyes. Two mighty beams of red plasma surged across the sky, vaporizing everything in their path. Allies or foes, it made no difference; any creature too slow to dodge out of the line of fire was summarily annihilated. The two beams continued their course and split the sky in half.

The ISS, which had become a very visible falling star, was hit at the speed of light. Immediately a mighty explosion spread through the heavens above. Apollyon had struck true with a missile’s precision and a nuke’s firepower.

When at last Apollyon ran out of juice, nothing remained of the ISS; nothing but cosmic dust blown away by atmospheric winds. The skies were cleared of life, with not a soul to see.

“Vasi!” Basil checked his party menu in fear, but thankfully his girlfriend remained unharmed. She and the others had probably flown out of range before the Horseman of Famine could open fire.

“Gather our forces in one point to break the encirclement!” Apollyon ordered his troops as more of them emerged from the pillar. “We will secure the portal and scour this city to find the Avatar! I sense his presence! Bring him to me alive and devour everyone else! Cleanse this world of life! A barren wasteland shall be our prize!”

A beam of light hit Apollyon in the back as he finished his speech.

Rosemarine had shown an exceptional aptitude for stealth in Bordeaux in spite of her colossal size. The party had decided to make good use of it by having Plato cast an illusion spell on her. She struck Apollyon with all her might from across a large distance.

Basil had seen her mighty sunbeam vaporize monsters and torch castles. But compared to Apollyon’s own rays, Rosemarine’s assassination attempt amounted to a candle challenging the sun. The sunbeam burned the Horseman of the Apocalypse’s back without inflicting damage. At best it heated up his armor somewhat.

Missiles and artillery strikes followed in the wake of Rosemarine’s wake, hitting Apollyon without phasing him at all. In fact, he barely seemed to notice the attempts on his life. Projectiles powerful enough to blow up castle walls were as effective as pebbles thrown by children at a fully grown adult. Apollyon was simply too big and his metal armor too thick.

“Basil.” Kalki stopped singing above his friend, his calm face twisted into a grim expression of concern. Even his mount appeared intimidated by Apollyon’s display of overwhelming power. “What is your call?”

We can’t beat this thing conventionally, Basil realized. If artillery strikes couldn’t damage the titan, none of their normal weapons would amount to much. Worse, Apollyon was looking around the horizon searching for the source of the enemy bombardment. *That leaves only one option...*

After a moment of hesitation, Basil reached his decision. “Kalki, they want to capture you alive. Distract the swarm by luring them to the south.”

"It's not the swarm I'm worried about."

"Me neither, Captain Obvious." Basil gathered his breath. "I'll lure Apollyon to the Louvre's ruins in the east and trap him there. Everyone else must evacuate the area."

Kalki looked at Basil with concern. "You wish to fight him *alone*?"

"Almost." Basil glanced at his most beloved companion. "Are you with me, Plato?"

The Rakshasa Kitten looked up at Basil, then at Apollyon, and then back at his best friend. He was clearly more frightened than he had ever been... but a true cat didn't falter before danger. "I'm right behind you," he said with a soft voice. "Always."

Basil and Kalki exchanged one last glance, with the bard giving his friend a short nod. He didn't agree with the plan, but trusted his ally to pull through. "Good luck, my friend," Kalki said as he flew away. "Don't die."

"Same for you," Basil promised. Afterward, he glared at Apollyon, gathered his breath, and shouted as loud as his throat would allow him. "Fear me, Apollyon! I have a windshield and bug spray!"

Over two kilometers separated Basil from the Horseman of Famine, yet Apollyon proved to have sharp ears. The Horseman of Famine snapped his head in the challenge's direction, his eyes quickly pinpointing Basil and Plato's location.

"Bohen!" The insectoid titan's many mandibles chattered in delight. "I told you I would come for you!"

"I've gotta ask!" Basil shouted at the top of his lungs. "Why are you so obsessed with me?! Certainly, I'm not the first person to squash you under my heel!"

"I have seen your kind time and time again on countless worlds." Apollyon hissed threateningly, his mighty voice echoing across Paris. "Most weaklings are broken by violence, but some... some grow strong from adversity. One day they are larvae and mighty foes the next. If left unattended, they rise from humble beginnings to become heroes and leaders of their people. They become *problems*."

He took a step in Basil's direction, leaving a colossal footprint in his wake.

“And that is why you must die before your time, Bohen!” Apollyon declared with malice.

“Because I know exactly what you will grow into if left ignored! I will never allow you to reach your full potential! For the sake of our ambitions, I will cut you down before you can become a threat to us!”

At the core of his argument, underneath the pragmatist, was fear, Apollyon was strong, but afraid that other creatures might rise to challenge him one day.

“So big on the outside!” Basil mocked him. “And yet so small within!”

Apollyon began to run in response.

Basil didn't think someone so huge could run at all, but he did. And it was terrifying to watch. Apollyon rushed through the closest building in his path, shattering walls and monsters alike underfoot. Neither stone nor steel could stop him. The ground trembled with each step and a cloud of dust gathered around him. His eyes burned with murderous intent, telling Basil that he wouldn't stop; that this mountain of steel would chase after him until he was *dead*.

“Now you've done it!” Plato complained as the duo rushed to the edge of the roof. Empowered by haste, they closed the gap with the next building in a single bound. “Run!”

Basil followed the advice and fled across Paris' roof with death hot on his trail.

Chapter 39: Man vs Nuke

The city crumbled behind them.

Basil and Plato jumped from one Parisian building's roof to the next in an epic show of parkour. Century-old houses collapsed in their wake. Walls of stones were crushed under a steel titan's feet and rusted cars flattened on the pavement.

"He's gaining ground on us!" Plato warned as the frantic race went on. Indeed, the rumbling noise of Apollyon's footsteps grew ever closer behind them. "Faster!"

"Gh!" Basil grunted. He was already running as fast as he could while under the influence of Hasten. The world seemed like a blur around him, but his tiny legs could hardly help him outspeed a two hundred meter-tall titan. Apollyon covered more ground in one step than the Bohens in a hundred. "Keep going!"

Basil looked over his shoulder to survey the distance between their pursuer and them. Apollyon was growing closer, but they still had a large head start on him. A squad of monstrous wasps escorted the Horseman of Famine while the rest of the army struggled with Basil's allies around the rift. Kalki had managed to draw some of the swarm's forces away to the south and put them in range of Neria's artillery. Explosions and flashes of light rocked the horizon.

But neither projectiles nor the avatar's presence would distract Apollyon from his quarry. The colossus shrugged off all bombardments coming his way, his eyes firmly set on Basil himself. Apollyon approached closely enough to trigger Monster Insight, and new information filled Basil's mind.

Apollyon, Horseman of Famine

Level 60 (70-10) [Bug/Artificial]

Faction: Apocalypse Force.

HP: 38500/39500.

Immune: Critical Hits, Insta-Death, all Ailments.

Resist: Physical, Corrosion, Metal, Earth, Wind, Lightning, Light, Mythic.

Weak: Bugslayer, Artislayer, Wood, Fire.

The ten plagues of Egypt all rolled into one nasty mechanical package, Apollyon is one of the toughest bugs in the multiverse. His exoskeleton shrugs off almost anything and his heavy artillery has laid waste to entire worlds; only crippling both with supereffective attacks will ensure victory.

The good news? Apollyon wasn't immune to any elemental attack and he feared fire, which Basil appreciated.

The bad news? *Everything else.*

"I hate raid bosses," Basil cursed. Apollyon had nearly ten times more health points than his entire party combined. Basil could only hope the neutron bomb would be a powerful enough insecticide.

Although hundreds of meters still separated the hunter from the hunted, Apollyon went on the offensive. His eyes fired lasers of crimson light at Basil and Plato, the duo leaping onto an 18th-century building's roof to dodge the attack. The house they jumped from was vaporized in an instant.

The monstrous wasps escorting Apollyon opened fire at the duo as well, unleashing lethal poisonous darts. These monsters were below level thirty, just powerful enough to inflict minor wounds but too weak to provide experience. Basil and Plato had little difficulty shrugging off or dodging their attacks. The buildings they ran through, however, trembled from the onslaught. Basil shot the wasps down with his laser pistol while Plato did the same with blades of wind. Each blow killed one of the critters, sometimes two.

"Basil, we have a problem!" Plato shouted, pointing at the path ahead of them. "Look!"

Basil clenched his jaw. They were fast approaching the former *Esplanade des Invalides* park. Formerly a green landscape in the middle of the urban jungle, the dungeons' influence had turned it into an open desert of sand bordering the dried-up Seine river. There were no buildings to run on, no place to take cover. Apollyon would have no issues shooting them in it.

“I have an idea.” Basil put his laser pistol back into his inventory, leaving one of his hands free as they leaped into the Invalides desert and landed in a dune of sand. “Elemental Orb: Water!”

A sphere of focused liquid materialized in Basil’s palm. He immediately threw it at the sand beneath their feet. The water evaporated under the searing heat of the desert field, raising a cloud of steam. Basil kept throwing more orbs around to obscure the duo’s movements.

“Follow me,” Basil told Plato, who could rely on his sense of smell to follow his best friend. “Stay close.”

“Clever, Bohen!” Apollyon shouted behind them. The titan flattened the last buildings of the 7th Arrondissement and walked over the Esplanade des Invalides. The sand flowed between his legs’ servos with a screeching noise. “But I do not need to see your monkey face to kill you!”

The Horseman of Famine’s mandibles vibrated at an insane speed, enough to rival that of the Hasten Spell.

“Sonic Shock!”

Apollyon screeched and Paris trembled.

The air itself vibrated at high speed, spreading a mighty sonic shockwave through the park. Sand and steam alike were blown away, followed by the Bohens themselves.

Basil screamed in agony as the shockwave hit him. The vibrations traveled through his flesh and bones; he could almost feel his bones creak and crack. The terrible, droning noise of the swarm echoed inside his skull like a maddened scream. The pain was indescribable.

Supereffective [Wind] damage! [Madness] Ailment negated by [Lethal Vigil]!

Basil stumbled on the ground, and then it collapsed beneath his feet. The earth beneath the desert crumbled under the power of Apollyon’s attack. Basil and Plato flew down into a waterfall of sand and hit the steel ground underneath.

Basil gritted his teeth to ignore the pain and immediately rose to his feet. He immediately recognized the area as Paris’ sewers. A large hole let the eldritch light of the spatial rift from above and into the tunnel below.

“Plato, are you all right?” Basil glanced at his cat and barely managed to dodge a sword strike.
“Plato, what are you doing?!”

His feline friend ignored him. The Rakshasa Kitten hissed at Basil with maddened eyes and swung Joyeuse at him. Although he looked less hurt than his Tamer, Plato still suffered from the Madness ailment.

The irony of being attacked by Plato after doing the same while Berserk wasn't lost on Basil... but unlike the battle with Tamura, the Tamer had an ace up his sleeve.

“Monster Cure III!” Basil immediately healed Plato of his wounds and Madness ailment. His best friend's eyes regained a sliver of sanity. “Plato, are you all right?”

“What the...” Plato shook his head. “What happened?”

Basil opened his mouth to answer, but a colossal shadow loomed over the open tunnel before he could say anything.

Acting almost entirely on instinct, the Bohens rushed into the sewer tunnel ahead of them. Apollyon's colossal hand punched through the hole in the ceiling a second later with enough strength to cause an earthquake. The blow sent a cloud of stones and dust flying through the sewers, with Basil and Plato running through the tunnel to avoid being swallowed by it.

“That's right, weaklings, scurry away,” Apollyon mocked them before inhaling like an asthmatic Darth Vader. “Bio-Blaster.”

The Horseman of Famine exhaled a cloud of green gas into the tunnels. The noxious toxin swiftly spread through the sewers, rusting steel and consuming the leftover waste. The Horseman of Famine was trying to gas Basil and Plato like cockroaches.

“Keep running!” Basil told Plato as the ceiling trembled above them. Apollyon was walking right above them, trying to locate their position; and the gas cloud continued to spread.

Worse, the world started to slow down around them.

Your [Hasten] buff has run out.

Basil cursed under his breath and looked over his shoulder. Without the speed boost provided by his buff, the toxic cloud gained ground on them. Plato turned around, swung Joyeuse in a circular fashion and unleashed a blast of wind behind them, causing the noxious fumes to recede.

The duo's happiness was short-lived. The ceiling kept trembling with pieces of steel and stone falling left and right. The tunnel behind them collapsed as Apollyon punched through it. The Horseman of Famine was trying his hand at a deadly game of whac-a-mole.

The Bohens managed to evade him for a time, until they reached the end of the sewer. A metal grate stood between them and the dried Seine River beyond. The Louvre's ruins awaited on the opposite shore.

