



Apocalypse Tamer

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Chapter 1: Man vs Wild

When Basil Bohem woke up, the world had gone mad.

The day had started like any other: with Plato waking him up at eleven o'clock by howling like a condemned man on a pyre. The black Bombay cat never made a sound unless he was hungry; in which case, he became even louder than a dog.

"Enough, you'll get your breakfast." Basil grumbled, his Nintendo Switch occupying the cushion right next to his face. He always kept the device within arm's reach, to play as soon as he woke up. "Two minutes."

Since he had never learned to count, Plato hopped on the blanket and kneaded his owner's back to make him prepare the breakfast faster.

"I should have gotten a ferret," Basil complained as he rose from his bed, his pet immediately following after him. "I'm starting to understand why some people eat cats."

There wouldn't be much to eat with Plato though. Basil still didn't understand how his pet managed to remain slim while spending eighteen hours sleeping and the rest eating.

Ugh, I got something in my eye, Basil realized as he noticed a red crux-shaped form at the very edge of his vision. Did he have dust in his eyes? He rubbed them to no avail and eventually gave up. *I'll go to the doc if it doesn't pass.*

After leaving his master bedroom behind, Basil moved to his well-stocked modern kitchen. His window gave him an

impeccable view of the stream bordering his house and the marshes beyond. Basil found it relaxing to cook behind the counter while watching nature outside, although the morning mist obscured the skies today.

"There, Plato, I'm buying your silence." Basil gave his cat a bowl of food and filled up a coffee cup for himself.

"Thanks, Basil," his cat answered before ravenously burying himself in his breakfast.

"You're welcome," Basil replied absentmindedly before freezing in place. He looked down at Plato, his coffee cup steaming on the kitchen counter.

His cat sensed something was wrong and looked up at his owner with his big yellow eyes. "What?" Plato asked with an all-too-human voice. "What is it?"

Am I hallucinating? Basil wondered. "Since when can you talk?"

"Uh, since I was born?"

Basil realized that he had asked the wrong question. "Since when can you speak *my* language?"

His cat squinted at him. "Wait, you didn't understand my meowing before?"

Basil frowned and grabbed Plato by the back of the neck. He didn't like that at all. "Assassin!" The cat shrieked as his owner checked him up. "Assassin!"

"I don't see any microphone," Basil muttered with incomprehension as he released his pet. "It doesn't look like a hidden camera prank."

"Of course not!" Plato growled. "Does it matter if you can understand me? I say it was about time you learned a sophisticated language!"

"And now that's just condescending." Basil pinched his own arm to wake himself up, but only hurt himself for his trouble. *It doesn't look like I'm dreaming*, he thought. Maybe he had finally gone mad from the isolation? Basil hadn't seen a fellow human for weeks. "Weird."

Plato wagged his tail. "Will you rub my belly at least?"

Basil settled on scratching his cat behind the ears, which he liked very much.

I'll go to the doc sometime soon, Basil decided as he put on some clothes and enjoyed a slow breakfast on his living room's sofa. The stuffed heads of boars, deers, and pikes decorated the wall above his chimney right next to an overpriced plasma screen and a picture of Vasil Levski. Most of the animal trophies belonged to the house's previous occupant, Old Man René, though the fish and the Levski picture were Basil's additions. They reminded him of his native Bulgaria, which he had left almost five years ago for France in search of better economic opportunities.

Which he didn't find.

Two fully stocked shelves faced each other near the entrance door, each holding a different library: one of books and the other of video games. An unused wood table stood between them like an inviolable frontier; the house had originally been built for a large family, but since Basil lived alone, he rarely made use of all the available amenities.

So good not to share with anyone, he thought. His previous lodging experience had involved sharing a flat with three

students, each of them poorer than the last. Basil still kept a sour memory of working his ass off late into the night to escape the rat race while his neighbors partied until morning. His hard work had paid off in the end, but he had sworn never to live through those times again.

Basil switched through the TV channels and grumbled when all of them turned out blue. Even Netflix didn't work. It didn't surprise Basil considering the area's poor internet coverage, but it still annoyed him. At least he had his Playstation 5 to fall back on.

Now if only that strange crux symbol in his eye didn't obscure his vision... Basil focused on it, trying to get whatever caused this mess out of his eye.

And then the crux expanded into a translucent screen covering his field of vision.

Whoever will reach level 100 first shall become Earth's new Overgod.

What the—

Basil raised a hand to touch the message, only for his fingers to go through it. Was it a hologram? Another hallucination?

Warning: The Dungeons appeared 6 hours and 57 minutes ago. Please select a starting Class as soon as possible.

"If this is some kind of brain ransomware, fuck you I'm not paying anything," Basil complained. No one answered and the screen didn't vanish. "Okay, what's happening? Can anybody answer?"

Classes are jobs where you can assign levels. They will grant you extraordinary powers.

Based on your past history, stats, and elemental affinities, you can access the following classes, divided between the five families:

Fighter Classes: [Berserker], [Brawler].

Spellcaster Classes: [Runesmith].

Rogue Classes: [Ranger], [Poisoner], [Gambler].

Crafter Classes: [Alchemist], [Trapmaker], [Merchant], [Chef].

Monster Classes: [Tamer], [Fisherman], [Gardener].

His past history? Basil knew he had a... short fuse... but [Berserker] struck him as exaggerated.

The screen looked like some kind of role-playing game menu. Basil had played many of them but he had never expected one to pop up inside his own eyes. Nor did he recognize the game this selection menu came from. Why were [Fisherman] and [Gardener] considered monsters of all things?

This was definitely a lucid hallucination of some kind. As if a talking cat hadn't been bad enough. Or had he been hooked to some kind of virtual reality in his sleep, Matrix-style? "Is this real? What must I do?"

Please select a starting Class as soon as possible.

Of course. Goddamn unremovable pop-ups, if only his mind had an adblocker...

"Which Class is best?" Basil asked without receiving an answer. He was about to pick an option at random and be done with it when Plato joined him on the sofa. The cat had finished his meal and swiftly took over a cushion.

Inspired by the sight, Basil chose the [Tamer] option. "I pick Tamer."

You selected [**Tamer**], a Class focused on taming and recruiting monsters. Growths: Strength (B); Agility (B); Vitality (C); Skill (D); Magic (B); Intelligence (C); Charisma (A); Luck (C).

Level 1 Stat Gains: + 1 AGI, +1 VIT, +1 SKI, +1 INT, +1 CHA, +1 LCK. Your Health Points were raised by 30 and Special Points by 15.

New Perk: Monster Charmer I (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.

Basil shivered as a pleasurable jolt went down his spine. The sensation reminded him of the first time he kissed a girl, though it didn't feel quite as strong.

Selected monster partner: Plato the Housecat.

Dismaker Labs wishes you a happy apocalypse! Good luck on your journey to Overgod!

Dismaker Labs? The name sounded vaguely familiar, though Basil couldn't put a reason on why. He promised himself to investigate the lead and find out the responsible party as soon as the internet worked again.

The screen shrunk back into a crux-shaped icon at the edge of Basil's vision, though it didn't fully disappear as he had hoped.

"Hey, look," said Plato. "There's a weird blue screen all over my face. It says I joined your 'party,' whatever that means."

To each their own. Since Basil didn't see Plato's screen, he assumed it only existed inside his cat's head. "Did other weird stuff happen lately? Like, say, seven hours ago?"

The screen said 'dungeons' had appeared at that time, whatever that meant.

"Oh yes, I forgot to tell you." Plato rubbed his belly. "The ground shook and I saw little green men in the woods."

"The reptilians?"

"No, no, I mean little green people the size of human children. First time I saw anything like that. I tried to warn you but I would have had better luck waking up a stone."

"Says the cat who spends eighteen hours of his time napping on my sofa."

Plato gave his owner a dark look.

"I'm not a cat," he said, weakly. "I'm a dwarf panther."

Basil raised an eyebrow with a chuckle. Though he found it amusing, nothing so far explained why he could even

understand his cat at all. To his surprise, the screen reappeared again to provide an answer.

To improve cooperation and coordination, the Trimurti System automatically translates the language of monsters and fellow players. You can disable this option in [Settings] if you wish.

"What's a Trimurti System?" Basil addressed the elephant in the room.

The screen changed form again.

Status Inventory

Party Crafting

Classes Spellbook

Logs Settings

None of this answered his question. Didn't this weird game have a tutorial of some kind? Did it even matter? Basil would either wake up from this weird hallucination soon or a trip to the hospital would give him a medical solution.

After some trying, Basil returned the screen back to its icon status with a thought. This strange virtual reality interface appeared to somehow answer his thoughts.

"Plato, prepare yourself," Basil said as he set his empty coffee cup aside and moved to his home's door. "We'll go to

the city after I feed the chicken and the rabbits. I need to meet a doctor soon."

"Can you buy fish while you're at it?" His cat asked as he hopped from the sofa to follow him. "I would like some tuna."

"We've got enough canned fish, what more do you—"

Basil stopped in the middle of his sentence. He had opened the door to his garden and taken a look as the morning mist cleared up.

At the age of twenty-five, Basil lived alone in the house of his dreams in the French countryside since Old Man René bequeathed it to him. The two-story building was located in the middle of a pine forest close to the Barthes swamps in the Landes, half an hour's ride away from the closest settlement. Basil had never liked noisy cities and preferred a quiet life of comfort away from civilization.

Still, his home was located in France rather than Finland or Siberia.

So why was there a goddamn *aurora borealis* in the skies?

In the middle of the day!

Basil knew global warming caused some strange weather phenomenon, but still!

"Oh right, I completely forgot about the lights." Compared to his confused owner, Plato sounded quite unfazed by the sight. "They've been up there since last night."

Basil walked into his grass garden to take a better look. The green northern lights formed a circle in the heavens above,

centered around the swamps behind his house. Maybe it was some kind of electromagnetic anomaly? It would explain his hallucinations if it scrambled his brain.

Basil decided to investigate after checking on his animals. His property covered a vast area bordered by a wooden fence and provided him with enough space to set up a greenhouse, a chicken coop, and a rabbit hutch. He usually fed them in the morning and let them walk around in the afternoon.

Basil's rabbits and chicken both looked at him from behind iron grids, all of them hungry for food. "I suppose you don't know what's up with the skies?" he asked them.

His animals didn't answer. Nor did they seem to understand.

Basil glanced at Plato, to his cat's confusion. "What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I can only understand *monsters*," Basil replied, putting some emphasis on the last part.

"Hey, what does that mean? Come on, you cat racist, tell me what's on your mind!"

Basil paid his angry cat no mind as his eyes wandered to the wooden fence.

Something had made a large hole in it, close to the greenhouse.

Basil was half used to boars and the occasional deer chipping away at his fence, but considering all the strange happenings since he had woken up he assumed the worst. He slowly approached the hole and examined it.

Whatever had gone through was big and left traces. Basil's gaze followed them first to the Platanus tree right next to his greenhouse. He had left an axe against the trunk to chip wood for the chimney yesterday, and to his relief, the weapon was still there.

However, the intruder had broken into the greenhouse by shattering one of the glass panels.

Basil's fear instantly turned to rage at the sight.

"Uh, what is this?" Plato sniffed the air. "It smells like bugs!"

The cat froze as noise came out of the greenhouse. Basil grabbed the axe. Another screen message appeared the moment he touched the weapon.

Old Iron Axe

Family: Weapon (Axes)

Quality: D

Power: + 8 STR

Crit: + 5 %

Accuracy: 50 %

Effect: [**Plantslayer**]: supereffective damage against [Plants] (x3 damage).

This rusty veteran of a hundred garden battles has over twenty confirmed tree kills.

Basil didn't understand half of what he saw, and didn't have the time to ask questions.

A monster crawled out of the greenhouse through the opening, fearsome and terrible.

The creature resembled a centipede over two meters in length. Red, chitinous exoskeleton plates protected its back while its underbelly was a soft yellow. Purple saliva dropped from its blade-sharp mandibles.

Red Centipede

Level 1 [Bug]

"What is that?" Plato hissed threateningly, ready to leap at the intruder on a moment's warning.

"Finally, a human." The centipede spoke with a deep, guttural male voice. Its green eyes glared at Basil with keen intelligence... but not to realize he had picked a fight with the wrong man. "Your death will be my ascension to level 2."

"You broke my greenhouse." The fact he was facing the biggest bug in the world and that it could talk back didn't even register within Basil's mind. His blood boiled in his veins, his hand's grip tightening on his ax. "And my fence."

"Yes, I have." The centipede snapped his mandibles and raised his antennae, trying to appear tough and threatening. "And once I have murdered you and devoured you feet-first, I will make this place my nest—"

Basil struck the bug before he could finish his sentence. A message flashed above the creature.

Critical hit!

The centipede was taken aback by the sudden display of violence, and Basil's axe hit his face with enough strength to

send his head hitting the dirt. The human's jaw clenched in rage as he raised his weapon again, blinded by fury.

"This greenhouse cost us two-thousand euros! Two thousand!" Basil struck again. His axe's blade found its way into the centipede's back this time, splitting his red carapace in half at the impact point. "You think money grows on trees?!"

The centipede snapped his mandible and hissed as he tried to raise his head to strike. Basil stomped the bug's face with his shoe before he could retaliate and the bug ate dirt.

"You little shit!" Basil said as he kicked the bug in the underbelly multiple times, the monster letting out growls of pain each time he did. "You don't respect people's private property, uh?! Uh?!"

"Aim for the eyes, Basil!" Plato encouraged him. "And the belly too!"

The centipede roared in humiliation before spitting venom at his attacker's chest. Basil was lean as far as men went, but he exercised a lot and was no stranger to street brawls. His sharp reflexes let him dodge the spit by stepping to the side. The centipede's saliva melted the grass where it landed.

"Die!" The bug lunged to bite Basil with his mandibles, the human narrowly avoiding disembowelment by taking a step back. "You stupid mammal, you dare strike a member of the [Bug] master Type—"

"Dwarf panther to the face!" Plato chose this moment to join the fray, hissing ferociously as he leaped at the centipede. He landed on the creature's head, clawing and biting and

raging. The bug shook like a tree trying to get the smaller animal off his face.

Taking the opportunity, Basil tossed his ax aside and grabbed the centipede's antennae with both hands. Plato leaped off the bug's back right as his owner slammed their foe's head against the Platanus. The tree's trunk cracked at the impact and leaves fell into the garden;

"Uh..." The centipede struggled to form words, the blow had left him dizzy. "What... what..."

"You tried to harm my cat!" Basil snapped as he punched the bug in the face. He then tossed the centipede onto the grass, sat on him, and pummeled him one punch after another. The monster spat blood. "You think hitting animals smaller than you makes you look tough?!"

"I... I yield!" The centipede wagged his antennae in surrender, his arrogant eyes now full of fearful tears. "I yield!"

Basil kept his fist raised mid-motion, but didn't finish the bug off. "You threaten me with death after invading my home and now ask for mercy?"

Plato licked his lips. "I say we just slit his throat and eat him for dinner."

The centipede whined all the louder, his tiny legs wiggling helplessly. "I'm sorry... I didn't know you were the area's boss... I thought it would be easy EXP... Please don't kill me... I just wanted to become an Overgod..."

Basil observed this cowardly wreck of a bug, trying to decide what to make of him. A question had been bugging him for a while. "The fuck's an Overgod?"

The screen appeared before his eyes once more to offer an explanation.

The Overgod is the supreme administrator of a planet as selected by the Trimurti System. The title will be awarded to the first creature on Earth to reach level 100, whether they are a player or monster.

Experience points are awarded by killing players or monsters, fulfilling hidden achievements, and completing quests. They can then be traded for levels in different classes to grant players extraordinary abilities.

"What constitutes a player?" Basil asked.

Every human on the planet.

And if they could all gain power by killing other people...

Basil suddenly remembered Plato's words about little green men in the woods and worrying thoughts crossed his mind.

"There's more of you out there?" he asked the centipede.

"More monsters wanting to become gods?"

"Countless! Goblins, ogres, bugs... the dungeons gave us life so we could grow strong by eating humans!"

"You're quite poor at it," Basil said with heavy sarcasm before pointing a finger at the aurora in the skies. "And why are there northern lights in my country?"

"It's the local dungeon," the bug replied fearfully. By now he had realized that Basil would let him live as long as he talked. "It changes the world with magic and summons monsters to fight humans."

The more Basil heard, the less he liked it.

"So are we killing him or what?" Plato asked as he licked his fur. "It's cold outside."

Sometimes, Basil forgot that cats were born mass murderers; as the number of birds and mice Plato had brought home over the years could attest. The centipede shivered in fear, believing his last hour had come.

"Well, Plato, let me ask you a simple question." Basil rose up and stepped away from the centipede. "Do you think he's a threat to us?"

"No," Plato replied flatly.

The centipede cried, his tears running down on the grass. "I'm sorry..."

"Start by repairing my fence and my greenhouse if you want to apologize," Basil replied. "I'll spare you this time."

It took the centipede a full minute to process Basil's words and answer them. "Y-You're letting me live?"

"For now. I only understand half of what you say and I'll let you live until I get the full picture." Basil grabbed his ax, the edge as sharp as ever. "But if you try to pull a fast one, I'll hang your head above my chimney with the deer and the boars."

"Y-yes master." The centipede bowed so low in submission that he turned almost flat. "I am but a child before your awesome might, Mr. Boss..."

"Quit the servility. You're a centipede, not a cockroach. And I'm not a 'Boss.'" Basil smiled smugly. "But I'll gladly be *your* boss."

The screen appeared again.

You have domesticated: Red Centipede! Red Centipede joined your party!

Alright...

"So what's up, dog?" Plato stretched on, ready for adventure. "We go to the city to buy fish, slice some throats, and become gods?"

Basil watched the centipede move to repair the hole in the fence by putting pieces together. "Personally I think I'm in a delusional coma of some kind... but whether this is real or not, we're just going to stay home."

"Stay home?" Plato's enthusiasm instantly deflated. "Why?"

"Haven't you heard? This is exactly what Thomas Hobbes warned us about in *Leviathan*: the war of all against all." Basil shrugged. "If everyone can grow strong by killing people and monsters run rampant, it's going to be dog eat dog out there. So we're going to stay at home and bunker up until the army reestablishes order."

Plato blinked repeatedly. "What army?"

"The French Army." Basil decided to explain to his cat how adult life worked. "Plato, when I earn one-hundred euros, barely half of them make it to my bank account. The local government takes everything else. I didn't help fund armed forces so they could watch me do all the work and stamp paperwork. They've got to earn their keep."

Despite its poor reputation abroad, France had the seventh-largest army in the world. If Basil could beat a monster into

submission with an axe and his fists, how hard could it be for soldiers with tanks to prevail?

"Soldiers will clean the countryside of invaders like Joan of Arc kicked the British out of France, or like when the great Bulgarian people shrugged off the Ottomans' yoke," Basil said with optimism. He conveniently forgot the help Russians provided in his country's independence, as it would complicate the heroic narrative. "Until then, we've got enough fuel and food to last months."

He was already living like a hermit, the apocalypse wouldn't change much for them. His house was equipped with solar panels and the basement with an electrical generator. Basil had stockpiled gas and oil to fuel it for months specifically due to the home's remote location. He had a garden, plenty of hunting game in the woods, and could always gather freshwater from the nearby stream.

Besides, Basil couldn't abandon the house. The old man had entrusted it to him before passing on. He wouldn't let some bug have it.

Plato didn't look convinced. "Joan of Arc... wasn't it the Hundred-Years War?"

"Yeah." Basil frowned. "How do you know that?"

"I've lived with René for years, I know all his rants by heart." Plato sat in front of his owner. "It took the French a hundred years to kick the British out, right? It's in the name."

Basil didn't say a word.

"Do we have enough food and water to last that long?" Plato asked innocently.

Basil looked at his greenhouse and then back at his cat.
"Smartass."

"You're welcome, Basil."

Chapter 2: Man vs Goblin

The basement trembled as Basil switched on the back-up generator. The mechanical device hummed as it gluttonously tapped into a gas cylinder to make that sweet, sweet electricity.

"Here we go," Basil muttered to himself. "All good."

The house had suffered an hour-long outage before electricity came back and Basil expected more. Either bug monsters had damaged the cables or electrical engineers no longer maintained the grid. Running water might last a few more weeks, but it would go out too in time.

Old Man René had spent most of his meager pension funds into installing a solar panel system on the roof, but he could never rely on the sun all year long. The Landes were a temperate region with their share of rain, windstorms, and obscured skies. As such, the old man had brought a second home generator and stockpiled gas to fuel it. Basil could probably last for years if he rationed electricity, and the stream outside would provide clear water once purified the old-fashioned way.

"Guess you were half-right, Old Man," Basil said. "A disaster came, but not in the form you expected."

Old Man René had bet the world would end with a devastating nuclear war, and Basil because of global warming fostering the development of pandemics. None of them could have predicted an alien invasion from video game monsters.

After checking the generator, Basil went on to review the food reserve. The freezer was filled to the brim with fries, fish, deer meat, and frozen vegetables. Rows after rows of canned food filled the basement's shelves, alongside pasta, rice, oil, and last but not least, the Old Man's extensive collection of ricard pastis bottles.

Although René loved to sit in the garden to sip a glass of ricard in the evening, Basil had sworn off alcohol after watching his father drink himself to oblivion. He had never touched the bottles since the Old Man's passing.

A screen popped up as Basil checked the closest bottle's brand.

Old René's Ricard

Family: Consumable (Potion)

Quality: D

Effect: Applies the [Drunk] ailment on a failed Vitality check.

René's favorite brand of pastis which has now been discontinued. Tastes of nostalgia.

Basil didn't remember taking anything before bed last night, but could he have drunk a dangerous substance giving him hallucinations somehow? Or eaten a bad mushroom? "Is that why I'm seeing this?" Basil asked the screen. "Did I drink something and don't remember it? Am I drunk?"

Negative.

"Am I high?"

Negative.

"Did I take LSD?"

Negative.

"Am I dreaming?"

Negative.

"Hallucinating?"

Negative.

"Delusional?"

Negative.

"Dead?"

Negative.

"Not even in purgatory?"

Negative.

"Schizophrenic?"

Negative.

"Under alien influence?"

Negative.

"In a virtual game?"

Negative, this is real.

"Do I have a government chip in my head?"

Negative.

"Okay you win, nothing else comes to mind."

Dismaker Labs wishes you a happy apocalypse!

That name again... Basil knew he had heard it before, but where? Questions for later. "Also," he said while staring at René's ricard pastis, "why does a bottle of alcohol come up with a description, but nothing else?"

Your Intelligence Stat is too low to provide information on most items.

"Are you calling me dumb?!" Basil choked on his own indignation. "I've got a Master's Degree in fucking Pharmacovigilance!"

Which never earned him a high-paying job, but still!

Your current Intelligence score is 11.

Yes, the screen was calling him stupid. "Who said that, an internet IQ score?"

You can check your stats by selecting 'Status' in your menu.

Basil followed the instruction and an enormous wall of text appeared before his eyes.

Name Basil Jean-François Bohén

Type Humanoid

Faction Basil's Unnamed Party

EXP 100/250

Immune

N/A

Resist

Physical, Corrosion, Metal,
Wood, Fire, Water, all

Weak

Manslayer, Soul, Wind,
Lightning, Light.

Ailments.								
Level		Health Points			Special Points			
1 (Tamer 1)		650			235			
Strength	Agility	Vitality	Skill					
18	16	17	14					
Magic	Intelligence	Charisma	Luck					
8	11	15	11					
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 I		N/A						

Basil blinked at the sheer amount of information and struggled to make sense out of it. It looked very much like an RPG game character's sheet, but it included a compendium of elements for some reason.

Basil remembered seeing things like '+1 INT' or '+1 CHA' when he leveled up. He guessed they were shorthands for the stats on the screen. Did that mean

Basil started with a 10 in Intelligence? Was that good? Bad? Average?

Basil suddenly felt very insecure about his IQ score.

"So if my intelligence stat increases," he asked for confirmation, "I'm getting smarter?"

Intelligence improves spell memorization, influences your chances of learning crafting recipes, unlocks many Crafter classes and provides information on items and enemies.

So it didn't improve *intelligence* as much as *knowledge*. Since the screen appeared in a good enough mood to answer his questions for now, Basil fished for more details. "What about the other stats? What do they do?"

Of course, a goddamn wall of text came up. Basil grunted as he forced himself to read everything.

Health Points represent your life; if they reach 0 after taking enough damage, you die. **Special Points** represent a pool of energy used to power active perks such as spells or techniques. Both HP and SP regenerate over time.

Strength represents your physical might. Strength affects access to many Fighter classes, the power of weapon attacks, and your ability to wear heavy equipment.

Magic represents your spellcasting might. Magic affects access to Spellcaster classes, the power of magical abilities, and your odds of learning new spells.

Skill represents dexterity, accuracy, and perception. It affects your chances of detecting enemies, your odds of hitting a target, and access to many Rogue classes.

Agility represents your speed, reflexes, and chances of dodging attacks. The higher it is, the faster you will move and react. High Agility will also allow you to attack more often.

Vitality represents your constitution; it affects your resistance to ailments, tolerance for physical damage, and rate of HP recovery.

Charisma represents your personal charm and willpower. It affects the power of your support abilities, tolerance for magical damage, and rate of SP recovery.

Luck represents your good fortune. It mostly affects critical hits, drop rates of items, and your chances of triggering beneficial events.

"Thank you, Mr. Tutorial." Basil's piss-poor magic didn't surprise him, since he had never cast a spell in his life, and his physical stats looked good. He guessed exercising regularly had paid off.

Come to think of it, Basil remembered that some options of the System could be changed with the 'setting' option. He immediately checked it and a list of propositions appeared before his eyes, none of them good.

Disable Auto-Translate?

Disable Level-Ups?

Disable Menu Features?

Disable Quests?

Increase Difficulty?

"Wait, you win this 'game' by reaching level 100 and become 'Overgod,' right?" Basil asked, utterly confused. "So what's the point of disabling level-ups?"

Some players enjoy the thrill of death more than the possibility of becoming Overgod.

So it was an option for masochists. "What about difficulty?"

You can increase the difficulty to Hard. Enemies will inflict x1.5 more damage and they will receive x0.75 damage from your attacks. Once chosen, Hard difficulty cannot be disabled.

"Is there any practical benefit to it?"

You get a nice visual icon on your System Screen.

"I'll pass."

Basil couldn't imagine what kind of madman would make the apocalypse harder for themselves. Come to think of it, all of the setting changes available involved *worsening* the user's conditions rather than easing them up.

Basil was about to ask more questions when he heard a noise coming from upstairs. "What's happening?!"

"Little green men in the garden!" Plato shouted back from upstairs. "They want to eat the hens!"

Sighing in exasperation, Basil prepared to defend his property again. Thankfully, Basil had checked up on Old Man René's belongings after the

centipede attack and found his hunting rifle.

Basil had never seriously used a firearm, but it couldn't be too hard. Just point and fire, right?

Right.

When Basil barged out of his house with the hunting rifle loaded, he found Plato and the red centipede shielding the coop and hutch from a gang of five monsters.

The *little green pigs* would have been a better term to describe the creatures rampaging through his yard. No bigger than human children, the beasts had snouts, boar-like tusks, and red tufts of hair on their skulls. Though they moved on two legs and carried wood branches as improvised clubs, the creatures wore nothing more than tattered loincloths. Pustules grew all over their green hides.

Goblin

Level 1 [Beast]

Basil fired a warning shot and instantly won everyone's attention.

"Okay, ground rules," Basil said as the goblins hissed at him. "I've been threatened with knives in back alleys more than once and I always fought back. You don't scare me, and I won't hesitate to use lethal force to defend my life and property."

I'm reading the riot act to walking pigs, Basil thought. Please make this a delusion. I don't want to live in that kind of world.

"Now that that's cleared, let's talk this out like intelligent people." Although the goblins looked more like animals than humans, a part of Basil didn't feel easy starting a fight with humanoids if he could avoid it. "Get the fuck off of my property."

"Suck my snout, human!" One of the goblins threatened Basil with his wooden club. "The swamp belongs to Ogremoché!"

"Who?"

"The biggest ogre there is!" Another goblin pointed at the northern lights in the skies. "He's a big shot, the Dungeon's Boss!"

To Basil's utter lack of surprise, another screen popped up before his eyes.

New Quest: Baddest Ogre in Town

Recommended Level: 5.

Objective: Conquer the Barthes' Dungeon by defeating Ogremoché.

Reward: 500 Bonus EXP + [Ogre Necklace].

"That's fine, my house isn't part of the swamp." Basil pointed at his fence with the rifle. "Here, this is civilization's frontier."