"Nowhere to hide," Basil said with a scowl. The dried riverbanks revealed an open space without any cover. Apollyon would have an easy time shooting them down. "It'll be suicide without Hasten."

"I have a plan," Plato said. "Gimme the bomb. I'm faster than you. I can do this."

"It's me he wants," Basil pointed out.

Plato answered by casting an illusion spell on himself. The feline vanished in the blink of an eye. In his place stood a near-exact mirror of Basil himself. The resemblance was so lifelike that Basil wondered how many of his friends would mistake the two; Plato even managed to mimic his best friend's more subtle facial expressions.

It was a performance only a lifelong friend could achieve. One that could fool almost anyone... including the giant monster outside.

"No," the real Basil said immediately, as he understood his best friend's plan. "No way."

"It's fine, just teleport me back to you before the bomb hits," Plato said using Basil's voice. His smile was almost too life-like. "Besides, you're fragile. You can only die once, while I have six deaths to go."

Basil held his best friend's gaze, before realizing he wouldn't budge on the matter. Plato was ready to give his life—one of them at least—for the cause. Although it bothered Basil to send him away on a suicide mission, he had no choice but to respect it.

“Send me a message through the Logs the moment you need an emergency evacuation,” Basil said as he unstored the Baguette from his Inventory. The black briefcase appeared in a flash and snapped open. The antenna rose up and the screen booted up.

Basil entered Neria's code on the keypad, unlocking the device. The Magitek refinement option appeared in response on his System screen, much to his surprise.

“How is it possible?” Basil wondered. “It's just the detonator, not the bomb itself. Would empowering it with a rune affect the device on the other end?”

Dismaker Labs wishes you a happy apocalypse.

At this point, Basil decided to ignore logic and embrace the absurd. Empowering a nuke probably violated all disarmament treaties in the world, but you couldn't really do war crimes halfway.

“Magitek: Fire Rune,” Basil said as he empowered the Baguette. Burning symbols appeared on the detonator's surface, radiating warmth and light.

Refinement attempt successful! The [Neutron Bomb] will now inflict additional [Fire] damage.

Basil set the timer to ten minutes. The keypad glittered as the words ‘Package Armed’ appeared on the screen alongside a countdown.

Quest: Goodbye Geneva, complete! Your party earned 30,000 Bonus EXP (5000 for you) and learned the [Mustard Gas] Alchemical Recipe! Dismaker Labs wish you happy war crimes!

“I had forgotten this Quest.” Basil squinted at the message. “I thought I needed to create the weapon in the first place?”

Refining a weapon counts as creating it.

“Less questions, more action,” Plato said as he closed the briefcase and grabbed it. He needed to use both hands to do so; his spell granted him Basil’s appearance, but not his strength. “I think you should run in the other direction after I’ve distracted the Bug Godzilla.”

“Yeah.” The neutron bomb’s radius would cover two kilometers according to General Leblanc; enough to wipe out a whole district. “Remember, send me a message when the timer is close to zero.”

“Pinky swear, dog,” Plato realized with a grin before cutting his way through the metal grate. “Wish me luck.”

Basil did. He watched his best friend jump into the dried up Seine River and run through the desert faster than the wind. Apollyon immediately noticed the disguised feline and jumped after him, blowing dust in all directions.

“You will not escape me, Bohem!” the Horseman shouted as he ran after the disguised Plato. He whipped up so much sand with his steps that Basil could barely see him through it. “There you are!”

Basil winced as he watched the steel titan run after Plato... and he could do little more than that.

With Apollyon distracted, Basil emerged from one of the holes left by the Horseman and walked under the shining sky. He glanced at the pillar of light, which Rosemarine, the Steamobile, and Neria’s CAESAR cannons kept bombarding from afar. Vasi, Leroy, and other flyers dueled the insect drones in the sky. The dead bugs formed hills of corpses, and yet they gained ground in spite of their catastrophic losses. Basil’s allies only had so many artillery shells to fire and SP to spend, whereas the bugs came in an unceasing tide of flesh. Eventually, the swarm would overwhelm their opposition under the weight of their limitless numbers.

There would be no victory so long as Apollyon lived.

Basil ran down the Esplanade des Invalides and towards the southern part of Paris, as far away from the Louvre as he could. The earth shook as Apollyon fired his Gehenna Cannons at the Seine River and scorched the sand to glass. Basil desperately checked on Plato’s vitals through the Party system, and sighed in relief upon finding him unharmed.

With the Baguette's countdown nearing its end, Basil leaped atop the ruins of a destroyed building. He had a good view of the area from there and watched Apollyon reach the Louvre's remains. The titan blasted the district left and right, oblivious to the fact he had been tricked.

Did he suspect a trap? Or was he arrogant enough to think he would survive whatever Basil had in store for him?

"Come on, Plato," Basil whispered as he checked his Logs. "Give me the signal..."

His heartbeat quickened and his body trembled in anticipation. The seconds stretched on, and yet Plato didn't send any message.

"Come on!" Basil cursed, watching the horizon with concern and impatience. "What are you waiting for—"

The world was set ablaze.

An ocean of blinding light swallowed the horizon in the blink of an eye. Apollyon, the Louvre, and all of Paris' 1st Arrondissement vanished in its ethereal phosphorescence. Time slowed down and all sound ceased.

Basil didn't see the ICBM hit. He didn't even notice it falling upon the Louvre. The weapon, fired from Bordeaux, had traveled across France in seconds and reached its target faster than the human eye could follow. It didn't even make a sound.

The blast did, however. Basil covered his eyes as a mighty sphere of energy expanded in the heart of the light. The spectacle was as dizzyingly beautiful as it was terrifying, like the roar of a newborn star. Basil couldn't help but stare at it in awe and silence. The sphere expanded until it consumed all of the Louvre. The earth erupted like an open wound under it, the heat convection blowing up dust into the air.

When the light receded, a powerful shockwave of hot wind and sand washed over the city. Although Basil was at a safe distance, the boom made him wince. A massive cloud rose in the fireball's place in a familiar mushroom shape.

Basil lowered his halberd in horror. The resulting devastation frightened him more than the next System's notification.

Rakshasa Kitten [Plato] has lost a life! Five remain!

Basil immediately summoned Plato through One for All. The Rakshasa Kitten appeared at his feet in a terrible shape, enough to fill his best friend's heart with dread. Flames had burned off his beautiful fur and exposed the skin underneath to melted radioactive glass. He had gone blind, and probably deaf too. Even though Plato's Nine Lives Perk had let him survive the blast by recreating him afterward, he could barely breathe. Worse, his status screen showed an 'Irradiated' ailment affecting him.

"Monster Cure III!" Basil wasted no time in healing his best friend. "Monster Cure III!"

A green aura covered Plato, lifting the Irradiated ailment and regrowing his fur. The Rakshasa Kitten groaned as the magic let him shed off the melted glass attached to his body and helped return his eyes to normal.

"Why?" Basil asked as he kept applying his Perk again and over again. "Why didn't you let me teleport you? Did Apollyon block it?"

"The bug... would have sensed a trap otherwise..." Plato coughed. "Had to do it... that hurt..."

"You brave fool..." Basil shook his head as he treated his best friend. "If we both live through the day, I'll serve you as much fish as you want."

"Way to make me hang on to life," Plato replied with a grin. He had recovered enough strength to rise back to his feet and raise Joyeuse. "Did we get him?"

Basil glanced at the horizon and cursed under his breath.

The neutron cloud had raised a sandstorm around the Louvre's ruins, but Apollyon's body shape remained clearly visible in its midst. The giant bug still stood proud and tall, though burning like a torch.

"He's still alive," Plato whispered in shock. "He's... That cockroach is *still* alive after this?"

Monster Insight provided more intel.

Apollyon, Horseman of Famine

HP: 3503/39500 (critical health).

“Barely,” Basil whispered back. The Horseman of Famine walked the thin edge between life and death. “He’s barely hanging on.”

The neutron bomb had failed to kill Apollyon... but it had made him vulnerable. It had made him *beatable*.

“Handsome!”

Basil raised his eyes and smiled. Vasi was floating down from the sky on her broomstick with an audacious grin.

“Need a lift?” she asked, all but begging for a fight date.

It was time to finish this.

“With pleasure,” Basil replied, his halberd heavy in his hand. “Let’s squash him for good.”

“Then let’s go,” she replied as she lowered her broom. Basil sat behind his girlfriend, with Plato leaping on his shoulders like a wild squirrel. The trio flew up in the sky and into the sandstorm.

Into the jaws of Hell itself.

Chapter 40: Man vs Apollyon

A sandstorm of radioactive dust swirled over the ruins of the Louvre.

Vasi fearlessly flew into the cloud, facing strong warm winds and burning sand. The air itself was charged with energy. Basil felt an invisible force enter his lungs, his flesh and blood. The nuke's radiations expanded outward from the impact point to poison all things.

[Sandstorm] weather! [Wind] and [Earth] elements will be strengthened, [Water] will be weakened, and visibility will be slightly decreased!

[Irradiated] ailment! You will lose 1/16th of your maximum HP each minute and be unable to heal! The ailment can only be lifted magically.

[Death's Banner II] negates HP damage.

Basil's magic protected his team from the fallout's passive damage, but not from the lack of healing. He prepared to cast Monster Cure II to lift the effect on his allies.

"Don't," Vasi interrupted him. "Even if you cure us, the ailment will return within seconds so long as we breathe this toxic dust. Pace yourself."

"Yes, keep some SP for that sweet banner protection," Plato said. "We'll need it!"

Basil nodded slowly before checking upon his Special Points. He had around half of them left in storage, but Death's Banner cost him ten per minute; Elemental Orbs would demand more.

He missed Kalki's regenerative buff.

"Here he is," Vasi warned as they approached the center of the sandstorm. The ICBM had transformed the Louvre into a crater of rocks and molten sand. Their nemesis knelt in its midst, struggling to breathe.

The blast had peeled most of Apollyon's exoskeleton away and exposed the corpselike, festering flesh underneath. Layers of purple metal had melted off the Horseman of Famine's body. Circuits and cables embedded in the monster's skin let out jolts of electricity at random.

One of the two mighty cannons that had shot down the ISS less than an hour ago had turned into scrap on the ground; the other remained attached to Apollyon's shoulders, though with most of its circuitry exposed to the outside world.

The Horseman of Famine gasped for air. Although he had survived the neutron bomb's blast by the skin of his teeth—an achievement in itself—his injuries were severe. The radioactive sandstorm bothered him as much as the Bohens. Without most of his exoskeleton, he reminded Basil of a cicada struggling to shed off its old worn skin.

The Horseman of Famine noticed the Bohens' approach and glared at them with his four fiery eyes. Basil immediately felt his strength slipping away as Apollyon's magic affected him.

[Famine] Ailment! All physical stats debuffed for ten minutes! You will lose 1/16th of your SP per minute!

[Death's Banner II] negates SP damage.

"What... What weapon was this?" Apollyon rasped. Beyond the anger in his eyes, there was fear. "You greedy fool... have you sold your soul to the Unity for power?"

"I would rather die," Basil replied as he raised his halberd. Plato prepared to jump off Vasi's broom while the witch muttered a spell. "That bomb was a pure Made in Earth product. Accept no substitute."

Neutron bombs were among the weakest of nukes in terms of payload. A stronger ICBM would have vaporized Apollyon instead of leaving him on the brink of death; though the Bohens probably wouldn't have been around to celebrate either.

"I never imagined... you monkeys could craft something so powerful." Apollyon rose to his feet and pointed his remaining cannon at them. Power built up within its depths. "But not as mighty... as this!"

"Hasten!" Vasi cast on Basil. Time slowed for him as they moved right above the Horseman, the spell spreading to all team members through One for All.

"Gehenna Cannon!"

Apollyon opened fire in mindless rage. A stream of blinding light erupted from his remaining cannon, so powerful that the air itself simmered from the heat. Vasi flew as fast as a fighter jet and escaped the blast. Apollyon pivoted in an attempt to reorient his continuous beam, but the witch managed to approach the cannon closely enough for Basil and Plato to make the jump.

The duo landed on Apollyon's shoulder, braving the searing radioactive dust corrupting the air. Plato started cutting through the cybernetic cables running through the titan's skin, while Basil struck his cannon with his halberd. His weapon cut through steel and circuitry alike. Electric jolts sparked out of the device, only to be safely absorbed by Basil's thunderbird armor.

The beam weakened as the barrel channeling it heated up. Small steam explosions rocked Apollyon's shoulder before a larger one blew up most of his cannon. Basil and Plato were almost thrown off the Horseman by the blast, but hanged on by stabbing his flesh with their weapon.