"Exactly, it's our territory," Plato added. "I have my scent all over!"

"All I'm saying, we don't have to fight," Basil explained to the goblins. "We stick to our respective homes and stay good neighbors."

"You're right, human, we don't *have* to fight." One of the goblins grinned, rows of pointy fangs behind his lips. "But we want to, because killing humans is *fun*."

They're making it really hard for me not to press the trigger, Basil thought. "Last warning. Don't fuck with me, goblins. Don't ever try to fuck me."

It made the goblins laugh. "Oh, he's threatenin' us! The human is threatenin' us with his metal club!"

"Human, we're going to burn your house, kill everyone inside, and deliver you to Ogremoché! We'll eat you for dinner, and then..." A goblin loudmouth turned around and showed Basil his ass. "We'll shit you, yeah! Right through this hole—"

Basil shot the goblin in the back before he could finish.

Critical Hit!

Basil was aiming for the ass, but somehow he managed to hit the head. The bullet went through the back of the goblin's skull and came out on the other side, the creature falling dead on the grass.

How are they still surprised after I warned them thrice? Basil wondered as the goblins turned silent. He only believed in diplomacy up to a point. *When a fight looks inevitable, better to strike first and seize the initiative.*

The little green pigs were too startled to strike back immediately, which allowed Plato to pounce on one of them with his claws out. The red centipede joined in by snapping his mandibles on a goblin's neck, beheading him in one strike. The goblins regained their composure and charged with their clubs raised.

Basil's next shots were significantly less impressive than the first. In fact, he wasted two bullets; and when he hit a goblin's chest with the third, it wasn't

enough to put him down. "You dirty human!" the wounded creature shouted while rushing at Basil. "I'll kill you!"

Basil grunted as he pressed his rifle's trigger, only for the weapon to jam. He barely had time to dodge a hit meant for his knee. The goblin kept trying to strike without care for his self-preservation.

Basil kicked the monster in the face with enough force to stun him. He threw the rifle aside, grabbed the goblin by the hair, and then slammed his face against his house's wall. Blood splattered all over the paint.

Oh God, goblins bleed, Basil realized. He had already seen the centipede shed blood, but it hit differently with the warm fluid all over his hand. His brief shock allowed the goblin to scratch his arm with his sharp nails, making Basil wince in pain. *I felt that.*

"I'll kij jou!" Although the goblin had lost many teeth, he remained somewhat understandable. Since he attempted to hit Basil with his club rather than beg for mercy like the centipede, the human introduced his unwelcome guest's face to the wall once more.

This time the goblin was too dead to threaten him again.

Meanwhile, Plato had disemboweled another invader like a fish and the centipede squeezed the last one to death anaconda-style. "I got another!" the centipede shouted with pride. "I got two of them, Boss!"

With the rush of adrenaline dying down, Basil watched his dead goblin fall on the grass with a sick feeling in his chest. He half expected the corpse to vanish in a cloud of smoke like in video games, but nope, it stayed.

Basil looked at his arm where the goblin scratched him. Three red marks cut through his skin deeply enough to draw blood. *This feels real,* he thought. *Fuck, this is real.*

It wasn't a delusion. Basil had killed a humanoid pig out for his blood in his garden. If he hadn't fought back, he would have died.

Well... it wasn't any different from killing a wild boar, Basil tried to tell himself. It made it easier, but he tried not to think too much about the implications.

"Good job," Basil thanked the centipede. He would have to bandage his wound and clean it to avoid infection, then wash the blood off his wall later.

Your party earned 500 EXP (166 EXP each). You earned 1 level!

"Party?" Basil asked as he read the screen, only for another to pop up. It showed his own stats, plus two additions.

Name Plato (Housecat)

Type Beast

Faction Basil's Unnamed Party

Experience 266/500

Immune

N/A

Resist

Soul, Wind, Wood,
Darkness

Weak

Beastslayer, Physical,
Corrosion, Water,
Lightning

Level

1+1

Health Points

275

Special Points

260

Strength

5

(D+20%)

Agility

24

(B+20%)

Vitality

5

(D+20%)

Skill

21

(B+20%)

Magic

12

(C+20%)

Intelligence

10

(D+20%)

Charisma

10

(D+20%)

Luck

20

(B+20%)

Physical Mind

Soul

Corrosion Metal

Wood

Life

Support

Ailment

Weak - Strong Weak - Strong - - -

Fire Water Earth Wind Frost Lightning Light Darkness Mythic

- Weak - Strong - Weak - Strong -

Passive Perks Active Perks

Sharp Claws N/A

Heavy Napper N/A

Birdbane N/A

Name N/A (Red Centipede)

Type Bug

Faction Basil's Unnamed Party

Experience 266/500

Immune

Resist

Weak

N/A

Corrosion, all Ailments,
Wood, Earth

Bugslayer, Mind, Frost,
Water, Wind

Level

Health Points

Special Points

1+1

730

175

Strength	Agility	Vitality	Skill
26	13	24	10
(C+20%)	(D+20%)	(C+20%)	(C+20%)

Magic	Intelligence	Charisma	Luck
3	9	9	14
(E+20%)	(E+20%)	(D+20%)	(D+20%)

Physical	Mind	Soul	Corrosion	Metal	Wood	Life	Support	Ailment
-	Weak	-	Strong	-	Strong	-	-	Strong
Fire	Water	Earth	Wind	Frost	Lightning	Light	Darkness	Mythic
-	Weak	Strong	Weak	Weak	-	-	-	-

Passive Perks Active Perks

Poisoned Fangs N/A

Carapace N/A

Tremorsense N/A

From what Basil read, he was in a team with his two pets and experience points were shared between them. But why was their level marked as 1+1 instead of 2?

Oh wait, the monsters in my group can't be a higher level than me, Basil thought. I've got to assign mine before they can do the same.

"I don't see any Classes on your stat sheet," Basil informed his allies. "Is that normal?"

"Classes? That's something for humans, Boss!" The centipede uncoiled from his last victim. "We monsters, we gain new Perks by evolving into stronger forms once we level up enough!"

"Could I become a lion?" Plato raised his tail with sudden interest. "A smilodon?"

So the letters and percentage beneath their stats were their expected growths on a level-up? Good to know. Basil was about to ask the centipede a very important question when another came up first. "What's your name?"

The centipede gave Basil a funny look. "I'm sorry, Boss?"

"What's your name?" Basil asked. "I'm tired of calling you 'centipede' in my thoughts."

The bug lowered his antennae in shame. "I don't have a name."

"You don't have a *name*?!" Plato mocked him while licking goblin blood off his fur.

"I-I thought a human would drop one upon dying!"

"Well, I'll give you one right now..." Basil trailed off until he had a eureka moment. He snapped his fingers, proud of himself. "Bugsy. *Bugsy Alphonse Venture*."

Powerful. Sophisticated. Transgressive.

Bugsy looked up at Basil with his beautiful green eyes, astonished by the honor done to him. "B-Bugsy, Boss? It sounds a bit stupi—"

"Are you talking to me, Bugsy Alphonse Venture?" Basil interrupted his uppity minion.

"N-No, Boss!" Bugsy immediately submitted to the pecking order and accepted his fate. "It's a great name!"

Red Centipede's name has been changed to: **Bugsy Alphonse Venture**.

"Perfect," Basil said. "Now, Bugsy, did you repair the fence and the greenhouse?"

As it turned out, he did a poor job out of it. Bugsy had closed the hole in the fence with a pile of stones and melded back the glass shards of the greenhouse with his poisonous saliva. A shoddy work all over.

When Basil finished his inspection, Bugsy flattened on the ground like a living carpet. His antennae wavered in fear. Clearly, he expected his head to roll. "So, Boss?"

"I give you some points for effort." In retrospect, Basil should have known that an armless centipede would make a poor manual laborer. "Okay, I'll consider your debt paid. If you swear never to harm another human again, I'll let you go."

"Go?" To Basil's surprise, Bugsy looked downright horrified. "But where?"

"Anywhere you want." Basil frowned. "What, you wanna stay with us?"

"Can I?" Bugsy whistled in happiness. "Your nest is so warm and safe, Boss... and you're so tough! Nobody's going to mess with us and live to tell the tale!"

Nobody dumb enough to threaten someone with a rifle at least, Basil thought. "Well, in that case, welcome to the team long-term."

Plato was all too happy to exploit the situation. "I will allow you to live if you respect my seniority. You will hunt food for me whenever I feel too important to walk."

The poor centipede didn't dare to argue. "Yes, Mr. Plato!"

"You'll protect the chicken and the rabbits when I let them out of their homes," Basil ordered Bugsy. "No more intrusion on your watch."

"Yes, Boss!" Bugsy nodded furiously. "No living goblin will get past the fence!"

"What do we do with the dead ones?" Plato asked while pointing at the pile of goblin corpses. "Do we dump them in the river? Or do we feed them to the chickens?"

"Are goblins even edible?" Basil asked, slightly curious.

Plato smelled the goblins, exchanged a glance with his owner, and then looked back at the corpses.

A few hours later, Basil's pets anxiously watched their owner as he took the day's dinner out of the oven.

Basil put the plate on the counter and cut off a piece with a long kitchen knife. The tender goblin meat seemed to melt as the sharp steel edge sliced it. Basil

had stuffed the creature with apple, onions, and mushrooms before adding a dash of pepper. The whole thing was served on a bed of homemade potatoes. Their soft golden surface cracked from the heat with an appetizing sound.

Basil raised his fork like a man going to war, stabbed the slice of meat with a deft strike...

And *ate* it.

A tense silence settled in the kitchen as Basil's teeth sank into the meat, his tongue savoring the flavor. "So?" Plato asked while wagging his tail.

"They taste a bit like boar, a bit like duck too," Basil answered before taking another bite. More than that, it tasted like karma and victory. "It's good, you can eat it."

Basil watched on with happiness as Plato and Bugsy ate their fill of meat. That settled the matter.

Goblins were the new boars.

Chapter 3: Man vs Menu

When Basil woke up with a pop-up before his eyes, he came to a sudden realization.

Your party earned 100 EXP (30 EXP each).

The screens were here to stay.

It was one thing to say the truth and another to accept it. A foolish part of Basil had hoped reality would return to normal once he woke up from sleep like a bad dream. The bandage on his arm, where the goblin had struck, reminded him that he wouldn't be so lucky.

It's not so bad, Basil tried to tell himself. Besides the occasional attack on his property, life had gone on as before. *Though I miss the internet.*

"It is time, Basil," Plato said as he kneaded his owner's chest. "It is time for breakfast."

"Yeah, yeah," Basil grunted as he rose from his bed, his cat following after him. "I got EXP... did you guys do something while I was asleep?"

"I hunted a bird last night. It was so big Buggy had to help me carry the corpse." Plato licked his shoulder. "I can't resist the urge. When I see a bird, I have to kill it."

"You never attacked the chickens though," Basil pointed out as they moved to the kitchen. As it turned out, Buggy and Plato had tossed their newest trophy on the counter.

"Because they're good birds."

"There are good and bad birds?" Basil raised an eyebrow as he examined the dead bird monster. It looked vaguely like a crane bird, except with red feathers, fangs in its beak, and dagger-like talons. Plato had sliced its neck with his claws.

Dinocrane

Level 1 [Avian/Reptile]

"Yes, of course. The good birds like chickens, they don't fly. The bad ones, they do. Very simple." Plato puffed his chest with pride. "How do you find my catch? It's my biggest yet."

"It's impressive," Basil admitted. "But correct me if I'm wrong: the level 1 goblins before gave 100 EXP per head in total, 33 for each of us. So why did we only get 30 each this time? Where are the missing points?"

To avoid easy level grinding and to incentivize fighting powerful opponents, you receive less EXP from lower level enemies. If the gap is too wide, you won't earn EXP at all.

Ugh, wonderful. Although Basil noted that EXP could be shared among party members even if they didn't participate in a kill. He suspected that this mechanism was meant to allow weaker members of a group to catch up to their stronger allies.

"You've never killed anything bigger than you before," Basil observed. His cat had never brought anything bigger than a pigeon home, but the Dinocrane was more than thrice Plato's size.

Plato frowned in outrage at his owner's skepticism. "Of course I did. You just didn't see me."

Of course. Come to think of it, Basil remembered Plato disemboweling a goblin with his bare claws; a feat worthy of a tiger. Basil checked the 'Party' screen and his cat's Perks. The System quickly confirmed his suspicions.

- **Sharp Claws:** Plato's claws inflict SKI-based damage. Plato gains advanced proficiency with Unarmed Attacks such as fangs and claws (x2 damage, +10 Crit).
- **Heavy Napper:** while under the [Sleep] ailment, Plato benefits from a [Regen] positive effect (recovers 1/16th of max HP per minute).
- **Birdbane:** Plato's attacks with natural weapons gain the [Birdslayer] effect, making them supereffective against the [Avian] Type (x3 damage).

Double damage with claws stacking with [Birdbane]... Basil guessed that the Dinocrane probably died in one hit. "Are all cats so overpowered at first level?"

"Why wouldn't we be?" Plato replied with typical feline arrogance.

Basil pitied the mice and rats of the world. "System," he muttered as a thought crossed his mind, "how is damage calculated exactly?"

Ignoring the random factor, damage with your fists scales with your Strength. If you use a weapon instead, it inflicts damage based on the appropriate Power stat and the weapon's additional bonus.

Basil frowned and quickly moved to check his weapons. As he remembered, his old iron axe ran on Strength. The rifle, however, relied on Skill.

Duckslayer, Old Hunting Rifle

Family: Weapon (Firearm)

Quality: D

Power: + 11 SKI

Crit: + 0 %

Accuracy: 80 %

Effect: [Birdslayer]: Supereffective damage against the [Avian] type (x3 damage).

Old Man René's old hunting rifle, which ruffled a few feathers... with blood!

Basil calculated the potential damage in his head. The old iron axe added +8 to his Strength of 18 for a total of 26, while the rifle added +11 to his Skill of 14 for a total of 25. "Wait, does this mean that I inflict more damage with a rusty old axe than a firearm?"

Basil blushed as a humiliating realization came to mind. Considering Plato's high Skill, combined with his multiplied claw damage...

"Yo Basil, why do you look so ashamed all of a sudden?" his cat asked with concern.

"Whether I use an axe or a rifle, you hit harder than me either way."

Plato's feline lips stretched into the smuggest, most condescending grin imaginable.

The System made no sense!

The rest of the day happened without incident. Basil put Plato's newest trophy in the freezer until he could figure out how to cook it, gathered a bounty of chicken eggs from his feathered tenants, fed his rabbits, watered his vegetables in the greenhouse, and checked on the electricity. Although the house appeared cut off from the French energy grid, the aurora in the skies had a beneficial effect on the solar panels' output. The house wouldn't run out of power anytime soon.

His work done in the morning, Basil took his afternoon off. He set a longchair in the garden while his rabbits and chicken peacefully waded through the garden.

Basil alternated between dozing off and exploring his menu's options; what he could access anyway. The 'Spellbook' feature remained unavailable, probably because of his piss-poor Magic stat. *Yer no wizard, Basil*, he thought with annoyance.

As per the name, 'Logs' recorded whatever information that Basil gathered. This included a journal of Quests, basic information about enemies his party had slain, and a small map of the local area. 'Classes' allowed Basil to assign his levels to Classes he had unlocked. [Gardener] and [Fisherman] tempted him the most considering their potential utility.

It was the 'Inventory' feature that amazed Basil the most, however.

Your Inventory is an extra-dimensional space where you can stock your items and summon them to your location at will. You can store 1 item per level by touching them. An Inventory's items will reappear at their owner's location upon death.

Basil raised an eyebrow and turned his head to look at his house.

Could it be... no, that would be ridiculous... but what if...

Basil bolted off from his chair and slammed his palm against the nearest wall.

No, your Inventory cannot store buildings.

Basil roared out of sheer disappointment, startling the hens in the garden. But another brilliant idea soon crossed his mind and filled his heart with hope. His legs moved on their own and carried him all the way to the garage.

His multipurpose vehicle, an old Renault Kangoo, awaited his arrival. Its lustrous blue paint only showcased the scratches on its left door, the scars of a fever-pitched battle against a deer determined to commit suicide by car at night. Basil's hand brushed against its fearsome hood with near-religious respect.

"Store," Basil whispered.

A pulse of energy spread from his hand to bathe the car in holy light. The *Renault Kangoo* vanished in a flash, leaving the garage an empty church deprived of its relic.

Vehicle: [**Renault Kangoo**] has been added to your Inventory.

"I knew it!" Basil let out a laugh of triumph. Yes, yes! He wouldn't have to pay for parking ever again!

What else could he store? Did ships count? Planes? Could he store a plane? So thought Basil as he exited his garage to find Bugsy waiting for him.

"Greetings Boss, I completed my patrol!" The centipede straightened up like a soldier reporting to his general. "The nest's perimeter is secure!"

"No more goblins?"

"Not since we put up a signboard with skulls on top. I sense them lurking nearby with my [Tremorsense], but they don't dare to approach."

Finally, the locals had learned to respect Basil's boundaries. "Good, let's hope our neighbors behave from now on."

"So what do we do next, Boss?" Buggy asked with his antennae raised. "We fortify the nest and then go clear the dungeon?"

"Sure, we can set traps around the place," Basil replied, "but why would we clear the dungeon?"

Buggy looked at him in confusion. "W-Why not, Boss? Didn't we get a quest to do it?"

"Yes, but it was recommended for level 5 and we're three short of that." Basil shrugged. "And why would we have to fulfill it anyway? If the goblins stop attacking our home, we won't attack theirs. Good neighbors stick to themselves."

"But Boss, don't you want to get stronger and richer?" Buggy argued. "I'm sure the ogre keeps a treasure stashed in the dungeon!"

"What would we spend it for?" Basil frowned. "If you're worried about rent, you're paying it with your work."

Buggy wagged his antennae in confusion. "I don't understand, Boss. Don't you want to become stronger and

richer?"

Basil gritted his teeth in silent anger. The words had struck a nerve. "No, I don't."

Bugsy winced at his owner's harsh tone, which made Basil shrug. The centipede deserved some explanations. "Okay, Bugsy, let me tell you where I come from," he declared with patriotic fervor. "The great land of Bulgaria."

"Is it a dungeon?"

"I... maybe?" Basil didn't know what counted for a dungeon or not nowadays. "Bulgaria is a great country, but a poor one. After the communists fell, we joined Europe to become wealthier."

"Communists? What kind of monsters are they, Boss? They sound very low-level."

"They're like goblins, but red," Basil joked. Bugsy took him at his word. "Like many, I thought I could get out of poverty by getting an education in a more developed country; the one we're in right now, France. Since I didn't have a family rich enough to pay my rent, I had to work in my free time and holidays to fund my studies."

Like taking care of an old man in the middle of nowhere in the summer.

"I did it because people promised me that my degree would earn me a good salary," Basil explained. "Except that when I got out of university, I ended up in direct competition with thousands of people with the exact same qualifications for a dozen posts. Half of my competitors came from schools with a better rep than mine."

"Sounds like a monster's life to me," Bugsy said. "Everybody fights everybody."

"Yeah, well, the best I could find were exploitative internships to 'get experience' or menial jobs. I wasted five years of my life just to go right back to square one. So you know what I did?"

Bugsy thoughtfully considered the question. "You killed all your competitors to get the job?"

Once a monster, always a monster.

"I said 'fuck it' and went to live in the woods." Basil snorted. "The moral of the story is that the lure of money is a mirage used by modern society to make wheel-running hamsters out of us. If you can live well and peacefully with little, then why bother doing more? It won't add anything, it won't make you happier. Same with that dungeon."

"I think I understand." Bugsy didn't hide his disappointment, but accepted Basil's wisdom all the same. "So, uh, if we won't raid the dungeon, what do we do from now on, Boss?"

"We live." Basil shrugged. "Have you ever played Mario Kart?"

"N-No, Boss."

"You will. I also have board games, soccer balls, and—" Basil stopped as he smelled a foul stench. The wind blowing from the Barthes carried a terrible odor. "What's this?"

Bugsy's antennae bristled with the soft breeze. "Smells like rotting meat, Boss. I think its coming from the stream."

I've got a bad feeling about this, Basil thought. He immediately moved to the back of his house, where a freshwater stream separated his home from the marshes beyond. The brook was a tributary of the larger l'Adour river, but deep enough that water would reach up to Basil's waist if he tried to cross it. Green marshy meadows and trees spanned the other side of the stream, a wild reserve full of bugs, birds, and other protected animals. How many times had Basil crossed into the wildlands to help René with his naturalist projects? A dozen, a hundred times?

Plato had already beat Basil and Buggy to the shorebank. He must have smelled the disturbance too. "Yo, Basil, we've got a problem," the cat complained. "That ugly manling is ruining my view of the marsh."

A dead body faced them on the other side of the stream, hung from a tree.

A *human* body. Although he couldn't see clearly due to the distance from the other shore, Basil estimated the victim as a man in his thirties. The body had been stripped of everything except his underwear and hanged to a branch with barbed wire. From its pallid skin and smell, he had been killed recently.

Words had been written into the corpse's chest with feces. Basil didn't recognize the language used, but that the System translated for him all the same: *'yer next, hummie!'*

Buggy straightened up, his body tense as a pole. "Boss, I think this is a warning."

"Worse, Buggy." Basil's jaws tightened with cold rage. "This is an insult."

"Who cares? I leave corpses everywhere too, no big deal." Plato stretched his legs. "Let's just pull it down and go back to the sofa."

Basil glanced at his cat with a dark look. "Plato, fetch me a knife."

"A knife?" His cat meowed in disappointment. "Oh come on, Basil, not again! It's like, the third time!"

"The third time for what?" Buggy asked.

"That he swears a vendetta against complete strangers!" When Basil wouldn't relent, Plato sighed and bolted back into the house. "Goddamn it, Basil, you always overblow things!"

If anything, Basil believed his response was entirely proportionate. The goblins had shown themselves brutal enough to kill and would show no mercy. They weren't mere predatory animals he could live with, but organized savages. If not stopped, they might end up killing him and his pets in their sleep.

Threatening to kill him was par the course for the world they now lived in, but murdering someone else to intimidate him?

It was a cause for war!

Basil opened his System screen and finally decided to assign his second level. He skipped the Crafters and the Rogues, the Spellcasters and the Monsters. Something primal guided his hand to the most appropriate option.

[Berserker]: This wrathful Fighter Class focuses on raging offense at the cost of defense. Growths: Strength

(S); Magic (B); Vitality (B); Skill (D); Agility (B); Intelligence (E); Charisma (C); Luck (C).

Basil assigned his level to this class. He immediately felt a near-addictive shiver of pleasure course through his veins and abs growing underneath his skin.

Berserker Level 1 Stat Gains: + 2 STR; +1 VIT; +1 SKI; +1 AGI; +1 CHA; +1 LCK. Your Health Points were raised by 50 and Special Points by 10.

New Perk: Slaughterer I (Passive): You gain advanced proficiency with Axes, Maces, Spears, and Unarmed Attacks (x2 damage, +10 percent Crit chances). However, all [Berserker] class Perks are made inactive if you wield a shield, armor, or accessory reducing the damage that you take. Monster skins and damage resistance provided by spells or Perks do not violate this rule.

This new level had changed his body somehow. Basil could feel it in his bones.

Plato returned with a small knife in his mouth, which his owner swiftly claimed for himself. "Here we go again," the cat complained.

"I, Basil Jean-François Bohén," Basil shouted to the heavens and his heart, "son of Dragan and Aleksandra Bohén, I hereby swear a blood oath before our Lord Jesus Christ! I will not rest until I have driven off the goblin menace from the Barthes of l'Adour!"

"How do we even know the goblins did it?" Plato asked, but was ignored. "It could be the birds. Treacherous, sneaky little birds."

"I swear never to let them violate the sanctity of my home! My fence shall be a great wall against which goblin hordes will break like wind before a mountain! I curse them! I curse them to the thirteenth generation of their blood!"

Basil lightly slashed his hand, just deep enough to draw blood without leaving a scar. He let drops of his red blood fall into the stream and raised his knife as if to strike the skies above.

"To the death!"

Basil's battle cry echoed across the river, and his chickens loudly joined in with wild clucking noises.

"That was epic!" Buggy snapped his mandibles with excitement. "Can I do it too? Can I swear too?"

"You shall all swear," Basil declared. His eyes turned to Plato, who tried to avoid his gaze the best he could. "Yes, that includes you."

Plato whined. "Can I at least spit out a hairball instead of blood?"

Basil would allow it. His two companions each made their vow to the river with blood and hair, swearing to fight until evil was at long last driven off from their land.

The First Neighborhood War had begun.

Chapter 4: Man vs Otter

As Basil's old axe cut another goblin in half, he realized that splitting skulls was no different than chopping wood.

In fact, the former had become frighteningly easy after taking a level in Berserker. Basil wielded his axe as if it were part of him. His muscles almost moved on their own, guiding his hand and imbuing it with new might.

It's not just the increased stats, Basil thought as he swung his weapon at a second goblin, bisecting him from the waist down. I know axe-fu now. My Berserker class downloaded knowledge into my brain somehow.

Thankfully, Basil's clothes didn't count as 'armor' for the purpose of the Slaughterer Perk. He would rather avoid fighting in his underwear due to the cold temperature.

"Help!" Plato called for help. A monster had emerged from the stream to chase after the cat. "Wet alert! Somebody help!"

Having slain the last goblin, Basil moved to answer Plato's call. A wolf-sized otter with sharp spines on its back hunted the cat, its fur drenched in water. Buggy was biting the aquatic monster's tail with his mandibles to little effect, besides poisoning it.

Spinotter

Level 2 [Beast/Aquatic]

Status: Poisoned!

It was the second enemy group Basil and his pets had confronted since they forded the stream to reach the other side. The goblins had brought new monsters with them both times; first a duo of dinocranes that Plato made short work of, and then this otter creature.

Basil flanked the otter. The beast saw him coming and fired spines from its back like javelins. Surprised by the unexpected attack, Basil deflected a projectile with his axe but missed another aiming for his left shoulder. The spine tore through the shirt and grazed the skin underneath before finishing its course in a nearby tree.

Basil gritted his teeth in pain and rage. His axe hit the otter's head and opened a bloody wound, but failed to cut through the skull. The beast snapped its jaws at Basil, nearly biting his ankle.

"I got this!" Buggy used the spinotter's distraction to coil around it. The stronger centipede hissed in pain upon touching his prey's spines, but managed to restrain it all the same. "I got this!"

Basil roared as he struck the spinotter's head again. This time he hit the beast hard enough to split the skull open. The third and final blow shattered it.

Once the beast was dead, Basil took a moment to gather his breath.

Your party earned 1050 EXP (323 EXP each). You earned 1 level!

100 base EXP per level 1 goblin and dinocrane, 250 base EXP for the level 2 Spinotter, Basil calculated in his head. He quickly figured out the underlying formula, or at least the gist of it. The experience was divided between each party

members, then the share I received from the goblins and dinocranes was reduced by around 10%. The penalty applied even after assigning my excess level.

It made sense. A party could include individuals of different levels who shouldn't be subjected to the same penalties. Basil suspected other factors were at work in the experience calculation, but the System wouldn't give him more details.

"Is it dead?" Plato asked as he touched the spinotter's leg. A drop of water fell on the cat's bloodied paw and startled him. "Ah, it's wet!"

"What a child," Basil said with a grin. He had to carry Plato in his arms when they forded the stream on foot. "Bugsy, are you wounded?"

"It's alright, Boss, you hit me way harder." Bugsy uncoiled from the dead otter. The spines had barely scratched his thick exoskeleton.

Basil couldn't say the same for his bleeding shoulder. A goblin had also managed to strike him in the chest with a club in the melee, leaving him with a nasty bruise. Basil had had the foresight to take a waist bag full of bandages on the expedition, but he couldn't rule out the risk of infection from the marsh. The human body could only take so much punishment.

Health Points

620/700 (Healthy)

"Quick question," Basil asked as he applied a bandage to his shoulder wound. "How do Health Points work? Are they a general representation of my health or a hard value?"

Your Health Points represent your general health. If they reach 0, you die.

"What if." Basil took a long deep breath as he made his problem with the HP concept known. "If I were to use a needle to inflict 1 damage to a goblin by stabbing their arm while avoiding the vitals, would it eventually kill him?"

No System tutorial appeared to enlighten Basil.

"Screen, answer the question."

It didn't.

"I'm tempted to capture a goblin alive to test out my hypothesis," Basil said. "But that would be animal cruelty."

"Capture a goblin alive?" Plato licked the blood off his paws. "I can't guarantee anything. The greenies look determined to commit assisted suicide."