Apollyon let out a screech loud enough to wake up the dead as his Gehenna Cannon fell to the ground at his feet. The droning buzz of his swarm echoed his call for help in the distance.

"Soldiers, come to me!" Apollyon snarled. He raised both his hands; the left attempted to catch Vasi in the air and the other moved to squash Basil and Plato. The duo dodged claws larger than the both of them combined by running towards the head while Vasi elegantly danced around the Horseman's blows. She retaliated with a fireball that hit Apollyon in the mandibles. The blast broke one and caused the titan to hiss in pain.

"Not so tough without your exoskeleton, eh?" Plato taunted Apollyon as he and his best friend climbed up the Horseman's head; a part of his body that was over twenty meters tall and many times larger than the Bohens' former house.

"He's just a glorified turtle," Basil mused. "Hard outside, soft inside, better off eating lettuce!"

He immediately regretted his taunt as giant wasps entered the sandstorm to support Apollyon. They launched a rain of poisonous darts at the Bohens. Vasi had to abandon her assault on the Horseman to dodge, while Plato and Basil deflected the attacks with their weapons.

Apollyon grabbed one of the flying insects with one hand, brought it to his mouth, and swallowed it whole. To Basil's horror, a patch of flesh on his chest started to regrow the metal exoskeleton.

Apollyon regenerated some HP/SP!

“He’s eating his troops to regenerate!” Basil warned his team. “Kill his mooks before he can touch them!”

“Go be a hero, I’ll take care of the small fries!” Plato replied as he gracefully leaped off Apollyon. In spite of the immense height, the tiger club managed to softly land on a wasp’s back by altering the winds with his sword. He cut the monster to ribbons and then leaped on another. Plato rampaged among the wasps like an acrobatic, tiny harbinger of death while Vasi assisted him with her own spells.

As for Basil, he continued his climb relentlessly. Apollyon tried to squash him with both hands, but thanks to Hasten, he dodged all attacks by running across the monster’s skull.

“Get off me, Bohen!” Apollyon snarled. “Stop hiding and face me!”

“As you wish.” Cutting into Apollyon’s forehead with his halberd, Basil used the weapon as an anchor to position himself right in front of the left side of the titan’s face. Two eyes out of four glared at him with malice. “Elemental Orb: Fire!”

Hanging on to his halberd’s shaft with one hand, Basil raised the other at Apollyon and unleashed a blast of holy flames straight into his eyes. All of them were already damaged by the nuke’s radiation, so his flames incinerated the dried orbs to ash. The Horseman shrieked as half his sight was robbed from him.

Warning: you have lost more than half your SP!

“Sonic—Argh!” A jolt of electricity traveled through Apollyon’s throat before he could complete his attack. “Argh...”

“Can’t use most of your Perks with damaged tech?” Basil mocked him as he climbed to the undamaged side of Apollyon’s forehead, intent on completely blinding the giant bug once and for all. “The portal is still open, if you wanna run away crying!”

“There are fates far worse than death, Bohen... You know not what my master is capable of.” The Horseman of Famine let out a screech of defiance. “I will not leave this planet to face him in disgrace.”

“On that, we agree,” Basil said as he prepared to fire another orb. “You won’t leave this planet alive at all.”

Apollyon responded to the taunt by shaking his head in an attempt to throw Basil off him. The Tamer struggled to hang on to his halberd as he was swung in one direction and then to the other like a pendulum. Worse, a great shadow loomed behind Basil. He looked over his shoulder and watched on as a giant hand moved to squash him. Time accelerated the closer the claws approached him.

“Damn it, not now,” Basil complained. The Hasten spell was running out. “Curse your intense but short duration!”

Basil attempted to rise up his halberd’s shaft and escape back to Apollyon’s forehead, only for the Horseman to shake it again. Basil was almost thrown off into the void. He barely managed to hold onto his weapon as Apollyon’s hand fell upon him.

The Horseman’s palm was the size of a house, and just as heavy. Basil raised his free hand instinctively as if to stop his incoming death, but he might as well have wrestled with a mountain. An enormous mass of flesh pressed him against Apollyon’s forehead and crushed him under its weight. Basil used all his strength to push it back.

He failed.

Basil screamed in pain and agony as his body was squeezed between Apollyon’s hand and face; the greatest pain was in his free arm, which he had foolishly raised to push back the tide. The forearm’s bone cracked in a terrible, sickening noise. Basil’s vision blurred as he felt his body crushed under the overwhelming weight. His breath escaped his squeezed lungs.

Critical Health! Critical Health!

“I... expel...” Basil used the last of his strength to mentally open his party system. He needed to expel his party before they died with him. “Release... every—”

An explosion rocked Apollyon’s hand. Basil felt the blast travel through the monster’s fingers and the pressure squeezing the life out of him immediately lessened. Apollyon’s hand moved away from his forehead and fell on the ground... along with the rest of the arm.

Barely hanging on to his halberd with his remaining functional hand, Basil managed to look over his shoulder. Dozens of Fire Seeds were climbing up on the titan like ants and clustering at his body's joints. A few of them still burned on Apollyon's elbow, the rest of their kindred having blown themselves up to sever the Horseman's arm. Apollyon wiped them off with his remaining hand before they could mutilate him further.

"Boss, we're here!" Buggy appeared at the edge of the crater, exhausted and carrying Shellgirl on his back. Both of them looked quite bruised; Buggy had magma scars on his exoskeleton and one of Shellgirl's tentacles had been severed. Basil suspected it didn't bode well for the Steamobile, especially since some bugs had broken through the army's encirclement. Neither was Rosemarine visible anywhere even as her brood swarmed Apollyon.

Nonetheless, Basil's party members immediately joined the battle. Shellgirl unleashed volleys of ice spheres at Apollyon's wasp escort while Buggy carried her on his back as a mobile platform.

At this point, Vasi switched targets and fired a spell at Apollyon himself. Shadowy spikes grew out of his chest and shattered the regrown parts of his exoskeleton. Being now on the verge of death and having swept away the Fire Seeds trying to suicide-bomb him, the Horseman attempted to seize one of his own wasp allies to regain his health. Shellgirl acted quicker and slew Apollyon's would-be meal with a well-aimed ice pearl projectile.

"Boss, we're coming!" Buggy looked up in defiance at Apollyon, only to falter. "We're... here..."

"Buggy?" Shellgirl asked, only to be violently thrown off the centimagma's back. Buggy left her behind and scurried towards Apollyon. "Buggy!"

*Buggy has been **[Charmed]** by Apollyon's **[Bug Crown]**!*

Basil's eyes widened in panic as Buggy offered himself to Apollyon, his mind dominated by the Horseman's power. "Thank you for the appetizer," Apollyon rasped mockingly as he raised his remaining hand to catch the centimagma. "It is much appreciated!"

"Monster... Cure!" Basil cast through his teeth, his magic spreading to his allies and healing their wounds.

***[Charm]** ailment lifted. Buggy will be immune to **[Bug Crown]** for 24 hours!*

The Horseman of Famine's control over Buggy was instantly lifted, with the Centimagma looking around himself in confusion. Noticing the giant hand moving to seize him, he used Agility Up to slip through Apollyon's fingers, much to his rage.

The Horseman looked around for more sacrifices and found none. Everywhere his drones fell. Plato had moved back to Vasi's broom, the two unleashing fireballs and blades of wind at any bug entering their range. Shellgirl assisted them by firing projectiles from the ground like an anti-air defense while Buggy carried her around the battlefield once again, although this time he remained careful not to approach Apollyon too closely. The Bohens party had grown into a well-oiled machine of a team.

No more reinforcement would come either. Neria's troops had managed to reform the encirclement around the portal with a copious amount of artillery. Army choppers blew up fliers around the energy pillar, stopping Apollyon's monsters from rushing to their leader's side.

The Horseman faced his death alone.

"I will not fall... here!" Apollyon let out a roar of desperation. "Rampage!"

The Horseman's body trembled with rage and his corpse-like skin turned red.

Apollyon has gone [Berserk]!

Apollyon snapped to action with unnatural speed and strength for his size. He attempted to punch Vasi out of the sky, with the witch barely dodging by flying upward at full speed.

Apollyon's sudden jerking movement threw Basil off his face, halberd included. He fell and fell from many stories high, the ground calling him.

"Basil!" Vasi dived down in a desperate attempt to catch him, only for Apollyon to relentlessly target her. The witch was forced to move to the side to avoid the Horseman's snapping mandibles, her boyfriend continuing his fall. "Basil!"

Basil landed earlier and more softly than he expected. His body hit a soft cushion of feathers rather than sandy ground, and a melodious song echoed all around him. For a brief second, he thought he had perished and ascended to heaven, but the music sounded too Hippie-like for his taste.

[Irradiated] ailment negated Kalki's [Song of Healing]!

"Sorry for being late," a friendly voice said in between notes. "I had to fly around to heal the wounded."

Basil realized he had landed on the back of Kalki's avian mount, right behind the bard himself. The music offered no reprieve from the pain, but at least he would live for a scant few minutes.

Having traded his sanity for strength as Basil once did, Apollyon rampaged around the crater like a wild animal. He desperately attempted to bite and claw at Vasi, but the witch flew too fast for his slow-moving hand to catch up; he might have well been a giant trying to swat a fly. On the ground, Buggy and Shellgirl had to run away in frantic terror to avoid being trampled to death.

A light at the edge of the crater attracted Basil's attention, and that of the maddened Apollyon. An invisible shape became noticeable as a layer of dust covered its reptilian body. The head glowed like the sun as it gathered power.

"Sneaky toe attack!" Rosemarine shouted with pride as she finally announced her presence. Apollyon snarled back and raised his feet to trample her to death.

He wasn't fast enough.

Rosemarine fired her beam first.

The ray of golden sunlight crossed the distance between the tropidrake and Apollyon in an instant before hitting the latter's chest. Without his exoskeleton to reduce the damage, the light pierced one end of the body and came out of the other. The supereffective sunfire burned through Apollyon's flesh and bones alike, leaving nothing but a smoking hole where the heart should have been.

Apollyon, whose foot was up in the air, never brought it down to the ground. Instead, sanity returned to his remaining eyes as his gigantic body stumbled. He fell to his back, first slowly, then suddenly. The Horseman of Famine collapsed like a mountain laid low by an earthquake with just as much power. Shellgirl and Buggy barely managed to avoid being crushed as he hit the ground in a cataclysmic shockwave. The edge of the crater was flattened under Apollyon's weight, with tons of sand and dust propelled in the air.

The aftershock could be felt from Basil's position in the sky. Apollyon's fall affected all remaining bug monsters in the area; the few surviving wasps fled in animalistic panic, while the rest of the swarm fell into chaos. The unified buzzing sound that followed Apollyon's army collapsed into a cacophony of maddened screeches. The Horseman's hold over his troops was broken in an instant, never to return.

Rosemarine let out a victorious roar. She had avenged centuries of plant oppression by insects and was proud of it. Basil's allies echoed the victory with cheers of their own.

"You have raised magnificent friends, Basil," Kalki said with a smile.

"No," Basil replied with a chuckle, coughing blood. "They raised themselves."

Kalki had his bird land right next to Apollyon's colossal head. He summoned a greenish potion from his inventory and poured it down Basil's throat. "I hope this will work," the bard said with a look of concern. The words *'Heavenly or Guaranteed'* were written on his beverage's flask. "I do not trust your angel's credentials."

[Irradiated] ailment lifted! You gained immunity to [Irradiated] for five minutes! You recovered 500 HP!

Green light swallowed Basil, healing his wounds. His vision returned to normal. His broken arm fell back into place. When Kalki dismounted from his bird, he helped Basil do the same. Vasi and Plato landed near the group while Shellgirl, Buggy, and Rosemarine flocked to them.

"I did it, Mister!" Rosemarine said in triumph. "I roasted the bug!"

"That was amazing," Shellgirl agreed. "You nailed him right in the squishy parts."

"And you'll get to eat him for dinner, Rosemarine," Basil thanked his beloved tropidrake. He couldn't think of a more appropriate fate for the Horseman of Famine.

"To end... like this?" The group turned to face Apollyon. Light flickered in the monster's two remaining eyes, struggling not to fade away into the darkness of death. "Beaten by... vermin? I was... so close to greatness..."

"I'll admit this could have gone either way," Basil said. Apollyon had been the meanest, most powerful foe they had ever faced. Without the neutron bomb, they wouldn't have been able to

stop him at all. "But that's what you get for underestimating us. You can only blame your arrogance for your defeat."