Basil sighed. Indeed, his cat was right. Their group had tried to talk it out with the monsters after Buggy's Tremorsense detected their ambush attempt, but they kept fighting to the death even when the tide turned against them. Did the dungeon's Boss frighten them so much that they would rather throw their lives away than go home to face punishment?

"Is it genocide if it's done in self-defense?" Basil wondered out loud.

"I'm sorry, Boss?" Buggy asked.

"We are confronted by a hostile species smart enough to talk back, but clearly not enough to stop bothering us," Basil said. "That species attacks us with suicidal zeal even though

they take terrible losses. They won't consider diplomacy no matter how much we try to establish a constructive dialogue. Ponder this question, Buggy Alphonse Venture."

Basil waved his weapon at the dead monsters surrounding them. "Is it genocide if we kill them all because they wouldn't stop attacking otherwise? Or is it self-defense?"

Buggy considered the question for a few seconds before answering. "I think we're getting ahead of ourselves, Boss. I mean, we haven't killed them all yet."

"We're putting semantics before the slaughter," said Plato. "We can always settle on how we'll call the goblins' extinction after we do the deed."

"I don't think we can exterminate the goblins at all," Buggy pointed out, "the dungeon will create more of them so long as it remains active and there are probably other tribes elsewhere across the world. They can absorb their losses easily enough."

"We just have to try hard—" Basil froze as his mind registered his centipede's words. "Come again?"

"I said goblins can absorb losses easily enough—"

"I meant the first part." Basil frowned at his insectoid pet. "The dungeon creates monsters from nothing?"

Buggy nodded in confirmation, much to Basil's chagrin. "Is there any way to stop the process?" he asked. "Or do we have to blow up the place from the ground up?"

This time, the System agreed to provide an answer.

Dungeons have a core called a neurotower that becomes accessible once the local Boss is slain. Whoever touches the neurotower first can decide the dungeon's fate.

Good to know. "Can we get the dungeon's location, please?"

The dungeon will be marked on your map once you discover it.

"I hate you so much."

Dismaker Labs wishes you a happy apocalypse!

After this enlightening interaction, Basil took a moment to examine the spinotter. He cut the creature's belly open with his axe and the half-digested remains of two minks spilled out.

Reminds me of invasive species, Basil thought. He had already noticed the conspicuous absence of normal cranes and birds that usually lived in the Barthes. *Monsters will edge out the local wildlife in no time.*

He shuddered to imagine the looming ecological disaster. The Barthes were a wildlife reserve with many of its local species vulnerable to disturbances. Basil had no qualms about hunting animals for food, but the possibility of a non-invasive species going extinct deeply bothered him. They would be gone from the world, never to come back. He would have felt the same way at a monument's destruction.

A part of Basil hoped that sabotaging the dungeon and culling the monster population would give the local wildlife a chance to survive.

At least this spinotter will make a fine carpet, Basil thought as he set out to finish the task his team had crossed the stream for: pulling down the human corpse on the other side. Basil swiftly cut the barbed wire holding the body up to the tree with his axe and examined it. *The body's fresher than I thought, but insect scavengers did a number on him. He probably died when the dungeons appeared two days ago.*

Something had shattered the ribs and damaged the heart, probably in a single blow from the impact. That was too strong for a goblin's club.

"Can Bosses leave their dungeon?" Basil asked.

"I don't think so," Buggy answered when the System wouldn't. The centipede touched the ground with his antennae to monitor the area in case the goblins planned to ambush them again. "What do we do with the human meat, Boss? We eat it?"

"No, we'll bury him near a tree." Basil frowned at Buggy. "Don't tell me you would eat a member of your own species?"

"I would, if it's well-cooked," the centipede replied before checking his belly. "I wonder how I would taste."

They could always check if they crossed another centipede's path.

Although the victim carried no identification papers, his face felt vaguely familiar to Basil now that he could take a closer look. *On the road,* he remembered. *I saw him a few times while driving on the road while he was going to work at—*

"The water quality control station," Basil muttered out loud.

"The waterwhat?" Buggy asked.

"There's an old facility meant to check the quality of the river's water nearby." Basil remembered that the French public services also repurposed the building to house a weather station to cut costs. "The goblins must have ambushed our man while he was going to work. From the body's state, he must have died right after the dungeon appeared."

"Oh, I get it!" Buggy rejoiced. "The dungeon and the station must be close to each other!"

"Probably," Basil confirmed. "We could check—"

"No," Plato interrupted his owner. His tone reminded Basil of an adult scolding a child. "No."

"You don't even know what I'm about—"

"No to water!" Plato hissed at the stream. "I only like it behind a glass window or in a bowl."

Basil locked eyes with his housecat. "Didn't you tell me you were a dwarf panther instead of a cat?"

Plato puffed his chest, full of pride. "Yes, what of it?"

"Panthers can swim, Plato. Even dwarf ones."

When Plato pouted in embarrassment, Basil knew he had already won the debate. "I-I can swim too, I just don't like it! Do you take a shower every day?"

"No, but I wash when I must." Basil shrugged. "Truthfully, I'm torn over this. The station is hours away from the house even with shortcuts. We'll leave our home unattended."

Besides, the dungeon's Boss Ogremoché had enough control over the local goblins to shape them into a semi-cohesive fighting force. He must have fortified the area, making a direct assault risky without preparations.

Plato nodded so abruptly that some of his fur fell off his face from the sheer speed. "See, see? What if it's all part of the goblins' master plan to lure us away from the house? Think, Basil! Will you fall for such an obvious ploy? Or you could go to the station with Buggy while I valiantly watch over our home from atop the sofa! What do you say about that?"

Basil pondered his cat's proposal, before suddenly realizing that Buggy hadn't spoken a word in a while. The red centipede kept his antennae applied to the soft grass, his back as tense as a bowstring.

He had detected a threat.

"Buggy?" Basil asked, his grip on his axe tightening. Plato understood the danger and rose on two legs. He smelled the wind in an attempt to detect smells. "What do you hear?"

"Explosions, Boss," the centipede murmured back. "Small ones."

Basil's jaw clenched in alarm. "How far?"

"Far." Buggy let out a sigh of relief. "Moving away. Northwest."

Basil kept his guard up. "Plato? What do you smell?"

"Enough goblin blood to make me puke, and a bug."

"I'm right next to you," Buggy said in confusion.

"Another bug," Plato clarified before shuddering. "It reminds me of these nasty giant Asian hornets who made their nest in our attic last summer."

"You don't smell gunpowder?" Basil fished for more information. "Or fire?"

His cat came up short and shrugged. If Plato had smelled firearms, Basil would have expected the French army coming to liberate the region. But the smell of hornets leaned more towards the hypothesis of an unregistered monster wrecking havoc.

An ugly picture quickly formed in Basil's mind as he put two and two together. "System, what could I do with a dungeon's core?"

This information is locked until you access one.

This doesn't bode well, Basil thought. Not well at all. "Guys, change of plans. We'll set traps around the house, bar the windows, close the door, and then we'll move to inspect the station."

Plato, who knew his owner well enough, immediately realized something was terribly wrong. "Basil, are you suggesting that we leave the house without any defender?"

"The water quality control station is in the northwest," Basil explained. "If we assume it's close to the dungeon's location, then a powerful bug monster is probably fighting the goblins over it."

"Oh, good for us then." As always, Plato's allergy to work made itself known. "We can satisfy our blood oath without lifting a finger. We can sit back and watch the fireworks."

"Except you don't attack a fortress full of monsters without expecting a reward," Basil replied. "What could a monster gain from taking over a dungeon from its Boss?"

"Basil, how should I know?"

"And that's my problem, Plato: we don't know what will happen," said Basil. "It might make the situation worse somehow. That's why we're going to monitor this situation closely."

The enemy of my enemy was not always a friend.

Chapter 5: Man vs Surprise

Locating the dungeon had been an easy task. They only had to follow the dead.

Whoever had attacked the goblins had done so with lethal efficiency. The marsh's putrid air had grown heavy with the stench of dead bodies thrown into the mud. Black stingers pierced the hearts of bleeding goblins while purple acid dissolved the remains of spinotters into poisonous puddles.

"Twenty-one, twenty-two," Plato counted the dead as the group walked through a game trail Basil knew by heart. "Twenty-three..."

Bugsy shuddered with his antennae against the ground. "Hard to believe a single monster could do so much damage."

"Yet it was alone." Basil had picked up a trail of abnormal footprints in the grass, light but confident, with two fingers per foot. "And experienced too. The stingers all hit vital areas."

The scene felt like the aftermath of a professional soldier rampaging through a crowd of helpless civilians. Basil wouldn't mourn goblins, but the sheer one-sided nature of their demise made him uneasy. Although he had taken both his axe and rifle on the expedition, the former in his hand and the other attached to his back by a leather strap, Basil would have traded them both for an AK-47.

Even the boisterous Bugsy twitched from time to time. "Boss, you should assign your level."

"Yeah," Basil agreed. The creature could fall upon them any minute. "I'll upgrade the [Tamer] class."

"Not Berserker?" Plato asked. "Odd choice."

"Berserker will make me a better fighter, but Tamer will do the same for both of you," Basil explained. "It will help the group more."

Tamer Level 2 Stat Gains: + 1 STR; +1 AGI; +1 MAG; +1 CHA. Your Health Points were raised by 20 and Special Points by 10.

After the rush of pleasure from the level-up died down, Basil awaited the coming of his new Perk for several seconds. "Wait, I won't get a new power this time?"

Classes grant a Perk on odd levels and when you complete its progression path.

"You couldn't tell me before I assigned the level?" Basil grunted in frustration.

"It's okay, Boss," Buggy tried to reassure him. "It still allowed us to assign our own extra level."

Basil opened his mouth to argue, before closing it just as swiftly. The dungeon and the water quality control station both came into sight.

They were, after all, one and the same.

Located at the junction between the stream and the larger l'Adour river, the water quality control station had been a small facility no bigger than a metal shack. The oval structure that had risen in its place was over four stories tall. Walls of mossy stone had replaced the station's metal doors, with neolithic symbols of boars and bears crudely carved onto their surface. The region's auroras pulsed from above the roof in swirling waves.

The dungeon's oval shape reminded Basil of a stone egg. Only part of it was visible; a good chunk of it was submerged by the l'Adour river while the rest had sunk into the marsh's muddy ground. A wide crack into the stone façade with wood and bone totems on each side formed the dungeon's foreboding entrance.

Dungeon: Ogre Den of the Barthes

Level: 5

Faction: N/A.

Field Type: Den.

[Fire], [Metal], [Earth], [Soul], and [Mythic] elements are empowered.

[Wind] and [Lightning] elements are weakened.

Improved chances of inflicting the [Berserk], [Petrify], and [Terror] status ailments.

They even rolled out the red carpet, Basil thought as he glanced at the bloody remains of goblins littering the ground. The remains of wooden barricades laid broken in tall grass. *We've arrived too late.*

A scavenger had beaten them to the prize and was trying to eat a dead goblin before their eyes. The moment Basil laid his gaze upon this new monster, his heart skipped a beat.

The beautiful creature resembled a venus flytrap bigger than Plato. Its mouth took the shape of multiple golden petals with spiky teeth around a cute, hungry gullet. Its green stem divided itself into six beautiful thorny vines wriggling in

the mud. Watching the creature attempt to swallow a goblin too big for its mouth was both horrifying and adorable.

Killaplant

Level 1 [Plant]

"Beautiful," Basil whispered. Plato sent him a tired glance but kept his mouth shut.

Bugsy proved himself less wise. "Oh, a new bag of exp! Let's gang up on it, Boss—"

Basil lightly slapped his tasteless centipede on the back of the head. "You uncultured fool!"

"Boss, you slapped me!" Bugsy whined. "Why did you slap me?!"

"I'm a man of action, but I'm also a caring gardener!" Basil snarled loud enough for the plant to abandon its dinner to look at them. "Look at it! Look at it, Bugsy! Don't you *feel* anything when you stare at its petals?"

His centipede looked at the killaplant in confusion. "I-Is it about the greenhouse, Boss?"

"Yes, it is," Basil confirmed. He wouldn't let Bugsy forget that part anytime soon. "This beautiful flower belongs in my greenhouse and not in a grave."

"Beautiful?" Plato squinted at the plant with unwelcome skepticism. "It doesn't look like catnip to me."

"Look at its bright petals," Basil argued. "It'll be perfect as part of a flower bed among roses and more exotic plants."

Besides cultivating vegetables, Basil took good care of his garden's appearance. He had even considered building a flowering hedge over his fence before the System arrived to ruin all his plans for the future.

But now that he saw this creature, Basil realized a whole new world had opened up to him. Could there be marvelous, aesthetical vegetal monsters out there? Lost creatures begging to become part of his house's scenery? Could he make a hedge out of monstrous plants?

He would start exploring this new future here and now.

The beautiful plant had turned to face the newcomers with its eyeless petals, a goblin corpse still stuck halfway through its mouth. The scene reminded Basil of that time he had caught a pelican trying to eat a fish too big for their gullet.

"Shush..." Basil whispered as he slowly approached the wary plant. It took a step back in fear and accidentally let its goblin catch slip through its petals. "Don't worry, I don't want to hurt you."

"If you start talking to trees too, I'm leaving," Plato commented on the scene with a deadpan tone.

Basil ignored him. "You want to eat, little plant? But you can't cut the corpse into tasty goblin legs?"

The killaplant watched warily without answering. To earn its trust, Basil brought down his axe on the dead goblin's legs and severed it. He then grabbed the severed piece of bloody meat and dangled it before the flower, immediately earning its interest.

"You want it?" Basil asked. When the flower replied by opening its mouth and salivating, he tossed the severed leg at it. The plant jumped and ate the piece of meat in one bite.

"Boss, what are you doing?" Buggy looked utterly confused by the scene unfolding before his eyes. "Are you... are you taming that monster? *Without* violence?"

"Like a dog," Plato added with condescension.

"Who's a good plant?" Basil asked as he tossed more severed limbs at the hungry flower. The pieces were small enough for the monster to eat them. "Who's a good plant?"

"You are nice!" The plant squealed back with an adorable, high-pitched girly voice. "I like you!"

Aww, she was a little girl!

"Sweet Pollen!" Once she had finished eating her meal, the flower exhaled pink dust at Basil's group. It smelled so sweet. Buggy hissed as if expecting an attack, but Basil stopped him with a wave of his hand. He felt his fatigue vanish and the wounds underneath his bandages closing on their own.

You have recovered 35 HP!

Aww, she healed them!

"When I evolve, I will kill everyone!" said the plant with her adorable voice, before pointing at Basil, Plato, and Buggy with one of her vines. "Except you! And you! And you!"

Aww, she had an attitude problem!

Basil decided now was the time to make her his offer with a big bright smile. "Do you want to live in my greenhouse in the middle of the woods?"

"Shouldn't you offer her candies first?" Plato asked mockingly. "Or a tour in your minivan?"

"Plato, shut up." Basil kept smiling at the beautiful flower. "I will feed you goblin meat fillets, and you will grow in fertile soil. I can give you sun, warmth, and TV."

"We also have a fence," Buggy thought it important to add.

"Mmm..." The plant wriggled in place before letting out a squeal. "Alright!"

Killaplant has joined your party!

"Henceforth, I shall name you..." Basil gathered his breath and let his muse speak through his lips. "Rosemarine Eglantine de la Barthe."

Distinguished. Precious. ***Bourgeois***.

Killaplant's name has been changed to: Rosemarine Eglantine de la Barthe.

"I have a name!" Rosemarine made her happiness known with another squeal. "When I evolve, I will scare everyone!"

"You sure will," Basil replied as he petted his new plant on the head. "You sure will."

The dungeon was bigger than its outside appearance suggested.

The very first room alone occupied a space larger than Basil's entire house. A few primitive, flickering braziers dangled from a dizzyingly high ceiling. Their feeble light illuminated crude goblin carvings on walls of smooth gray stone. Basil felt like an explorer discovering a paleolithic cave.

There's some space-time shenanigans happening here, Basil thought. The cavern reeked of sweat, blood, and dung. Half a dozen goblin and dinocrane corpses littered the ground.

"I'm so happy not to be the newbie anymore," Buggy said as Rosemarine happily hopped after him. "Can I bully her?"

"No," Basil replied flatly, much to his centipede's chagrin. "Don't lower your guard either."

"Y-Yes, Boss."

"When I evolve, I will bully everyone," Rosemarine chirped. "Except you! Because you are my friends!"

"Friends? Do you mistake me for a golden retriever?" Plato shrugged as he smelled the air. "I let you live in my house, that's all."

"Your house?" Basil asked with a raised eyebrow. He walked to a broken wood door at the end of the cavern protected by two primitive wooden totems topped with goblin skulls. Someone had shattered the idols.

Goblin Twin-Totems

Family: Trap

Quality: D

Effect: launch [Poison] needles upon being approached by non-goblins.

Goblin traps set for intruders and meant to work in tandem. Disabled.

"Boss?" Buggy asked. "Am I no longer your favorite?"

Basil looked over his shoulder. "What do you mean?"

"You're treating her so well," Buggy said while glaring at Rosemarine. The adorable plant scouted the corpses in search of a body part to eat. "But she's so dim!"

"This place is so dark and dusty!" Rosemarine chirped, utterly oblivious to the centipede's disdain for her. "I hate it!"

"I don't have a favorite," Basil protested.

Plato squinted at his owner. "You don't?"

Somehow, the cat made these two words sound like a veiled threat.

"Are you seriously doing this right now?" Basil frowned at his team. "In an enemy camp?"

Plato wagged his tail. "This discussion will wait until after we've finished cleaning up the place."

"But we will not forget," Buggy finished.

My Lord, did I just start a war? Basil thought. "Buggy, what does your Tremorsense tell you?"

"I hear a commotion slightly ahead of us." Buggy shuddered. "There's a fight happening in the next room, Boss."

The invader was close. Basil took a few seconds to check Rosemarine's stats and see if she could pull her weight in a fight.

Name	Rosemarine Eglantine de la Barthe (Killaplant)		
Type	Plant		
Faction	Basil's Unnamed Party		
Experience	0/250		
Immune	Resist	Weak	
N/A	Wood, Life, Water, Earth, Light.	Plantslayer, Corrosion, Metal, Fire, Wind, Frost, Lightning, Darkness.	
Level	Health Points	Special Points	
1	225	260/270	
Strength	Agility	Vitality	Skill
8	14	8	15
(D+20%)	(C+20%)	(D+20%)	(C+20%)
Magic	Intelligence	Charisma	Luck
18	6	14	16
(B+20%)	(E+20%)	(C+20%)	(B+20%)

Physical	Mind	Soul	Corrosion	Metal	Wood	Life	Support	Ailment
-	-	-	Weak	Weak	Strong	Strong	Strong	-
Fire	Water	Earth	Wind	Frost	Lightning	Light	Darkness	Mythic
Weak	Strong	Strong	Weak	Weak	Weak	Strong	Weak	-
Passive Perks		Active Perks						
Paralyzing Bite		Sweet Pollen						
Bugcatcher		N/A						

Paralyzing Bite: You treat fangs and jaw-enhancing weapons as if you had medium proficiency with them (x1.5 damage). Additionally, your bite attacks may inflict the [Paralysis] ailment on contact.

Bugcatcher: Natural attacks have the [Bugslayer] effect, making them supereffective against [Bug] type (x3 damage).

Sweet Pollen: 10 SP, [Life]. Unleashes pollen regenerating a little HP among those who breathe it.

Basil winced. Rosemarine’s Perks could be useful, but her physical stats were frankly terrible. She would fall in a single blow.

"Are you unhappy, Mister?" Rosemarine asked upon noticing his sore expression.

"It’s alright, Rosemarine, we’ll figure it out," Basil reassured his plant. "If the worst comes to pass, Buggy and I will move to the front. Plato, you sneak around to flank. Rosemarine, could you heal us if we’re wounded?"

Rosemarine let out a squeal of approval. "I will help you, Mister-who-feeds-me."

Plato tensed up, ears raised. "You’re not going to use the rifle, Basil?"

"It's effective against birds, not bugs, and I hit harder with my axe." Basil took a step forward through the broken door. "Let's go."

The door opened into a narrow tunnel that seemed to stretch on forever. The air grew hotter as the group advanced. An unbearable smell of stewing meat assaulted Basil's nostrils. He immediately knew that the cook had messed up the dish beyond repair.

Basil saw light at the end of the tunnel and heard the noise of battle. An unseen beast let out a roar full of wrath and pain before being swiftly silenced. Basil put a finger on his lips and his pets didn't make a sound.

When they reached the next room, the battle was already over.

Basil's group discreetly entered a primitive hall in shambles. The cave was as large as the previous one and circular in length, with a throne of bones occupying the wall opposite of the entrance. Spinotter pelts covered the walls like tapestries and torches provided a measure of light. A cauldron full of boiling stew occupied the hall's center; a monster was busy drowning another's face in it when Basil's group arrived.

"Weakling!" the battle's winner said with a masculine, cavernous voice. "None of you are worthy!"

As suspected, the monster responsible for the massacre was a Bug Type. Two meters tall and humanoid in shape, he had stingers as long as swords sticking out of his forearms. A thick green exoskeleton covered every inch of his body except for hornet wings, sharp mandibles, and crimson compound eyes. His forearms were drenched in blood.

Megabug, Apollyon Drone

Level 10 [Bug]

Faction: Apocalypse Force

Basil blinked twice upon seeing the creature's level. *Shit.*

The monster's victim was an oversized goblin even taller than Basil, with powerful hands struggling to hold a mighty bone club. Megabug held onto him by his red mane of hair and kept his head buried in the stew. Three stinger wounds bled profusely on his chest, and the remains of a shattered tusk had fallen at the cauldron's feet. The giant goblin gasped for air when Megabug lifted his head out of the stew, his breath weak.

Basil observed the defeated giant goblin from afar and the System swiftly confirmed his suspicions.

Ogre moche, Ogre Den's Boss

Level 5 Elite [Giant/Beast]

Basil noticed a few goblin survivors watching the scene from behind two chests located in a corner of the hall. The cowards had lost all hope after watching their leader beaten within an inch of his life.

"Where is the neurotower?" Megabug lifted Ogremoché above the ground with one hand. The ogre attempted to lift his club to strike, but was so weak that the weapon slipped through his fingers. "Answer me or I'll rip out your eyes."

Okay, retreat, he's too strong for us, Basil thought, his hands sweating against his axe. *We need to retreat—*

"Level 10?!" Buggy choked in surprise. "That's enormo—"

Plato silenced him with a glare, but Megabug had already heard them.

So much for stealth, Basil thought as the insect monster glanced in their direction. Something in the creature's posture and body language chilled him to the bone. That subtle aura of menace, of cold-blooded brutality...

This monster was no primitive savage playing war. He was a violent assassin who killed as easily as he breathed.

"A human?" Megabug's eyes briefly glowed with a blue light as he observed Basil. "A Tamer too?"

"Damn it, Buggy," Basil complained.

"I-I'm sorry, Boss," the centipede apologized, his antennae lowering in shame. "I-I, I never saw someone with such a high level before..."

Four against one, Basil thought as his group took a few steps into the room while keeping a respectable distance away from their foe. Megabug had massacred his way through dozens of monsters and their leader, but Basil could barely see a scratch on his exoskeleton. *Four times screwed, that's what we are!*

"Who are you?" Megabug asked as he casually tossed Ogremoché into his own cauldron. The Boss sank into his own stew, his feet sticking out of it. "Did you come to claim this dungeon?"

"Basil Bohen," Basil introduced himself. He had to stall for time until he figured out a way for his team to escape with their lives. "Actually, we came to kill all the goblins. I made a blood oath to kill them all after they ruined my view of the forest."

If the team's surprise appearance bothered Megabug, he showed no hint of it. "Interesting. I can respect that."

"And who are *you*?" Basil asked.

"Megabug, Apocalypse Force scout."

"So cool and confident," Buggy whispered so low that Basil could barely hear him.

Plato scoffed. "Megabug? That's your real name?"

Megabug glared at the cat. "What of it?"

"Where's Gigabug?" Plato asked with a chuckle. His tone sounded confident, but his tense posture betrayed his unease. "Or Omegabug?"

"I do not know of any Gigabug nor Omegabug," Megabug answered flatly. Apparently, his kind couldn't understand sarcasm. "Do they serve another Horseman?"

Basil didn't miss the fact that he had called himself a scout though. A scout implied an *army*.

"So you serve someone else?" Basil asked. Could he throw Megabug into the cauldron's firewood while he was distracted? Would flames even wound him?

"This world is too weak for Lord Apollyon yet," the monster replied. "My level was low enough to let me cross when you humans summoned the Trimurti System to this world. I will claim this dungeon and secure my faction an early lead in the competition."

The humans summoned the System? Basil took note of this information and kept it in mind for later. *Dismaker Labs wishes you a happy apocalypse... it must be connected.*

"Basil, what do we do?" Plato whispered too low for Megabug to hear. "Fight or flight?"

If we run, he'll catch up to us in seconds, Basil thought grimly. "How do you intend to do that, my insectoid friend?"

"Once I finish this 'Boss'," Megabug snickered as he said the last word, "I can claim this dungeon's resources for my masters. Its monsters will serve them as I do. As will you."

Damn it, he really is someone else's grunt, Basil thought before the last sentence registered. "You want me to kiss your ass?"

"Why? Would it buff me?" Megabug asked without any trace of sarcasm. "Your Tamer class is valuable to train soldiers, so there is a place for your kind in the Apocalypse Force. Submit and serve."

"What's in it for me?" Basil asked warily. He had no intention of working for anyone, but at its worst, it beat being killed.

"You'll live," Megabug replied. "You'll have the chance to earn your worth. The strong will devour the weak and reach greater heights of power. The seas will turn red with blood, the stench of a billion corpses will choke the heavens. When the Apocalypse Force purifies this planet of unworthy lifeforms, you will be on the winning side."

Charming, Basil thought while doing his best to hide his distaste. That settled it, he couldn't let a would-be genocidal warlord access a potentially limitless army of monsters. *Humanity first*. "You're alone in our world?"

"Yes, for now." Megabug's back straightened up. "Enough talk, human. In?"

He raised his left arm, a drop of venom oozing from his stinger.

"Or out?"

Chapter 6: Man vs Drone

Basil thought about the offer for a moment and reached a decision.

"You son of a bitch, I'm in," he lied.

"Yes, the [Bug] master type unites!" Buggy lowered his head in submission. "Please don't kill us."

"You are mistaken, human, I am no son of a [Beast] type," Megabug answered Basil. "I was born from Lord Apollyon's hive."

Plato looked up at Basil with an annoyed glare. "Basil, are we truly allying with this dolt?" the cat whispered. "Can't we pick a better side?"

Basil locked eyes with his pet and pointed at the cauldron with his chin. Plato squinted, but he understood the message. The two hadn't needed a common language to understand each other before. They had their own nonverbal method of communication.

Will the others catch on though? Basil wondered. Buggy was too intimidated by Megabug to even consider striking him, while Rosemarine hummed to herself. She looked completely oblivious to the danger at hand. *It's all or nothing.*

"So, do I have to follow an initiation ceremony or something?" Basil asked. His eyes calculated the distance separating him from Megabug. *If I sprint, I can hit him in seconds.*

He couldn't let a genocidal bug get his hands on the dungeon and retreat would end in swift defeat. Only a surprise attack and seizing the initiative would give Basil's party a chance to prevail.

"Lord Apollyon will induct you into the Apocalypse Force upon arrival." Megabug retracted his stingers and glanced at the goblins hiding in a corner of the room. The critters shuddered in fear; they knew their time had come. "In the meantime, you will exterminate the survivors. They are unworthy of recruitment and I barely get experience from killing them."

"What about the Boss?" Basil asked, his gaze turning to Ogremoché. The ogre was still alive, but in no shape to assist. There would be no team-up against a greater threat. This only strengthened Basil's resolve to follow through with his plan.

"Mine," Megabug hissed.

So possessive.

"System," Basil whispered as Megabug peeked into the cauldron. "Can you level up in the middle of battle?"

You can assign your levels anytime so long as you have the necessary exp.

It was a gamble, since the System had only afforded Basil's party experience after a battle had concluded so far. He hoped the current circumstances would be unique enough to represent a special case.

With nothing left to lose, Basil charged as fast as his legs could carry him. Plato outpaced him with his claws out.

Bugsy and Rosemarine remained behind, too confused to move.

"Huh?" said the centipede, since he hadn't caught on.

Megabug didn't expect the surprise attack. How could he? Basil's Party would have to be suicidal to strike him after he so clearly established the gap in power between them. When Plato jumped at his face, the bug monster didn't react fast enough.

"Argh!" Megabug snarled as Plato furiously scratched his left eye. The cat's claws sprayed the floor with green insect blood.