"Arrogance..." Apollyon scoffed as his life slipped away. "I am the weakest... the gatekeeper. Before you were nothing, Bohen... but now that you have broken me... you will come to my master's attention."

"I don't fear him," Basil replied.

"You should..." Apollyon let out a heavy breath. "In the Apocalypse Force... you join or you die. The other Horsemen... will come for you. To recruit... or to slay."

"Good," Basil replied. The rest of his group nodded in assent and determination. "It will spare us the trouble of hunting them down ourselves."

The System echoed his sentiment with a new quest.

New Main Quest: Apocalypse Not

Recommended Level: 80+

On four horses they came, under six feet they must go! You have declared war on the Apocalypse Force, and now it's time to show them who's the real one-man armageddon! Defeat the four Horsemen of the Apocalypse Force!

Reward: 24,000,000 + Holy Grail artifact.

"You have barely beaten me... and I am nothing but a worm... in the Maleking's shadow..." Apollyon let out one last chuckle, before coughing sick purple blood. "He will burn this planet to the ground... I wish I could have seen that... Armageddon."

Apollyon, Horseman of Famine, eternal foe of the Homeowners Revenge Association and bane of the House of Bohen, breathed his last. The light in his remaining eyes switched off and piles of treasures appeared atop his smoking corpse.

Your party earned 4,000,000 Exp and 2,000,000 Incursion Bonus EXP (total 6,000,000, with 1,000,000 for you). You earned a whopping 9 levels (total 52).

The house, at long last, had been avenged.

It filled Basil with an immeasurable amount of satisfaction. Although they had lost friends and suffered greatly to reach this point, Apollyon would never again threaten anyone else. That was the real reward, beyond the petty joy of revenge.

“The portal isn’t closing,” Vasi noted. While the bug swarm had fallen into chaos with Apollyon’s death, Basil’s monster allies struggled to keep them contained. Many drones retreated, but far more kept trying to break through the encirclement and infest Earth. “Why is it still open?”

“Wasn’t the Incursion meant to last a week?” Shellgirl asked with a sigh. “We aren’t paid enough for clean-up duties.”

“This is good,” Rosemarine rejoiced while licking her petal lips. “More food for us!”

“You’ve heard her, the job is not yet done.” Basil pointed his halberd at the rift. “Let’s throw these locusts back into the hole from which they came from!”

His friends and allies cheered all at once. For they understood that although they had a few days of containment ahead of them, the worst was behind them.

The Battle for Paris, no, for all of France, was won.

Chapter 41: Man vs Respec

They spent the week helping the army secure Paris.

It was a long, tedious process. Apollyon's death had spelled the Apocalypse Force's defeat on this front, but not all of his thralls were willing to accept it. For every bug that retreated back into the rift, two more attempted to break through the security perimeter. A few slipped through in the early hours of the Incursion, but each new day brought its lot of new soldiers, choppers, and tanks. By the event's end, any monster was shot from a distance before it could walk ten meters past the rift.

The strangest of the invaders had been a giant panda riding a thundercloud, of all things. Basil had paused long enough in confusion to let the monster escape confinement and then decided to take a look at the world beyond the rift out of curiosity. What he saw filled him with dread.

The world beyond the rift was a wasteland; a gray, barren desert stripped of its very grass by Apollyon's brood. When they failed to enter Earth, the weaker monsters had turned on each other in a cannibalistic frenzy. Basil wondered if the panda creature had been a desperate survivor escaping its homeworld's destruction.

That was the future the Apocalypse Force wanted for Earth: a spiral of destruction that only ended when everyone was dead.

Basil swore never to let that happen.

Halfway through the Incursion, he sat at the edge of his bed in the depths of the Steamobile; the vehicle had suffered heavy damage during the invasion, but the army's crafters graciously helped repair it. They had even improved on the design until it offered the same comfort as a true campervan.

Basil stared at the lotus in his palm. The flower felt so light and warm to the touch; its petals were immaculate like snow. They held the seed of potential, or rebirth.

"You've made your decision?" Vasi asked softly at his side, covering her nakedness with a bedsheet. The whole bed still reeked of sex. "About time."

“Yeah,” Basil agreed. “About time.”

It was bound to happen at some point. The couple had been together for a month now, and Apollyon’s defeat had left them in the mood to celebrate. Vasi simply showed up in Basil’s room one night with her stuff and settled there permanently afterward.

It was... good. There was no other word for it. Making love to his girlfriend for the first time had been sweet, and natural. So they did it again the next night, and then the one afterward. Plato even interrupted a session midway through to complain about the noise. As for Bugsy, he simply cried in joy. Basil had caught him working on a cradle one morning.

Inquisitors might have burned him at the stake for making love to a demonic witch, but as far as Basil was concerned, it felt positively *saintly*.

“Sorry for the delay,” Basil apologized. “I know more levels would help with containment, but I truly wanted to think it over.”

“It’s fine, Basil.” Vasi rested her head on his shoulder. “It’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Rushing it would be a poor decision.”

Basil smiled. “How would you feel about dating a dragonknight?”

“I’m dating a knight,” she replied with a chuckle. “I’m dating *you*. That wouldn’t change even if you took on a Vagrant class.”

And that was why he loved her.

Basil decided to assign his nine new levels before using the lotus. He at first considered completing Deathknight of the Sepulchre, but changed his mind at the last second. There was another class he had been considering for a while and according to the information provided by Hagen, it would make Berserker redundant and help him let go of it. Basil needed to confirm if the Perk progression fitted his ally’s intel.

Having made his choice, Basil assigned his new levels to the Dragonknight class.

A wave of pleasure almost as intense as the thrill of sex coursed through his body. The magic of the System empowered his muscles, strengthened his bones, and sharpened his mind. His new class’ power filled every inch of his body.

Dragonknight Level 1 to 9 Stat Gains: +9 STR, +9 AGI, +5 VIT, +7 SKI, +4 MAG, +2 INT, +7 CHA, +5 LCK. You earned 300 HP and 90 SP.

Dragoon I (Passive): You gain advanced proficiency with Swords, Spears, and Shields (x2 damage, +10% Crit).

Dragon Rider I (Passive): You gain advanced proficiency in riding creatures, but only those with the [Dragon] Type (+10% damage to attacks when mounted, you cannot be dismounted by force unless you suffer a Critical Hit or Supereffective attack, and you can both direct your mount and attack without splitting your attention).

Dragonbane I (Passive): All your attacks with weapons in which you have a Medium, Advanced or Perfect proficiency will inflict Dragonslayer damage supereffective against [Dragon] types (x3 damage).

Double Jump I (Passive): Not only is the distance of your jumps increased, but you can leap a second time while airborne. Additionally, the damage of your Spear weapons is doubled while in the air.

Dragonbreath I (Active): Select an element in which you have a strong affinity. You gain a weak breath attack (60 base damage) of that element which you can use at will; the breath will also pierce through Resistance.

Basil selected Corrosion as his chosen breathing attack. His halberd and elemental orb already covered most elements anyway, so the choice mattered little to him.

“I think you’ve grown new abs, Handsome,” Vasi noted with appreciation. Her soft fingers trailed over Basil’s chest and thighs. “You should start naming them at this rate.”

“I’ll let you pick the nicknames,” Basil teased her back. “But only after I get rid of the Berserker muscle pains.”

“Are you sure you want to fully get rid of it?”

“Yes, I am.” His halberd counted both as a spear and as an axe. With his new Dragonknight Perks, he could let go of Berserker and keep his proficiency. The Runic spellcasting loss would

be compensated with an investment in Runesmith. "I don't regret taking the class. It saved my life more than I can count in the early days."

"But you've outgrown it," Vasi whispered softly.

"I did," Basil confirmed.

Once, it was anger that carried the weight of his fight. Not anymore. He looked at his girlfriend and lightly kissed her on the lips. A warm feeling coursed through his cheeks, pleasing and comforting.

That was the thing that spurred him on now. He wanted to protect Vasi, Plato, Rosemarine, Shellgirl, Buggy, and all the people he had come to care about since the world's end. Monsters like Apollyon needed to go; not to help Basil feel better about himself, but for the sake of everyone's safety and happiness.

"Goodbye, Berserker," Basil whispered as he activated the Lotus of Wisdom. "You will always be a part of me, one way or another."

The lotus dissipated into nothingness and a screen appeared before Basil; one showcasing both his current classes and those he could access, but never invested in. A series of '+' and '-' allowed him to reassign his levels among them.

Basil had considered his choice of build for a while. His strength was that of his team, so he intended to focus on support classes like Runesmith and Alchemist in tandem with more martial options like Deathknight of the Sepulchre. He would empower his allies and protect them with the strength of his arm.

Berserker, Gardener, and Fisherman would go. The former was a good class, but one better fit for an antisocial grumpy bear than a team player; the other two had been useful when Basil lived in the wilderness, but were now all but useless. He reassigned his levels and confirmed his choice.

You have exchanged your 5 [Berserker] levels, 3 [Gardener] levels, and 1 [Fisherman] level for 1 [Deathknight of the Sepulchre] level and 8 [Runesmith] Levels.

You have lost the following Perks: **[Slaughterer I]**, **[Fishing I]**, **[Warp Spasm I]**, **[Jardin Secret I]**, **[Greenhand I]**. **[Runic II]** remains unchanged; the loss of **[Berserker]**'s **[Runic II]** is compensated by the gain in **[Runesmith] [Runic II]** tier earned at level 9.

Lost Perks have been replaced with the following:

Runestorm I (Active): [Support] 10 SP. You can empower any melee weapon you wield (such as swords, axes, or daggers) with an elemental infusion for five minutes, changing the damage Type to the chosen element. Available elements: [Fire], [Wind], [Earth], [Water], [Frost], and [Lightning].

Runecraft (Passive): You can now incorporate runes into all of your crafting processes, permanently empowering your equipment with their additional effects.

Magic-Eater I (Active): When you have Runestorm active on a weapon, you can redirect any spell of the channeled element within twenty meters to your weapon, absorb them, and regain an amount of SP proportional to the spell's power. You can only redirect Spells, and not Active Perks or standard attacks.

You have capped **Deathknight of the Sepulchre** at level 10. You earned the **[Duty Beyond Death]** capstone. You can also select one of your stats except for HP/SP; it will receive a one-time bonus chosen at random (maximum +6).

Duty Beyond Death (Passive): Not even death will stop you from fulfilling your duty. When your health points hit 0, you do not immediately die. Instead, you gain the **[Invincibility]** status for five minutes, during which you cannot take any damage nor suffer from debuffs and status ailments. However, you cannot regain HP and once the effect ends, so will your life. You also cannot be turned into a **[Undead]** type by any means, even willingly.

Basil hoped he would never have to make use of that last Perk. He assigned the stat bonus to intelligence, one of his weakest stats.

You gained 4 Intelligence Points and 20 SP.

Already he could see synergies between his new abilities and the old ones. He could make better equipment for his team and would have an easier time targeting an enemy's elemental weaknesses.

If Technomancer was like Deathknight of the Sepulchre, it should be cleared at level 10; both classes, once completed, amount to 40 levels when combined with Tamer. If Basil dedicated himself to completing Dragonknight, Runesmith, and Alchemist, each of them with 20 levels, then that would make for 100 levels.

A full build.

Basil chuckled at the thought, much to his girlfriend's bemusement. "Come on," Vasi said. "Don't keep the joke to yourself."

"I'm seriously planning my class progression as if I intended to reach level 100," Basil replied. "That's absurd."

"Is it, truly?" Vasi smiled. "We're a long way before we can hope to reach this threshold, but the possibility isn't zero either."

"I just find it insane that I started picking levels based on how they would help me survive day-to-day, and now I'm planning for a full journey to level 100." Basil laughed. "I don't want to become an Overgod, but I find it funny."

"I'm not particularly interested in godhood either," Vasi said. "But at the speed at which our foes throw themselves at us, we might end up ascending to godhood out of self-defense."

Truer words had never been spoken.

"In any case, it is done," Basil said as he put his arm around Vasi's waist and pulled her to him. Her skin felt good against his. "I hope that will be enough."

"Are you worried?" Vasi frowned. "Apollyon's words bother you, don't they?"

"We needed a neutron bomb to defeat him, and he wasn't even at full strength. If he really is the weakest of the Horsemen..." Basil sighed. "We can't really solve all our problems with nukes."

“That human arrow of light was fantastically powerful, I’ll concede,” Vasi said while caressing his chest. “But it is Rosemarine that landed the coup de grâce, helped by our spells and weapons. The System is the great equalizer. Don’t demean your own strength, Basil. Apollyon became so powerful because he was dozens of levels ahead of us. We can catch up.”

Basil chuckled. “Do you think Plato might become just as big one day?”

“I doubt it,” Vasi replied with a bemused tone. “Size does not always equal power, Basil. I’ve heard of mages no taller than a child, yet capable of far more destruction than Apollyon and his army put together.”

Basil didn't know whether he should take that as an encouragement... or as a warning.

Today’s battle had been won, but the war was far from over.

The rift closed on the seventh day.

Basil watched the scene from afar as the pillar of light collapsed on itself. Its otherworldly energy receded into the sky, where the cosmic circuit linking Earth to countless worlds disintegrated. Basil knew it hadn’t truly vanished; it had only become inactive until the next Incursion. Leroy believed it would be many months before the portals opened again, but with Maxwell afoot, one could never be certain.

Still, this particular Incursion ended on a triumphant note. A tall building of steel stood proudly where the pillar of light once touched the ground. The Eiffel Tower had been restored to its original state. A thin layer of rust covered its metallic architecture and its feet sank in a desert of sand, but none of that mattered. The world had ended, yet the very symbol of France stood undefeated.

This country still had hope.

And so did others. Basil had heard from Neria that the British Army, helped by the Queen's Guard—though the King's Guard was probably a more appropriate name now—had retaken London and the Big Ben dungeon. Good news was coming from Germany and Spain too.

But still nothing from Bulgaria.

Basil suppressed a sigh as he walked back to the site of Apollyon's fall. He feared for his mother's safety, but he could do little but wait until the French Army managed to establish communications with his homeland.

Basil observed the Louvre's crater from the edge. Mages had cleaned the area of radiation with spells, allowing hundreds of crafters and workers to excavate buried artifacts and exploit the Horseman's corpse. Basil noticed Muggy and other coffee machine mimics serving beverages to guards while Shellgirl barked orders from atop a pile of treasure.

Not only had Apollyon's demise spawned a shower of precious loot, but the Horseman's corpse was made of advanced technology and high-quality material. Shellgirl had already called dibs on many body parts, including the claws and mandibles.

One of the Gehenna cannons had been set aside for research and future mass production. The other would be mounted atop the Steamobile to replace the damaged howitzer. Basil also hoped to work on pieces of the exoskeleton. With Berserker gone, he could now wear metal armor without losing his weapon proficiency. Considering Apollyon's exoskeleton had allowed him to survive a neutron bomb...

How could Basil call himself a knight without a shining suit of armor made of an alien bug's corpse? It just didn't feel *right*.

The noise of a chopper echoed above the crater. Basil raised his eyes at an approaching helicopter that soon landed at his side. A familiar man stepped out of the cargo hold alongside a pair of guards.

General Leblanc had come to reclaim the capital.

"I can hardly imagine that you killed this creature on foot. This is a feat worthy of a Greek epic." The General shook Basil's hand warmly, but firmly. "Your people truly are modern-day heroes, Basil."

“We wouldn’t have lasted long without your Baguette, General.” Basil instantly regretted his wording. “It did ninety-five percent of the work.”

“You shouldn’t discount the other five, young man.” The old soldier waved a hand at Apollyon’s remains. Even dismembered and carved up into pieces, he remained awe-inspiring. “Few would have dared to engage this monster, and fewer would have survived to tell the tale.”

“Still three more to go,” Basil said. “Has any other Horseman shown itself?”

“Not that I know, though our information network only extends to parts of Europe and North Africa. It’s not impossible that a Horseman manifested on the other side of the world without our knowledge.” The General put his hands behind his back and observed the Eiffel Tower from afar. Although he remained stoic even in the face of victory, he couldn’t suppress a satisfied smile at the edge of his lips. “I cannot put into words how happy I am to see this monument again, Basil.”

“Don’t tell me you’re a closet Parisian,” Basil mused.

“No, of course not,” the General chuckled. “But building this tower was a tribulation. Many artists decried it, the architects struggled to find funds, and it was never meant to last long. Yet men of great will persevered, and here it stands.”

He waved a hand at the Eiffel Tower.

“This monument survived two world wars and one apocalypse,” he said with pride. “It gives me hope that our people will endure what comes next.”

“Me too,” Basil replied with a smirk. “Neria told me we’re winning on most fronts.”

“Your actions have helped more than you can possibly imagine,” General Leblanc said with a sharp nod. “With most portals closed, we could relocate troops where needed and make territorial gains. Madrid has been secured, Berlin too, and the British have reestablished control over their island; An axis going from Portugal to Germany is now more or less safe for humankind. Once we’ve secured the Western European Zone’s borders, we’ll start pushing East to retake the rest of the continent.”

Basil could see the writing on the wall.

After so many setbacks, the tide was finally turning in mankind's favor. They would beat back the apocalypse, inch by inch.

"I'm surprised Kalki is not with you," the General observed. "Neria informed me the two of you were rarely seen apart nowadays."

"He's helping treat the wounded at the infirmary." The man was a saint; when he didn't heal people with his songs, he did his best to tame Apollyon's surviving drones into docility. Kalki had limited success with the latter, but Basil gave him points for trying. "We intend to leave for Athens together."

"A most dangerous journey."

"Are you going to stop us?" Basil doubted the military man would be unwise enough to try, but the world's fate depended on Kalki's survival. Many men would have acted rashly in the light of these facts.

"I let him go free when Metal Olympus wanted him captured, why would I restrict his movements now?" General Leblanc smiled sharply, though his eyes remained calculating. "Making an enemy out of a god is usually ill-advised. I would rather have him as a friend, even if that means indulging him against my better judgment sometimes."

And like that, Leblanc had proved himself wiser than all of Dismaker Labs' board members put together.

"What of Leroy then?" Basil asked. The false god had been taken away by soldiers and not seen since. "What will become of him?"

"He'll be put under house arrest and help us solve the disaster he started." General Leblanc crossed his arms, his face twisting into a scowl. "I am mindful of his attempt at repentance, but his remorse does not erase the severity of his crimes. His actions would have earned him a one-way ticket to the Hague before the apocalypse he helped create. He should be thankful that we abolished the death penalty decades ago."

"He has burned his bridges with Maxwell and blunted the Incursion the best he could," Basil pleaded on Leroy's behalf. "His sins are great, but his good behavior should count for something."

“It does matter. But once things settle, his fate must be settled before a tribunal. All his actions, good and bad, will be taken into account.” The General scowled grimly. “Let us speak of other things. I have... news for you.”

Considering his grim tone, Basil doubted it would be good. “It’s about my mother, isn’t it?”

“I’m afraid so.” The General put a hand in one of his uniform’s pockets. “We were setting up a direct line of communication for your sake when the Incursion struck us earlier than expected. We lost contact with Bulgaria when the portals opened.”

He brought out a photo and presented it to Basil.

The picture showed a reptilian, winged monster flying over a raging sea. The sky above it was covered in eldritch circuitry, while mechanical krakens of gears and bolts infested the waters below. Basil immediately noticed the familiarity between the latter machines and the Unity’s gearsmen. As for the reptilian monster, it couldn’t be anything but a dragon; its black scales seemed made of polished obsidian and its eyes burned like eldritch rubies in a dark night.

The photo in itself wasn’t so intimidating, but the implications worried Basil greatly. Although he could barely see the shoreline in the background, the Tamer immediately recognized it.

“This photo was taken by a frigate near Varna in the Incursion’s first hours,” General Leblanc explained. “According to our sources, the local portal opened into a Unity-led world. They jammed our long-distance communications with eastern Europe.”

The Unity had invaded Bulgaria.

Basil stared at the photo for a few seconds before quickly reaching a decision. He returned the photo to General Leblanc and offered him a short nod.

“General,” he said. “I’ve done my best to help your country... but now mine is calling.”

“And you can count on our support to protect it,” General Leblanc replied with a warm smile. “If even a tenth of your people are like you, then I pity the Unity. They do not know what they have stepped into.”

No, they did not.

“Shellgirl!” Basil shouted from the edge of the crater. “Shellgirl!”

“Yes, partner?!” his teammate replied from atop her pile of gold.

“Pack the loot, we’re skipping town today!”

Saint George would have his tribute.

Chapter 42: Man vs Journey

The Bohens left Paris like a modern Western's ending: by preparing to ride into the sunset with a giant campervan full of guns.

Basil had to admit he felt an unmistakable sense of enjoyment at seeing one of Apollyon's cannons topping his Steamobile in place of the destroyed howitzer. Parts of the Horseman's exoskeleton reinforced the vehicle's shielding.

It was deliciously ironic. After destroying the Bohens' former home, Apollyon had become part of the new one.

"We've set up a rookery for Garud and a vivarium for Ananta on the upper floors," Basil told Kalki after giving a brief tour of the Steamobile. "You'll have your own guest room, but it's a bit cramped."

"It is fine, my friend," Kalki replied. "I usually sit and meditate instead of sleeping, so space is of little concern to me. Though I admit I would prefer to sleep in the wild."

"You truly are a hippie," Basil mused. "You can also use the greenhouse, if you want."

"I might." Kalki's hand brushed against the Steamobile's metal walls. "All this steel makes me uncomfortable. I can feel the pain that went into forging it."

Sometimes, Basil forgot that his vehicle started as a conquering dragon's property. The Bohens had once crossed paths with elves enslaved by the Unity; some probably perished building Steamslime's shell.

"It will go away with time," Basil told Kalki. "If we spend years making good memories, eventually they will drown out the bad ones."

“The journey ahead should offer us many opportunities for it.” Kalki nodded in assent. “Have you chosen an itinerary yet?”

“I have.” Neria had helped provide maps of post-apocalyptic Europe, including the location of safe zones and more hostile ones. “We’ll travel to Bulgaria by going through Germany, Austria, Hungary, and then Romania. The first two are mostly under human control, but the latter two will make for a dangerous trip. Afterward, we’ll follow the Black and Aegean Seas until we reach Athens.”

Considering it had taken the party many weeks to travel from Bordeaux to Paris, Basil expected this particular journey across Europe to last months. He missed the days when a plane trip would let him move from Sofia to Paris in hours. Sky monsters made that impossible nowadays.

“I’m sorry,” Basil apologized to Kalki. “I know you would rather us move to Athens immediately to rescue your girlfriend.”

“I do not mind making a stop on the way,” Kalki replied calmly. “You have freed me from my prison and agreed to help me save my beloved. I would be ungrateful not to assist you in your own quest.”

“Thank you, my...” Basil stopped as he searched for the right word. “My...”

“My god?” Kalki joked. “I jest.”

“My friend,” Basil decided. “Thank you, my friend.”

“Was that so difficult to say?” Kalki teased him.

Yes, it was. Ignoring the godhood, Kalki was a goddamn hippie. Accepting him as a friend carried heavy social implications, a burden that Basil would have to bear for the rest of his life.

"I'm not good at the mushy-mushy stuff," Basil admitted.

"You're getting better at it," Kalki replied kindly. "You are an entirely different person from the man I met in the southern marshes. Kinder, more open with his feelings... more charming too."

"Are you flirting with me?" Basil joked. "We're both taken."

"I say things as they are," Kalki replied, though his smile faltered a little. "Do not let Vasi go, Basil. You would regret it for the rest of your life."

And he was probably right.

The duo walked outside the Steamobile, where everyone was getting ready to leave. Kalki's monster allies helped Buggy and Shellgirl store the last supplies; Neria and Zachariel offered magical scrolls to Vasi; and General Leblanc had an escort of soldiers surround Benjamin Leroy, who stared at Kalki with a strange look.

Plato, that lazy cat, rested on Rosemarine's back while the tropidrake hummed a new tune Kalki had taught her. She intended to sing while carrying the Steamobile across the land, as she had done on the way to Paris..

"Are you certain you do not wish for a larger escort?" Neria asked with worry. "I know you can take care of yourself, but..."

"It's all right," Basil said, patting Kalki on the back. "He's in good hands."

"The greater a convoy, the slower it is," General Leblanc said. "When moving quickly, it is better to travel light to avoid ambushes."

A wise counsel not all armies understood.

The old military leader smiled at Basil's group. "Nor do I believe numbers would make a difference. This party probably has the highest level in all of western Europe.."

"Meow, that's right," Plato boasted as he stretched his back. "We're your gods now. Bring us your virgins, and your cat food."

Leroy crossed his arms and remained sullenly silent.

"Yo Zach, would you be open to a joint venture?" Shellgirl asked the angel. "We open a new church, fifty-fifty on donations."

"I will pass," the angel said politely. "I'm under exclusive contract with the heavens above, and the penalties include bolts of divine retribution."

"We'll stay in contact through the Logs," Neria promised as she shook Basil's hand. "We'll keep sending supplies through the Guild Inventory."

"We'll build teleporting Lairs wherever we can," Basil replied. "And claim any dungeon we find."