Hoping his cat could buy him some time, Basil kicked the cauldron and spilled the stew all over the floor. The stunned Ogre moche rolled on the ground.

"Ugh..." he groaned as Basil's shadow blanketed his face.
"What... what the..."

Praying he hadn't made a mistake in his beating heart, Basil brought down his axe and beheaded the ogre.

Thankfully, God had taken pity on him. Basil's party did earn some experience, probably because striking down Ogre moche completed a quest unrelated to Megabug.

Quest: Baddest Ogre in Town completed! Your party earned 1500 EXP + 500 Quest EXP (500 EXP each). You earned 1 level and an [Ogre Necklace] Quest Reward!

By defeating Ogre moche, your Party can now bypass the Neurotower's barrier and decide the dungeon's fate.

One level? Basil gritted his teeth. He sensed something appear around his neck but was too panicked to care. One level wasn't enough! He had hoped for at least two!

Worse, Megabug had regained his composure. His hand swiftly grabbed Plato by the neck and lifted him above the ground with casual ease. The cat attempted to cut his foe's arm, but his claws barely scratched the exoskeleton.

"You dare strike me?" Megabug snarled. His stingers extended from his forearms, and he raised his free hand to punch Plato. "You low-level trash?"

Having finally realized the danger at hand, Buggy and Rosemarie charged into the fray. "Mr. Plato!" the centipede roared. "I'm coming, Boss!"

"[Tamer]!" Basil snarled as desperately rushed to help Plato. He would have taken a level in [Berserker], but he needed a Perk right now! "Something good, something good, something good!"

Tamer Level 3 Stat Gains: +1 STR, +1 AGI, +1 MAG, +1 INT, +1 CHA, +1 LCK. Your Health Points were raised by 20 and Special Points by 20.

Passive Perk Improved: Monster Charmer II: You can unlock the hidden potential of a recruited monster, granting them an additional Perk that they cannot access in the wild. Monsters will keep these additional abilities even if you kick them out of your party.

Plato learned [**Nine Lives**]! Buggy Alphonse Venture learned [**Agility Up**]! Rosemarie Eglantine de la Barthe learned [**Seed Decoy**]!

Megabug stabbed Plato before Basil could reach him.

The monster's stinger impaled his cat through the chest. Plato tried to say something, but he could only spit blood.

Basil's heart skipped a beat at the horrifying sight, and doubly so when Megabug contemptuously tossed the wounded cat aside. Basil's vision turned red, his distraught drowned out by unyielding rage.

"You little shit, I'll tear you apart!" Basil furiously swung his axe at Megabug's chest. The monster dodged with a backstep before retaliating by thrusting his stingers at astonishing speed. Basil quickly found himself on the backfoot as he struggled to avoid the flurry of blows.

"You stole my kill." Megabug's voice was lower and brimmed with cold fury. "You can't fathom how much I'm going to hurt you. [Acid Blast]!"

Purple particles swirled around Megabug's left hand before taking the shape of an orb. As he was already engaged in close-combat, Basil took it straight in the chest. The projectile melted his sweater and reached the skin underneath. Basil gritted his teeth as the acid burned his chest. Megabug quickly followed his attack with a mighty kick that sent him stumbling.

Bugsy and Rosemarine both threw themselves at the enemy from two different angles. Megabug spin-kicked the centipede in midair and sent him crashing against the bone throne at the end of the hall, the structure swiftly collapsing on him. Rosemarine had more luck and managed to bite Megabug in the left arm. Her maw's tight grip cracked the exoskeleton and drew blood.

Megabug grunted as he tried to get Rosemarine off him, which gave Basil the opportunity to move to the monster's

left. With Plato having cut out his eye, he shouldn't be able to see attacks coming from that direction.

The thought made Basil feel sick in the stomach. His eyes wandered to his cat, lying dead on the cold stone in a puddle of blood.

I'm sorry, Plato, Basil apologized in his mind. The adrenaline—and the rage—kept his attention focused on Megabug. *He won't outlive you, I swear!*

He swung his axe from Megabug's blind spot and hit the chest. His weapon broke past the exoskeleton with a mighty cracking noise. Blood dripped from a gaping wound and Megabug let out a buzzing noise.

"Hummie, kick his ass!" the goblins hiding behind the chests cheered Basil. "You can do it!"

"Your cheers make me puke!" Basil snarled back, especially since the goblins would rather watch from afar like cowards than intervene.

His next swings missed one after another and Megabug backflipped to safety. When Rosemarine refused to let go of him, he hit her at point-blank range with an acid orb. The poor plant squealed in pain as she fell defeated on the ground.

Holy shit, he's fast! Basil thought as he tossed his axe aside and grabbed his rifle. Buggy emerged from the ruins of the bone throne for round two. *Numbers are our only chance.*

"How does this work?" Buggy muttered to himself, his antennae raised in alarm. "Ah, I get it! [Agility Up]!"

A blue aura flared to life around Buggy. His legs picked up speed, allowing him to catch up to Megabug in a blur. The centipede threw himself at his foe to bite him only for strong hands to catch him in midair. Basil opened fire with his gun at Megabug to support Buggy. He aimed for the creature's last eye to blind him, but his aim was terrible. Basil's bullets missed or bounced off the creature's head without hitting a soft spot.

"Enough!" Wind swirled around Megabug's hands as they held Buggy's mandibles at bay. "[Shockwave]!"

A mighty blast of compressed air erupted from Megabug's stingers. The surprise volley hit Buggy in the face and flung him backward. The centipede hit the stone wall with enough force to crack and it didn't rise up.

Damn it, damn it, damn it! Basil panicked as he fired bullet after bullet. Megabug extended his wings to take flight as none of the projectiles hit their mark. He was too strong, too fast.

And then...

And then the rifle jammed.

"Judas!" Basil shouted in frustration as Megabug flew straight at him with both hands extended. Basil tossed the rifle aside and rushed at his axe to grab it again.

He never reached it.

Basil heard one of his ribs crack as a blast of air hit him in the chest, followed by the *deeply* unpleasant sensation of a foreign object going through his stomach.

At first, Basil didn't feel much; no pain, no nothing. He sensed a thick, warm liquid running down his chest as Megabug slammed him against a dusty stone wall near Plato's location. Only then did the pain sink in. His breath grew heavier.

Basil's eyes looked down at the stinger impaling his stomach. His mind went blank, his heartbeat grew so loud he could somehow hear it in the back of his head.

I'm bleeding, Basil thought, his hands trembling. *I'm bleeding*.

The goblins were silent. Plato was dead. Buggy and Rosemarine couldn't help him. Soon he would die too. His team had landed some good hits in, but the battle's outcome had never been in question.

Megabug pressed an arm against Basil's throat to keep him pinned against the wall and stabbed him in the stomach with the other. Basil sensed a foreign substance spread through his blood, cold and slimy.

[Poison] ailment resisted!

"You might resist Corrosion and Physical, but you are weak to Wind," Megabug rasped as he twisted his stinger. It took Basil all his strength not to scream from the sharp pain in his chest. "You picked the wrong fight, human."

"What the hell... are you talking about?" Basil hissed through his teeth, trying to distract the insect with conversation. He refused to die in a cave at the hands of a bug! He had sworn to his dead cat that Megabug wouldn't outlive them, and Basil Bohen always followed through with his threats!

"Weakling, you don't even know your elemental affinities?"

I could rip out his other eye with my fingers, Basil thought. Anger gave him focus and numbed his pain. But without a weapon...

Wait... he still had a tool available... but would the System allow it?

"I will give you this, human, you made me run out of SP. But this ends here." Saliva dripped from Megabug's mandibles as they opened. He intended to bite Basil's face off. "Any last words, human vermin?"

Here goes nothing, Basil thought as he opened his inventory screen and mentally selected the only item registered. *Please make it work...*

Item selected: [**Renault Kangoo**].

"Yeah..." Basil stuck his fingers between Megabug's mandibles. "Carmehameha."

Basil's hand shone as he summoned his car.

The monster's head immediately exploded as the much bigger Renault Kangoo materialized inside his mouth. The car expanded in the blink of an eye, shattering Megabug's skull into a billion tiny pieces and showering Basil with blood. The monster's beheaded body crumbled under the vehicle's sheer weight. The arms snapped in half, leaving only a severed stinger embedded in Basil's stomach.

Basil half-expected Megabug to rise up again, but the corpse remained firmly under the Kangoo's wheels. He gritted his teeth and ignored the pain as he extracted the stinger from his stomach. Basil knew it wasn't a good idea to remove a

blade from a wound, but keeping a poisoned weapon inside his flesh sounded much worse.

"I may be weak to Wind," Basil taunted Megabug's corpse, one hand holding the stinger and the other covering his wound. "But you were weak to windshields."

Your party earned 6000 EXP (1500 EXP each). You earned 3 levels!

Somehow, the sight of new levels didn't reassure Basil. As he leaned against his car's hood to stand upright, he wondered if he would live to assign them.

How can I even walk with a wound like this one? Basil wondered. The gaping hole in his chest bled profusely and his broken ribs made him ache each time he breathed. He should have collapsed already. *Is it the work of my Vitality stat?*

"Guys?" Basil called his pets. He prayed that at least one of them had lived through this disaster. "Guys?"

Bugsy was unconscious, but alive. Rosemarine was waking up. And Plato...

"I'm fine..."

Basil froze upon recognizing the voice. His eyes glanced at a corner of the hall where Plato had fallen. To Basil's surprise, he found his cat struggling to stand on his four legs; weak and drenched in his own blood, but alive. His fatal wound had somehow closed on its own.

"Plato?" Basil didn't hide his relief and surprise. The blow should have killed his cat on the spot. "You're alive?"

"I feel weird, Basil..." the cat replied. A shining purple number appeared above his head, briefly going down from '9' to '8.' Plato tried to take a step forward and stumbled instead. "I see birds... dead birds..."

"Plato, how dare you be alive?" Basil chuckled and spit blood for his trouble. "After I swore to avenge you!"

"I'm napping," Plato groaned, his eyes closing. "Come back tomorrow..."

"Mister!" Rosemarine joined Basil and sprayed him with colored dust. "[Sweet Pollen]! [Sweet Pollen]!"

Screen messages informed Basil that he had recovered some HP, but he could already tell by himself. His stomach wound closed before his eyes. Flesh knitted itself back together and new fresh skin grew to replace the old.

"Where's the body mass coming from?" Basil asked in confusion. He felt good as new, and it made no sense! "Where are the nutrients? You can't grow intestines from nowhere!"

"When I evolve, I will hang animals by their intestines!" Rosemarine chirped.

"Ugh, it doesn't matter." Basil sighed and petted Rosemarine on the head. She wriggled in happiness with a cute little noise. "Thank you, Rosemarine. Please heal the others too."

"Yes, Mister! Can I eat the big bug afterward?"

"Anything you want, sweetie." Basil moved to recover his axe and patted his Kangoo Renault on the back. Megabug's

blood was splattered all over the hood. "I'll give you a car wash, I promise."

Basil's joy lasted until he heard the surviving goblins stepping out of their hiding spot. In total, six of them had survived Megabug's rampage by bravely watching others kill him for them.

"Up for more?" Basil asked, half a challenge and half a threat. He briefly wondered if they would try to exploit his exhausted state to strike.

The goblins looked at Ogremoché, then at Megabug's corpse, and finally back at Basil.

"The old Boss is dead!" They shouted at the same time. "All hail the new Boss!"

Predictable, Basil thought. He looked down on the treacherous goblins with contempt. *I've never seen so many piles of filth in one room.* "Before I let you in my team, I must confirm something."

Basil's grip tightened on his axe.

"Have you killed other humans?"

"Yes, yes!" One of the goblins answered. These critters couldn't read Basil's mood to save their lives and believed they could earn his favor with empty boasts. "We killed two! Yes, two!"

"Two?" Basil squinted at the monsters. "I counted only one corpse outside my home."

"We ate the other," another goblin said. He pointed at the cauldron. "That stew isn't made of vegetables, ya know

Boss?"

Basil forced himself to smile. He noticed Rosemarine had finished patching Plato up and Buggy was starting to wake up. "Good to know. Honesty is the first step toward building trust. However, I feel you may have misunderstood the situation."

The monsters exchanged confused glances. "How so, Boss?"

"I didn't save you to recruit you."

Basil cut down the nearest goblin with a swing of his axe.

"Now that the bug is gone..." Basil's grin turned wicked. His tongue licked some of Megabug's warm blood still sprayed on his face. "I can kill you all by myself!"

The goblins screamed in fear, but their lives were already forfeit.

Chapter 7: Man vs Architecture

Nothing better than the smell of dead goblins in the evening.

Your party earned 600 EXP (45 EXP each)

"Ten percent per level," Basil calculated as he wiped the blood off his axe.

"Boss?" Buggy asked as Rosemarine patched up his wounds with her pollen.

"We take a ten percent experience penalty per level of difference when we kill a monster," Basil explained. "The six goblins were level one and I am level seven, so I took a seventy percent penalty."

Plato quickly caught on to the implications. "Does that mean we don't get experience from killing someone ten levels below us?"

"Mr. Megabug said that he barely got experience from killing goblins anymore," Buggy pointed out.

"That would make sense," Basil replied. "The System can't allow someone to become a god by killing rats over and over again."

With the goblin pest extermination complete, Basil checked his party's health. Rosemarine had done a great job at healing their wounds, although Basil felt a soreness in his ribs whenever he breathed and he would have to throw his

destroyed sweatshirt away. Plato looked like the healthiest member of the party, and he had come back from the dead.

"You're okay, buddy?" Basil asked.

"Of course I am," Plato replied with pride. "I died, no big deal."

"Quite unexpected," Basil said before checking his pet's stats. As he suspected, Plato's new Perk had saved him.

Passive Perk: Nine Lives: When Plato would die, he instead benefits from an [Auto-Revive] effect bringing him back to life at critical health. Plato can be revived eight times before the Perk becomes inactive. Current lives left: 8/9.

"You can die seven more times," Basil informed Plato. "The eighth death will stick."

"Does it include old age?" the cat asked, his big yellow eyes wide with excitement. "Can I dream of living past fifteen?"

"I can't say. Death by old age isn't mentioned."

"You know what, let's test it out," Plato decided. "I will avoid all risky endeavors until I die of old age."

Basil doubted that the apocalypse would let them live peacefully for a year, let alone a decade.