"Many still remain," Leroy said, his voice barely audible. The man seemed a bit stabler and calmer than a few days ago, and he spent more time in his humanoid, batlike form than his shadowy one; but he often nervously fidgeted in place when he thought no one was looking. He was on a good path to mental recovery... but he still had a long way to go. "Most will be under a Faction's control now. The Unity, the Apocalypse Force... my remaining colleagues. None will surrender without a fight. And all of them..."

Leroy glanced at Kalki.

"All will come for him," he warned. "They will hunt you down."

“Nothing unexpected,” Vasi said with a shrug. “We’re getting used to ambushes.”

“You shouldn’t. Tamura was boastful and Hypathia was a fool, but Ashok is cut from a different cloth. With him, it’s a fight to the death. As for Maxwell...” Leroy looked away. “You have seen what he is. With the essences, they can track you anywhere.”

Basil nodded grimly. While he was confident in his abilities, the warning hadn’t fallen on deaf ears. Maxwell and Ashok could potentially attack the group at any point. They could never let their guard down.

“Do you have any idea where Maxwell might be?” Neria questioned him. “We know Ashok is in the city of Athens, but his master could be anywhere.”

“Malta. He will be in Malta.” Leroy folded his arms. “Our European HQ was located in La Valletta for tax and infrastructure purposes.”

“Does Dismaker Labs’ list of crimes involve tax dodging too?” Basil asked with a groan. “You people know no shame.”

“It was legal,” Leroy said with a shrug. “And Maxwell paid his taxes on time. Fiscal evasion is the kind of activity that brings government attention, and he didn’t want that.”

“Why would he be there?” Neria asked. “Did you keep important infrastructure on the island?”

“Yes,” Leroy confirmed. “We set up a data center with more processing power than you can fathom. Like my Naraka, it’s one of the hubs in the neurotower network.”

“We will send troops to Malta to investigate then,” General Leblanc decided. “We now have the resources to project power across the Mediterranean Sea.”

“Please give us a call if you can confirm Maxwell’s location,” Basil asked, his jaw clenching. “We owe him a reckoning.”

“So do we.” General Leblanc held Basil’s gaze. “Before you leave, young man, there is something I wish to give you.”

France’s leader grabbed at one of the many medals on his white military jacket; a five-pointed star bound to a red piece of cloth by a metal laurel crown. The golden visage of Marianne, the personification of France, occupied the center of the medal. The words ‘République Française’ formed a circle around her.

The System didn’t attribute magical properties to the decoration, but the general clearly cared for it. He stared at it with a nostalgic look, as if reminiscing about simpler times.

“A long-dead president gave me this a long time ago for serving my nation through difficult times,” General Leblanc told Basil. “There is no elected president or Grandmaster of the Legion d’Honneur to deliver this medal to you... so I’m going to do it myself.”

Basil straightened up almost instinctively as the general attached the medal to his scale and feather armor. The soldiers escorting the Steamobile, Neria Elissalde, lined up in a military salute.

“By the powers invested in me by the French state and in violation of proper protocol,” General Leblanc said, his voice heavy and solemn. “I hereby promote you to the rank of *Chevalier de la Légion d’Honneur* for your acts of bravery in the service of our nation.”

Basil held his breath as soldiers pointed their rifles at the sky and fired a shot loud enough to startle the rest of his party. Although he didn’t care much for rewards, he understood he was being honored; something doubly important since he was, at the end of the day, a foreigner in France. Basil knew such an award had been a rare occurrence even before the apocalypse.

“I’m...” Basil cleared his throat. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Then say nothing,” General Leblanc mused as he offered Basil a military salute. “Your acts have spoken more than your tongue ever could. You are a friend of France, now and forever; and no matter what happens from now, no matter how far you wander, you can always count on our support.”

Basil smiled as he returned the salute. The medal glittered on his chest. “Thank you for your trust, General,” he said, very much moved by the gesture. “You can always count on me.”

Congratulations, your faith, military expertise, and valor have been honored by a great nation. By earning these honors and reaching level 50, you have gained access to the prestigious [Warrior Saint] Fighter/Spellcaster hybrid class.

Warrior Saint: *A celebrated champion well-versed in the arts of war, combat tactics, and holy magic. STR (A), AGI (A), VIT (B), SKI (A), MAG (A), INT (C), CHA (A), LCK (A).*

Basil's eyes widened as he saw the notification. Him, a saint? That was a bit too much, even for him.

Still, although it wasn't the Paladin class... Warrior Saint was probably the next best thing.

With a final series of handshakes, Basil and his crew mounted the Steamobile for their journey. The Tamer mounted Rosemarine herself to test out his new abilities. He gave her a light tap on the back, and she dragged the vehicle away.

“Goodbye, sand!” Rosemarine said gleefully as she rode into the sunset. “You will not be missed!”

“I won't miss Paris either,” Basil said as he waved goodbye to General Leblanc, Neria, Leroy, Zachariel, and all the soldiers that fought by his side. He had the feeling he would see some again... but not all. “I might miss this country though.”

He wouldn't regret leaving though.

His homeland needed his help.

Blackcinders, Queen-ranked general of the Unity, admired power.

She breathed it, worshiped it. The Dragons of the Unity were the multiverse's supreme lifeform. They could adapt to any environment while in the egg, whether in abject cold or extreme heat. Blackcinders had been born in the void between stars, with scales of black steel and solar sail wings. Her crimson eyes could see magnetism and gravity currents. Her claws could tear through a battleship's armor and her breath burned hotter than plasma.

Hard-won levels had only made her deadlier.

Blackcinders stood at the apex of her faction's hierarchy, second only to the Grandmaster herself as commander of the Unity's armies. Countless millions toiled in her shadows and fulfilled her orders. Many would have grown arrogant in her position, but not Blackcinders. A single look through her headquarters' windows disabused her.

Her moon throne was a facility of stone and steel vast enough to house millions, yet it was nothing but an outpost. The true prize stared at her from beyond her window of reinforced nanoglass: the blue planet known as Earth. An insignificant ball of mud populated by an inferior species and infested with lesser breeds of monsters... yet a place that could very well decide the Unity's fate.

For somewhere on this insignificant planet, a Horseman of the Apocalypse Force had fallen.

Blackcinders feared nothing except the Grandmaster's displeasure. Yet even she wouldn't have dueled one of the Apocalypse Force's leaders without extensive preparations, for they rivaled

her in power. That was why she had had a primitive space station booby-trapped into a projectile meant to slay Apollyon the moment he stepped into this reality. Some battles were simply too important to be left to chance.

Apollyon countered her scheme, only to die in battle anyway.

The circumstances still evaded Blackcinders for now, but the result remained the same: underleveled primates had somehow managed to defeat a foe Blackcinders would have almost called a peer. Apollyon had all the power in the world, and yet he had failed.

Blackcinders would not grow so complacent. She would fight every battle as if it were the last, never lowering her guard. The task ahead of her demanded nothing less than complete dedication.

A great war was being fought, and she intended to win it.

“General?” one of her mechanical minions asked. Blackcinders had fired all the humanoids of flesh and blood in rage after the Steamslime debacle. “The Grandmaster is calling on the secured holo-channel.”

“Open it.” Blackcinders respectfully crouched on her back legs as a hologram appeared before her. An illusory representation of Grandmaster Wyrde, supreme master of the Unity, materialized in the form of great silver wings and piercing blue eyes. “Grandmaster.”

“Greetings, General.” The Grandmaster’s voice was always soft and soothing, beaming with warmth. “My condolences for your loss. I have learned about Steamslime’s demise. His death is a loss for all of dragonkind.”

“Pity him not, Grandmaster.” Blackcinders growled in scorn. She didn’t feel sorrow, but shame for her spawn’s pitiful performance. “His incompetence shames me still.”

She had never thought much of Steamslime. Of all of her brood, he had been the most disappointing. A runt that couldn’t even fly. Yet when he petitioned his mother for a chance to

prove himself, Blackcinders had generously granted him governorship over the Electron Cluster. A minor post, but a chance nonetheless.

For a time, Steamslime surprised his mother. His discovery of Earth granted the Unity access to a new world teeming with potential minions and natural resources. But then he failed to establish a strong foothold and perished fighting local savages.

A failure to his last breath.

But this insult would not go unavenged. Pitiful as he might have been, Steamslime was *her* son. No son of apes could slay him and live to tell the tale; his very life was an insult, and only his death could cleanse Blackcinders' honor.

Basil Bohan. The name had been recorded in their System's Logs and by the Gearsmen that failed to defend her son. *I will remember you, human, and you shall learn that there is no flame hotter than a dragon's fury.*

"You should not speak of your son this way, my friend. He died a martyr for our cause." The Grandmaster let out a shrug. "But let us speak of more present matters. Report, General."

"Our strategy is working perfectly, Grandmaster," Blackcinders replied. "The Apocalypse Force is deploying troops on the ground while we complete the Lunar Cannon. We should be able to lure the Horsemen and blow them all from orbit... perhaps even the Maleking."

"We are taking an awful risk, General. I hope it will pay off. If the Maleking invades this planet before our weapon is fully operational..." The Grandmaster marked a short pause. "I will have no choice but to take matters into my own hands."

"I will see to it that you do not have to sully your claws, Grandmaster." Blackcinders nodded in submission. "I will not fail you as my son did."

The primates had no idea of what awaited them.

On a beach of sand facing an azure sea, a man-shaped creature enjoyed the fruits of his labor. Drinking a Martini cocktail in one hand, he watched on as the last of the Incursion rifts closed above him.

Millions had perished over the last week; more than in the first Incursion, but far less than he would have wanted. Benjamin's betrayal, however predictable, had thrown a wrench in his plans. The creature was unhappy, unsatisfied.

But for someone like him, who had lived to watch empires rise and fall, patience had become less than a virtue and more of a part of himself. The second Incursion had been a bust, but it had set the stage for the third; the one where the big players would enter this planet and fight for supremacy.

He cared not who would live or die, or even who would win. All that mattered to him was that the blood kept flowing. Like a tick, he would grow fat on the blood and harvest his reward. He would feed and hoard until the fourth and last Incursion.

And then he would leave for a new world, to repeat the process again. As he had done countless times before.

"Two more to go," Anton Maxwell mused. "And then this play will come to an end."

The stage was set.

All he had to do was to wait for someone to set it on fire.

In the void between worlds, a fiend awoke in the deepest darkness.

One of the four had fallen.

It was not unusual. None of his Horsemen were the originals. Some had lasted a fortnight and others a century, but the eternal cycle of conflict demanded sacrifices. The weak were purged and the strong took their place.

The Maleking cared nothing for those who proclaimed themselves his servants. A creature like him had no need for lackeys or worshipers. He offered them guidance and let them share in his vision, but he granted neither punishment nor protection. In time, they too would be slain.

It was simply the nature of things. When two people met, they had to fight to determine who among them was the strongest. They might form groups of like-minded individuals to face common foes, but in time even allies had to fight for supremacy. Power progression was a constant process; there was always a higher level to reach, a new threshold to cross.

It was his duty to rise ever higher... or become a sacrifice, should he meet his end at the hands of a stronger foe. So far none had proved a true challenge, but he was not arrogant enough to believe himself invincible nor destined for victory. He didn't believe in fate or destiny; only in strength.

He knew the spiral of death could only end one way. Four would become two, and then one. Life was a battle where there could only be one winner. Perhaps it would be him... or maybe someone else. Whatever the case, the result would be the same.

On the last day of the cosmos, only one being would stand atop the throne of countless corpses. They would face an empty, desolate universe and bask in the joy of victory. They

would have proved themselves the strongest, the apex of the multiverse. They would say two words, two very simple words that would spell the end of the competition.

“I win,” the Maleking whispered.

The gate to the throne of Overgod would open soon.

He couldn't wait for that day.

End of Arc V.

Author Notes

And this concludes the second volume of Apocalypse Tamer. Special thanks to Daniel Zogbi for his wise counsel during the writing of this novel.

When I started writing Apocalypse Tamer, I had two major goals in mind: tying together my various LitRPG series (*Kairos: A Greek Myth LitRPG*, *Vainqueur the Dragon*, *Never Die Twice*) into a cohesive setting; and exploring a post-apocalyptic Europe, which is usually forgotten by the genre in favor of the United States. With the France arc finished, the next volume will focus on a trip across Europe and less explored countries like charming Bulgaria or Malta.

The focus of this volume was the System's constant escalation and Basil learning to mature as a person; after spending the first volume more or less in denial about the apocalypse, he now realizes he can't protect himself nor his party without going on the offensive. The losses of party members early reminds him that the apocalypse isn't a game and that he has to treat it with the seriousness it deserves. His ongoing character development is symbolized by his change in classes; from a self-centered Berserker to a true Tamer and knight defending the innocent from harm. Basil also starts to open up more to others, as shown by his relationship with Vasi.

So how do we proceed from here? Well, volume III will probably conclude the saga, but it might be the longest of them yet. Major faction leaders such as the Horsemen of the Apocalypse Force and the Unity's Dragonlords will take center stage as the competition for Overgod heats up. In the end, there can only be one.

In any case, I hope you enjoyed this volume and I hope to see you on the next one.

Best regards,

Voidy.

The Party's Stats

Name	Basil Jean-François Bohén
Type	Humanoid
Faction	Homeowner Revenge Association (The Bohens)
EXP	1,538,600/1,600,000

Immune	Resist	Weak
N/A	Physical, Corrosion, Metal, Wood, Fire, Water, Ailments.	Manslayer, Soul, Wind, Lightning, Light.
Level	Health Points	Special Points
52 (Tamer 20; Alchemist 1; Runesmith 9; Technomancer 3; Deathknight of the Sepulcher 10; Dragonknight 9)	2180	955

Strength	Agility	Vitality	Skill
66	61	48	43
Magic	Intelligence	Charisma	Luck
46	45	59	41

Physical	Mind	Soul	Corrosion	Metal	Wood	Life	Support	Ailment
Strong	-	Weak	Strong	Strong	Strong	-	-	Strong
Fire	Water	Earth	Wind	Frost	Lightning	Light	Darkness	Mythic
Strong	Strong	-	Weak	-	Weak	Weak	-	-

Passive Perks	Active Perks
Monster Charmer III	Runestorm I
Runecraft	Magic-Eater I

Alchemy I	Magitek
Monster Lair II	Spell: Fire Rune
Runic II	Spell: Ice Rune
Duty Beyond Death	Fuel Technology
Monster Insight	Monster Cure II
All for One	One for All II
Soulbound Weapon	Spell: Venomous Rune
Lethal Vigil	Spell: Corrosive Rune
Dragoon I	Spell: Savage Rune
Dragon Rider I	Death's Banner II
Dragonbane I	Elemental Orb
Double Jump I	Dragonbreath I

Alchemy I (Passive): you can craft alchemy items without need of a recipe and create your own through experimentations. The list of items you can craft includes potions, alchemy tools, mutagens, poisons and bombs.

Monster Charmer III (Passive): You can recruit monsters into your [Party]. The monster's level must be equal or below yours to join, and they cannot outlevel you afterward. Monsters in your party gain a 20% boost to stat growth on level-up, but will also die if your HP hits 0. Recruited monsters cannot leave your party unless you allow them to. You automatically form a party with an original partner selected by the Trimurti System. You can unlock the hidden potential of a recruited monster, granting them an additional Perk they cannot access in the wild. Monsters will keep these additional abilities even if you kick them out of your party. When monsters reach the level needed to undergo metamorphosis, they will now choose between multiple options rather than having one forced upon them. You must validate the choice as their Tamer.

Monster Lair II (Passive): you can select a hideout or dungeon under your control as your personal Lair. Lairs offer benefits based on your level. You can select and improve your Lair by clicking on Status in your menu. Your monsters can now create Lairs of their own; however, they must have undergone a metamorphosis at least once. Your monsters will keep this ability and their lair even if they leave your party.

Runic II (Passive): you can now learn and cast [Runic] Spells up to Tier II. If you gain the ability to cast [Runic] Spells from other classes or Perks, the Tiers stack together.

Monster Insight (Passive): you can passively glean information from monsters by observing them closely, including their elemental affinities and useful trivia. Your chances of analyzing a monster depend on your Intelligence, their level, and the effect of secondary Perks.

All for One (Passive): Tamer class Capstone. You have proven that the bond uniting you to your monsters is unbreakable. All buffs and beneficial status effects affecting you apply to your monsters; however, status ailments and debuffs also carry over. [All for One] applies to your entire Guild.

Soulbound Weapon (Passive): Select a weapon in which you have an advanced or perfect proficiency. This weapon will be bound to you, allowing you to teleport it to your hand at will as long as you both remain on the same world; it will also gain new abilities and improve in quality as you progress into the Deathknight of the Sepulchre class. You can only select one Soulbound Weapon and cannot select a new one until the first is destroyed beyond repair.

Lethal Vigil (Passive): Nothing will disturb your vigil. You are immune to all status ailments that would either impede your ability to freely choose your actions (such as [Berserk], [Madness], [Charm]...) or physically acting at all (such as [Paralysis], [Sleep], [Petrification]...). Self-inflicted ailments, such as those activated by your Perks or equipment, will still affect you.

Dragoon I (Passive): you gain advanced proficiency with Swords, Spears and Shields (x2 damage, +10% Crit).

Dragon Rider I (Passive): you gain advanced proficiency in riding creatures, but only those with the [Dragon] Type (+10% damage to attacks when mounted, you cannot be dismounted by force unless you suffer a Critical Hit or Supereffective attack, and you can both direct your mount and attack without splitting your attention).

Dragonbane I (Passive): all your attacks with weapons in which you have a Medium, Advanced or Perfect proficiency will inflict Dragonslayer damage supereffective against Dragon types (x3 damage).

Double Jump I (Passive): not only is the distance of your jumps and leaps increased, but you can make a second one while airborne. Additionally, the damage of your Spear weapons is doubled while in the air.

Duty Beyond Death (Passive): not even death will stop you from fulfilling your duty. When your health points hit 0, you do not immediately die. Instead you gain the [Invincibility] status for 5 minutes, during which you cannot take any damage, nor suffer from debuffs and status ailments. However, you cannot regain HP and once the effect ends, so will your life. You also cannot be turned into an [Undead] type by any means, even willingly.

Runecraft (Passive): you can now incorporate runes to your crafting process, permanently empowering your equipment with their additional effects.

- *Active Perks*

Magitek (Active): You can use the 'refine' option on a technological device to forge a rune on a selected item. The device must have an unused effect spot and you must know a rune spell to assign to it. This ability can apply to pieces of technology from forged tools to machines and vehicles, but cannot work on Consumables, Lairs, or Key Items.

Fuel Technology (Active): you can spend Special Points to power machinery instead of the normal fuel. The Special Points consumption rate is unique to each device.

Monster Cure II (Active): 50 SP, [Support], [Life]. The tamer heals a medium amount of HP for all monster members of his party (HP recovered: (Tamer Levels+MAG) x 2); the Tamer and other Players do not benefit from the healing, but the effect applies regardless of distance. Additionally, the spell will heal status ailments affecting the targets. This replaces Monster Cure I.

One for All II (Active): if you are a party leader, you can teleport your party back to your Lair. Additionally, you can spend 1 SP x Level of a tamed monster to summon them at your current location; this ability works even if you have no Lair selected, but you can only summon one ally at once. You can now summon all monsters in your party at once instead of one at a time, though you must pay 1 SP x monster for each individual you are trying to summon. Neither teleportation effect works in dungeons or magically warded areas, and they cannot cross dimensions.

Death's Banner II (Active): [Support], 10 SP per minute. Your faith empowers your party members, granting them the following benefits as long as they benefit from [Death's Banner II]: All their attacks gain the [Deadslayer] effect (x3 damage against Undead types); immunity to the [Terror], [Zombie], and [Insta-Death] ailments; they do not take damage from ailments such as

[Poison], though it doesn't cure them of it; and their critical hits will inflict [Insta-Death] on the victims. This replaces [Death's Banner I].

Elemental Orb (Active): Variable element, 60 SP. You can throw a deadly orb of elemental energy from your hand; you can choose the elemental affinity of the orb, but it must be an element in which you have a Strong affinity (Base damage 130 of the selected element). This power is the equivalent of a Tier VI Spell.

Dragonbreath I (Active): select an element in which you have a strong affinity. You gain a weak breath attack (60 base damage) of that element which you can use at will; the breath will also pierce through Resistance. Element selected: Corrosion.

Runestorm I (Active): [Support] 10 SP. You can empower any melee weapon you wield (such as swords, axes or daggers) with an elemental infusion for five minutes, changing the damage Type to the chosen element. Available elements: [Fire], [Wind], [Earth], [Water], [Frost] and [Lightning].

Magic-Eater I (Active): When you have Runestorm active on a weapon, you can redirect any spell of the channeled element within twenty meters to your weapon, absorb it, and regain an amount of SP proportional to the spell's power. You can only redirect Spells, and not Active Perks or standard attacks.

- Spells

Spell: Fire Rune: Runic, 10 SP, [Fire]. Empowers one of your weapons with the power of flames, inflicting an additional 20% [Fire] damage for 5 minutes. Multiple applications of [Fire Rune] do not stack and the weapon loses its properties if you no longer wield it.

Spell: Ice Rune: Runic, 10 SP, [Frost]. Empowers one of your weapons with the power of ice, inflicting an additional 20% [Frost] damage for 5 minutes. Multiple applications of [Ice Rune] do not stack and the weapon loses its properties if you no longer wield it.

Spell: Corrosive Rune: Runic, 20 SP, [Corrosion]. Empowers one of your weapons with the power of corrosion, inflicting an additional 20% [Corrosion] damage for 5 minutes. Multiple applications of [Corrosive Rune] do not stack and the weapon loses its properties if you no longer wield it.

Spell: Venomous Rune: Runic, 20 SP, [Ailment]. Empowers one of your weapons with the power of poison, inflicting an additional 20% [Poison] chance for 5 minutes. Multiple applications of [Venomous Rune] do not stack and the weapon loses its properties if you no longer wield it.

Spell: Savage Rune: Runic, 20 SP, [Support]. Empowers one of your weapons with savage power, increasing its chances of inflicting a critical hit by 20% for five minutes; the Berserker's favorite tool. Multiple applications of [Savage Rune] do not stack and the weapon loses its properties if you no longer wield it.

Name	Plato (Rakshasa Kitten)
Type	Beast/Demon
Faction	Homeowner Revenge Association (The Bohens)

Experience	1,538,600/1,600,000
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Immune	Resist	Weak
All illusion effects, Mind.	Soul, Wind, Wood, Darkness, Mythic, Ailments.	Beastslayer, Demonslayer, Corrosion, Metal.
Level	Health Points	Special Points
52	2030	990

Strength	Agility	Vitality	Skill
30 (C+20%)	71 (A+20%)	32 (C+20%)	71 (A+20%)
Magic	Intelligence	Charisma	Luck
52 (B+20%)	35 (C+20%)	41 (C+20%)	70 (A+20%)

Physical	Mind	Soul	Corrosion	Metal	Wood	Life	Support	Ailment
-	Strong	Strong	Weak	Weak	Strong	-	Strong	Strong
Fire	Water	Earth	Wind	Frost	Lightning	Light	Darkness	Mythic
-	-	-	Strong	-	-	-	Strong	Strong

Passive Perks	Active Perks
Sharp Claws	Focus Up
Somnonapper	Windfang
Birdbane	Catnapping
Nine Lives	N/A
Swordsmanship I	N/A
Powerful Dao	N/A
Manbane	N/A

Illusionist IV	N/A
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Personal Perks:

- **Sharp Claws:** Plato's claws inflict SKI-based damage. He gains advanced proficiency with unarmed attacks, fangs and claws (x2 damage, +10 Crit).
- **Somnonapper:** while under a [Sleep] effect, Plato recovers HP as if he benefited from the [Regen] positive ailment. Additionally, his body will act on its own to dodge attacks and retaliate.
- **Birdbane:** Plato's attacks with natural weapons inflict [Birdslayer] damage (x3 damage against [Avian] Types).
- **Nine Lives:** when Plato would die, he instead benefits from an [Auto-Revive] effect bringing him back to life at critical health; this also purges Plato of ailments. Plato can be revived eight times before the Perk becomes inactive. 6/9
- **Swordsmanship I:** medium proficiency with swords (x1,5 damage).
- **Powerful Dao:** Plato can run on vertical structures, and even ceiling so long as he remains in motion. Additionally, the length of his jumps is doubled.
- **Manbane:** Plato's attacks with natural weapons inflict [Manslayer] damage (x3 damage against [Humanoid] Types).
- **Illusionist IV:** The Rakshasa's mastery of illusions transcends schools of magic. Plato can learn and cast spells up to Tier IV from any school of magic, but only illusion-related spells.

Active Perks:

- **Focus Up:** 30 SP, [Support]. Buffs Luck, Skill, and critical hit rates for five minutes.
- **Windfang:** 60 SP, [Wind], Technique. Plato can unleash a sharp blade of wind with any bladed weapon, claws and fangs included; proficiency bonuses apply depending on the weapon used (base [Wind] damage 100, +30% crit).
- **Catnapping:** 50 SP, [Support]. Plato can designate a foe within his line of sight. On a successful luck check, all the enemy's buffs are transferred to Plato as if they had been cast on him in the first place.

Name	Bugsy Alphonse Venture (Centimagma)
Type	Bug/Elemental
Faction	Homeowner Revenge Association (The Bohens)
Experience	1,538,600/1,600,000

Immune	Resist	Weak
Fire	Physical, Corrosion, Ailments, Wood, Earth	Buslayer, Elementslayer, Mind, Frost, Water, Wind
Level	Health Points	Special Points
52	2270	520

Strength	Agility	Vitality	Skill
70	48	70	42

(B+20%)	(C+20%)	(B+20%)	(C+20%)
Magic	Intelligence	Charisma	Luck
13 (E+20%)	27 (D+20%)	32 (D+20%)	36 (D+20%)

Physical	Mind	Soul	Corrosion	Metal	Wood	Life	Support	Ailment
Strong	Weak	-	Strong	-	Strong	-	-	Strong
Fire	Water	Earth	Wind	Frost	Lightning	Light	Darkness	Mythic
Strong	Weak	Strong	Weak	Weak	-	-	-	-

Passive Perks	Active Perks
Poisoned Fangs	Agility Up
Carapace	Firebreath
Tremorsense	N/A

Personal Perks:

- **Poisoned Fangs:** you treat fangs and jaw-enhancing weapons as if you had medium proficiency with them (x1.5 damage). Additionally, your saliva may inflict the [Poison] ailment on contact.
- **Carapace:** the damage you take from super effective hits is reduced from x3 to x2.
- **Tremorsense:** increases accuracy by 30 percent. Though you can suffer from the [Blind] ailment, you ignore the ailment's negative effects.

Active Perks:

- **Agility Up:** 10 SP, [Support]. Buff your agility for five minutes.
- **Firebreath:** 40 SP, [Fire]. Unleashes a fiery breath (base power 90 [Fire]).

Name	Rosemarine Eglantine de la Barthe (Tropidrake)
Type	Plant/Dragon
Faction	Homeowner Revenge Association (The Bohens)
Experience	1,538,600/1,600,000

Immune	Resist	Weak
N/A	Fire, Wood, Life, Water, Earth, Light.	Plantslayer, Dragonslayer, Corrosion, Metal, Frost, Lightning, Darkness.
Level	Health Points	Special Points
52	4560	1265

Strength	Agility	Vitality	Skill
71 (A+20%)	47 (C+20%)	61 (B+20%)	49 (C+20%)
Magic	Intelligence	Charisma	Luck
64 (B+20%)	22 (D+20%)	47 (C+20%)	61 (B+20%)

Physical	Mind	Soul	Corrosion	Metal	Wood	Life	Support	Ailment
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-	-	-	Weak	Weak	Strong	Strong	Strong	-
Fire	Water	Earth	Wind	Frost	Lightning	Light	Darkness	Mythic
Strong	Strong	Strong	-	Weak	Weak	Strong	Weak	-

Passive Perks	Active Perks
Paralyzing Touch	Sunbath
Bugcatcher	Fire Seed
Sunflower	Sunbeam
Harvest (Tropidrake)	

Passive Perks:

- **Paralyzing Touch:** Rosemarine treats fangs, jaw-enhancing weapons and claws as if you had advanced proficiency with them (x2 damage, +10%). Additionally, Rosemarine's bite and claw attacks may inflict the [Paralysis] ailment on contact.
- **Bugcatcher:** natural attacks have the [Bugslayer] effect.
- **Sunflower:** when exposed to direct Sunlight, Rosemarine benefits from a HP and SP Regen Buff (recovers 1/16th of full HP/SP per minute). Her Vitality and Magic are also buffed.

- **Harvest (Tropidrake):** Rosemarine produces fruits like any tree. The quality of her Tropidrake Fruits, and the harvest length, depends on her general health and season.

Active Perks:

- **Fire Seed:** 60 SP, [Life], [Fire], [Wood]. Rosemarine can spawn a Fire Seed level 2 Monster from her body. Fire Seeds are weak creatures who can self-detonate on impact to inflict [Fire] damage. Rosemarine cannot use Fire Seed if she suffers from a Body Ailment.

- **Sunbath:** 40 SP, [Life], [Light]. Regenerates HP to all allies within a ten meters radius; the amount of HP healed increases with luminosity.

- **Sunbeam:** 80 SP, [Fire], [Light]. Gathers light and then unleashes a powerful beam of fire (base power 150, half [Fire] half [Light]). The charging time depends on the ambient luminosity and has a low chance of inflicting [Blind]. Rosemarine becomes [stunned] for 1 minute if hit by a supereffective hit while charging her breath.

Name	Shellgirl (Mimic Booty)
Type	Aquatic/Slime
Faction	Homeowner Revenge Association (The Bohens)
Experience	1,538,600/1,600,000

Immune	Resist	Weak
Water.	Physical, Frost, Darkness,	Aquaslayer, Slimeslayer, Corrosion, Metal, Fire,

	Mind, all ailments.	Lightning.
Level	Health Points	Special Points
52	1890	960

Strength	Agility	Vitality	Skill
50 (C+20%)	29 (C+20%)	76 (A+20%)	34 (D+20%)
Magic	Intelligence	Charisma	Luck
51 (C+20%)	47 (C+20%)	50 (B+20%)	54 (B+20%)

Physical	Mind	Soul	Corrosion	Metal	Wood	Life	Support	Ailment
Strong	Strong	-	Weak	Weak	-	-	Strong	Strong
Fire	Water	Earth	Wind	Frost	Lightning	Light	Darkness	Mythic

Weak	Strong	-	-	Strong	Weak	-	Strong	-
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Passive Perks	Active Perks
Shelter+	Ice Bomb
Rainbow Shell Inventory	Rainmantle
Moneymaker	Discord Bounty
Slimeshift	Draw Aggro
	Motivate

Passive Perk:

- **Shelter +:** Shellgirl can retreat inside her shell to buff her Vitality and gain a 50 percent damage reduction. However, this also debuffs her Agility.
- **Moneymaker:** increases chances of drops if a monster is killed within twenty meters.
- **Rainbow Shell Inventory:** Shellgirl can stock up to one item per level inside her shell. Additionally, she can summon her shell to her side at will. Damaging the shell will damage Shellgirl herself.
- **Slimeshift:** Shellgirl can modify her slime appearance as she wishes, though she cannot violate conservation of mass.

Active Perks:

- **Ice Bomb:** [Frost], 30 SP. Throws a shrapnel made of ice at a target with her tentacle-barrels; the bomb inflicts [Frost] damage (base power 70) on impact and sends shrapnels hitting close enemies for additional [Frost] damage (base power 10).
- **Rainmantle:** [Water], [Life]. 30 SP. Shellgirl surrounds herself with a mantle of healing water for five minutes. She recovers 1/16 of your HP per minute, with the additional effect of buffing her agility under the [Rain] or on a water surface.
- **Discord Bounty:** [Mind], [Ailment], 60 SP. Shellgirl creates an illusion presenting her shell as a desirable bounty. Enemies seeing the shell have a small change of suffering from the [Madness] ailment for 5 minutes and fight over the booty.
- **Draw Aggro:** [Mind], [Ailment], 30 SP. Shellgirl infuriates a foe, inflicting the [Berserk] ailment for five minutes. The target becomes focused on Shellgirl at the exclusion of any other target.
- **Motivate:** [Support], 30 SP. Shellgirl motivates an ally, buffing their accuracy and chances of inflicting critical hits for five minutes.

Name	Vasilisa Yaga (Night Hag)
Type	Demon/Fairy
Faction	Homeowner Revenge Association (The Bohens)
Experience	1,538,600/1,600,000

Immune	Resist	Weak
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Sleep ailment, Nightmare ailment.	Mind, Soul, Corrosion, Wood, Fire, Frost, Darkness, Mythic, all Ailments.	Demonlayer, Fairyslayer, Physical, Metal, Light.
Level	Health Points	Special Points
52	1630	2350

Strength	Agility	Vitality	Skill
37 (C+20%)	43 (C+20%)	41 (C+20%)	42 (C+20%)
Magic	Intelligence	Charisma	Luck
71 (A+20%)	61 (B+20%)	58 (B+20%)	45 (C+20%)

Physical	Mind	Soul	Corrosion	Metal	Wood	Life	Support	Ailment
Weak	Strong	Strong	Strong	Weak	Strong	-	-	Strong

Fire	Water	Earth	Wind	Frost	Lightning	Light	Darkness	Mythic
Strong	-	-	-	Strong	-	Weak	Strong	Strong

Passive Perks	Active Perks
Yaga Witchcraft IV	Broomstick
Witch Brew	Witch Kiss
Magical Prodigy	Dreamrider
Hag Coven	Spell: Ember
Night Terror	Spell: Sleep
	Spell: Dreamthief
	Spell: Ice Storm
	Spell: Muspel flame
	Spell: Lesser Conjuraton

	Spell: Hasten
	Spell: Glamor
	Spell: Shadowspikes

Passive Perks:

- **Yaga Witchcraft IV:** As a daughter of Baba Yaga and experienced hag, Vasi can learn spells up to Tier IV from the following schools of magic: *Witchcraft, Thaumaturgy, Ritualism, Shamanism, Chronomancy, Necromancy.*
- **Witch Brew:** Vasi can craft potions, drinks and witch items without need of a recipe and create her own through experimentation.
- **Magical Prodigy:** as the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter, Vasi gains twice more SP gained from mental stats than normal. Her chances of successfully learning a new spell from tutors and spellbooks are doubled.
- **Hag Coven:** if Vasi is in a party that includes at least two other members capable of casting Witchcraft Spells, whether Players or Monsters, then they can form a coven. A coven's members can learn and cast unique Witchcraft spells, receive a +10% bonus to crafting potions and magical items per coven member, and can cast spells at half the SP cost. As the Tamer who awakened Vasilina's Perk, Basil can fit in as a placeholder in her coven even if he cannot cast Witchcraft spells.
- **Night Terror:** as a Night Hag, Vasi passively the [Nightmare] ailment (1/16th HP damage per minute) on anyone suffering from the [Sleep] ailment within twenty meters. She can turn off this ability at will.

Active Perk:

- **Broomstick:** 10 SP per minute of flight. Vasi can fly on any broom so long as she has magic to power it.

- **Witch Kiss:** 10 SP, tries to [Charm] a single target by kissing them. The effectiveness depends on the charisma difference between Vasi and the target. The perk fails on female or genderless targets.
- **Dreamrider:** Vasi can at will enter the dreams of any sleeping individual within twenty meters. When she uses this ability, her body is comatose.
- **Spell: Ember:** Tier I Thaumaturgy, 10 SP, [Fire]. You can breathe embers at someone within ten feet (base damage 30, [Fire]).
- **Spell: Sleep:** Tier I Thaumaturgy, 10 SP, [Ailment]. Tries to force a single target to sleep.
- **Spell: Dreamthief:** Tier I Witchcraft, 10 SP, [Soul]. You can harvest a target's dreams or your own in the form of smoke; the victim must suffer from [Sleep] first. The dream can be used as crafting material or components for specific spells.
- **Spell: Ice Storm:** Tier V Thaumaturgy, 50 SP, [Frost]. Unleashes a powerful storm of ice shards on multiple targets (base power 100 [Frost] damage).
- **Spell: Muspelflame:** Tier V Thaumaturgy, 50 SP, [Fire]. Unleashes a mighty burst of fire at a single target (base power 120 [Fire]).
- **Spell: Lesser Conjunction:** Tier II Ritual, 20 SP, [Soul], [Mythic]. Summons an otherworldly creature such as an angel or demon, but grants the summoner no power over the conjured entity. The Ritual must to be cast in a place of relevance to the summoned entity and demands a powerful magical focus; the creature contacted depends on these two elements. The summoned creature can refuse the summoning and may be of a higher level than the summoner's, but not higher than the world's Incursion Level Limit.
- **Spell: Hasten:** Tier IV Chronomancy, 40 SP, [Support]. Applies the [Haste] buff to one ally within close reach (doubles speed) for one minute.
- **Spell: Glamor:** Tier III Witchcraft, 30 SP, [Support]. Transforms you into a humanoid creature of your choice for thirty minutes. This is an illusion effect and does not actually change the body.
- **Spell: Shadowspikes:** Tier IV Thaumaturgy, 40 SP, [Darkness]. Creates powerful dark spikes within ten meters of the casting point (max range twenty meters) (base power 75, [Darkness] damage).

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