"Boss, can we loot this place now?" Buggy asked. "I hope the treasures are as good as your new necklace."

The new necklace? Ah yes, the quest reward. It had slipped Basil's mind in the heat of battle, but it appeared around his neck right after he slew Ogremoché.

Basil grabbed the item and checked its stats. The magical artifact had a miniature, horned skull for a charm and interlocked bones for a chain. How charming.

Ogre Necklace

Family: Accessory (Amulet)

Quality: D

Effect: Boosts the power of [Physical] attacks by 20 percent.

A necklace trendy among ogres ladies, usually fashioned from human pinkies.

The treasures in the goblins' chests weren't very interesting either. The first contained old leather boots far too small for Basil's feet and the second a pile of metal ore that the System registered as 'crafting material.'

Goblin Boots

Family: Accessory (Boots)

Quality: D

Restriction: Only small [Beast] or [Humanoid] Types can equip.

Effect: Increases Agility by +5.

Boots favored by cowards eager to run away from trouble.

"Do you want them, Plato?" Basil asked his cat. "Only beasts and humanoids can wear them, and they're too small for me."

"Sure." To Basil's surprise, the boots perfectly adjusted to the size and shape of Plato's back legs after he put them on. The cat stood up like a human and swaggered. "How do I look?"

"Cute and brave," Basil replied with a smirk. "Like the Puss in Boots."

"Aww, there's nothing for insects and no gold either," Bugsy complained. The treasures had left him thoroughly disappointed. "This dungeon's loot is junk!"

"Mister, can I eat them?" Rosemarine pointed at the dead goblins with her vines. "Healing everyone made me hungry."

"It's a waste of good food to leave them here," Bugsy said. "I'm sure we could do something with Mr. Megabug's stingers and Ogremoché's bones too."

"The pelts on the walls would make good carpets too," Plato added.

Basil quickly figured out a potential loophole. "Stash everything in the Renault Kangoo. If the Inventory considers wheels as part of the car, maybe it will do the same with stuff kept inside the trunk."

Basil's theory proved correct. After stashing everything they could grab in his car, Basil registered it in his inventory without any problem. Even better, Bugsy had also discovered a tunnel hidden behind a tapestry after taking it down. Basil stored his old rifle separately in the inventory before exploring this new path.

I suppose that's the advantage of listing items aside from one another, Basil thought as he tossed a piece of goblin leg to Rosemarine. The carnivorous flower caught it in midair

and hungrily swallowed it. *I can put extra stuff in the car, but only the rifle will appear in my hands ready to serve on a moment's notice.*

"I don't sense anyone, Boss," Buggy explained after checking the tunnel's entrance with his antennae, "but I hear a rumbling noise."

Plato raised his nose. "I smell steel."

"Don't lower your guard." Basil walked into the tunnel first with his axe in hand. His pets followed after him without making a sound.

Stone turned to metal as they walked. Golden circuits glowing with energy appeared on the tunnel's walls and colorful specks of dust floated in the air before Basil's eyes. Had they entered a particle accelerator? A hidden bunker?

Halfway through the party's journey into the dungeon's depths, the primitive stone tunnel had transformed into a chiseled hallway plated in metal. A harsh red light shone at the end. Basil tensed up, half-expecting a fight in the next room.

Something awaited them, alright. Something spectacular.

Basil's footsteps echoed into a large chamber. Faint auroras swirled in the air underneath a dome of advanced golden circuitry. A mechanical, two-meters tall monolith stood in the middle of the room like a divine obelisk. Its outer shell was black with a stylized golden 'D' logo engraved on its surface. Pulsating cables dug into the iron floor and a red forcefield protected the device from attacks.

Basil immediately identified the metal tower's true nature.

The dungeon's core was a server.

"I gotta say, I expected a shiny crystal," Plato commented.

"Me too," Buggy said with a low voice. The centipede spoke with the same respectful tone one would use in a church.

"This is my cradle, my origin. I can feel it in my bones."

The forcefield faded away when Basil approached the server. A System screen appeared immediately afterwards to present him with his options.

Congratulations. By defeating Ogremoché 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 5 dungeon, the Ogre's Den is limited to 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.

The more Basil read the text, the less he liked it. Basil had wondered why someone as powerful as Megabug would bother with a dungeon creating weak goblins, but now it made more sense. The teleportation network and renewable minions made it invaluable to any invading army.

Basil probed for more information. "What happens if I destroy the dungeon?"

The neurotower channels the power of the Trimurti to reshape reality. Destroying the dungeon will stop the terraforming effect and the summoning of monsters within its area of effect. Incursions may still happen. A dungeon's destruction cannot be undone.

"What do you mean by Incursions?"

This information is locked until the next Incursion event.

Basil snorted. "Stonewalled again?"

"Who cares, Boss? The dungeon is ours!" Buggy snapped his mandibles in excitement. "We claim it and the forest is ours for the taking!"

"Fuck no." Basil had made his decision. "We're burning down the place."

"Yes, this place is for the plebeians," Plato said, with Rosemarine squealing in support of the decision. "It doesn't even have a sofa!"

Buggy choked in indignation. "But, but, but! But what about the army? We could take over the marshes in no time at all!"

"We already conquered them," Basil pointed out. With Ogremoché dead and the goblins in disarray, the First Neighborhood War was as good as won.

"We could go farther!" Buggy argued. "This place is a fortress, Boss! We won't gain anything by throwing it away!"

"We will gain peace, Buggy. Haven't you heard what Megabug said? He was a scout, a grunt, and he nearly killed us all." And in Plato's case, successfully murdered him. "His superiors won't give up on the dungeon. They will send someone else to claim it."

So long as the dungeon remained active, it would be a magnet for trouble. Basil aspired to enjoy a quiet life, and he wouldn't have it so long as the dungeon remained active in the Barthes.

"We nearly died fighting a lone level 10 soldier," Basil pointed. "Do you think we could survive a raiding party full of them?"

Buggy grew less confident. "Maybe if we grind? I'm sorry, Boss, but destroying the dungeon sounds like a waste. We nearly died trying to take it!"

"Because you are blind to the truth." Basil locked eyes with his centipede pet, and delivered onto him a holy revelation. "Why would we need a dungeon when we have a *house*?"

Buggy's eyes opened as Basil delivered the holy revelation upon him.

"We have unused guest rooms on the upper floor big enough for you," Basil said as he invaded Buggy's personal space. The centipede attempted to retreat, but he couldn't escape the *truth*. "We have a sofa so warm and comfortable

that you will never want to stand up again. We have so many hours of recorded TV series and movies that you could spend a lifetime without watching them all. We have a central heating system and a chimney that will keep you warm at all times of the year."

Bugsy could hardly believe his ears... or what could pass for ears among centipedes. "Even in winter?"

"Even in winter," Basil replied softly. "The house is open to all those who believe in it."

"I understand." Bugsy repented from his lack of faith and ignorance. "We don't need to take somebody else's nest when we already have the perfect one!"

"Exactly." Basil focused on the System screen. "Is destroying the dungeon going to kill us?"

Once the self-destruct sequence is launched, the dungeon will revert back to its original state. People inside the neurotower's room will be unharmed, but individuals in other areas risk death or banishment to other dimensions.

"Then I have made my choice," Basil said with a triumphant smile. "Destroy."

Once chosen, this option cannot be undone. Do you confirm?

"I confirm."

The server shook and the dungeon trembled.

Basil felt invisible energies wash over him like a tide of water. A rumbling noise coming from the circuitry followed.

Bugsy's antennae wavered in alarm, Rosemarine froze in place, and Plato tensed up. Only Basil remained absolutely confident in his success.

Strange colorful particles erupted from the server; blue and orange, yellow and violet, green and red and all the colors of the rainbow. They briefly blinded Basil's vision with their numbers and brightness before fading away.

The ceiling shrank as the dome transformed into a smaller, cubical room before the party's astonished eyes. The circuitry vanished from the walls, replaced with small windows. Computers and technological devices that Basil didn't recognize materialized in the corners.

When at long last the lights died out, the group found themselves in a research room no bigger than a metal shack.

The water quality control station, Basil thought. A glance through the window showing the river outside confirmed his hypothesis.

Of the dungeon, only the server remained as a husk of its former self. Its circuits had fried from the heat, smoke rose from the cables, and the 'D' logo had melted on the iron shell. Basil doubted anyone could repair the device.

"Well, it's done." Plato stretched his legs. "Can we go back home now? I miss the sunlight."

"When I evolve, I will eat the moon," Rosemarine chirped.

"We won the war!" Bugsy rejoiced. "Nobody will climb the fence again!"

Basil didn't join in the celebration. Instead, he gazed at the server's remains and the damaged logo on its surface. *Dismaker Labs wishes you a happy apocalypse*, he thought. *Are they a server company? Where did I see the name?*

When Basil's eyes turned to the server's damaged processors, all became clear. "I remember!"

"What, Basil?" Plato asked with an annoyed look. "You remember what?"

"Where I saw the name Dismaker Labs and their logo!"

The answer had been in front of Basil all along.

Chapter 8: Man vs Craft

How good it felt to be home.

After warring in the mud and the dust for days, Basil could finally relax. After trading his damaged sweatshirt for a bathrobe and his shoes for slippers, he had evolved into the ultimate form of the Homo Sapiens: the *sedentary man*.

Like any good stay-at-home person, Basil did his research from the safety of his sofa. His laptop occupied a cushion at his side while he studied the user manual. The name '*Dismaker Labs*' appeared among the companies listed.

"I knew it, they built the next-gen chips." They had also provided a few of the laptop's applications. The geolocalisation, the visual interface... Dismaker Labs even provided some components used in his TV. "Chips made in India, huh? I would have bet on Taiwan."

The notice pointed to a Maltese child company of a larger consortium in charge of European logistics. It didn't surprise Basil, since Malta had become a favorite destination of tech companies in recent years. How did a multinational corporation producing chips in India come to install a monster-summoning server in the middle of nowhere, France?

I'm sure the police will investigate the connection, Basil thought. Are there any police left?

A part of him was tempted to visit the nearest city and check how the rest of the country was faring. A day after the dungeon's destruction, the auroras borealis above the

Barthes were gone. The world seemed to slowly return to normal.

You have earned 600 EXP (45 each).

Or not.

Basil opened his front door in case the house was under attack. Instead, Plato greeted him on the threshold. His fur was drenched in blood, and the feathers of his latest kills were stuck between his claws.

"You've been grinding?" Basil asked. At this rate, Plato would single-handedly expel the bird menace from the Barthes.

"I needed to blow off some steam." Plato hissed at his owner. "Especially after your twisted betrayal!"

Basil raised an eyebrow. "My betrayal?"

"After all we've gone through, how could you do this to me?" Plato looked adorable when he sulked, especially with his new little boots on. "I, who lovingly woke you up each morning with a gentler touch than any alarm, who gracefully allowed you to live each morning, who selflessly saved your hide from bugs and goblins!"

Either Basil had contracted Alzheimer's or Plato misremembered things. "Is it about the favorite pet argument? Or Buggy's new bedroom?"

From the glare Plato sent him, Basil had guessed right.

"I was the only one allowed to sleep in the house before," the cat said, incensed. "And how could you say that I'm not your favorite in public? That I am not the center of your universe?"

"Because you're not?"

"See? I should leave for a gentler owner and let you stew in your regrets!"

Fat chance of that.

"Plato, you're not my favorite pet," Basil replied calmly. "You're my best friend."

His cat remained silent for a moment, his tail stiff as an iron rod. "Come again?"

"I know you think friends are for other people, but it doesn't matter." Basil shrugged. "We've lived together for over two years; and after René died you were the only person I shared my home with. You're in a league of your own."

Plato sat on the threshold. From his expression, Basil's declaration had left him speechless. The cat locked eyes with his owner and tried to find his words.

"Wow," Plato said, probably because he didn't know how to react.

"Yeah."

"What does it say about you that your best friend is a talking cat?"

"That I'm an introvert and a cat person," Basil replied with a deadpan tone. He always felt closer to animals than his own kind. "Yeah, Bugsy will have his own bedroom... but you're the only one I'll tolerate in mine."

The cat muttered something under his breath, so low that Basil couldn't hear him clearly. "Plato, what are you

mumbling about?"

"I'm sorry." Plato's tail wavered in shame. All traces of arrogance vanished from his voice. "It was my abandonment issues talking, alright? I hate it when you pay more attention to another animal. It makes me feel inadequate."

He sounded so vulnerable, so afraid...

"I didn't mean to make you feel that way," Basil apologized. "I won't abandon or replace you even if I take new pets in. You don't have anything to fear."

"I know," Plato replied with a sigh. "My head understands that I can trust you, but my gut tightens on its own."

Some scars healed with magical pollen and others remained with you all your life.

"So René was right?" Basil asked before petting his cat behind the ears. "You had a previous owner?"

Basil and Old Man René had found Plato off the side of the road one night after returning from a shopping trip to Bordeaux. The cat had been so skinny they could see his bones and fleas infested him. Basil and René had stopped the car, taken Plato in, and never looked back. It had taken weeks to get the scared cat to recover and trust them.

"Do you think he's a stray cat?" Basil remembered asking René once.

"He would have run away from us if he were," the Old Man had replied with his usual cynicism. "No Basil, he's like us. An unwanted burden dumped out of sight, out of mind."

Basil could never confirm his theory before, but now that his cat could talk back...

"Yes, I had another owner." Plato looked away and avoided Basil's touch. "I don't want to talk about it, Basil."

"I understand." Everyone was entitled to a private life. "I would rather forget the bad times and make place for the good ones too."

"How about a *Major Chicken* rerun in the evening then?" Plato suggested. "We can invite the entire party."

"Sure, but I won't let you inside the house if you don't clean yourself first." Basil pointed at the cat's bloody fur. "I just cleaned the floor."

"Give me a few hours to groom." Plato licked his shoulders. "Don't you dare tell the others it was my idea. I've got a reputation to uphold."

"Sure."

Since he had a few hours to kill before the evening, Basil decided to finally explore the crafting side of his personal menu. He hadn't yet managed to repair his rifle on his own and hoped that the System would help with it.

Players can use the Crafting subsystem to make, enhance, or break items using four options.

- **Craft:** Create items using raw materials.
- **Repair:** Repair a broken item.
- **Refine:** Upgrade an item.
- **Salvage:** Break an item to harvest its materials.

Players without an appropriate Crafting Class or Perks must use the appropriate Recipe to work on an item. You can access the following Crafter Classes: [**Alchemist**], [**Trapmaker**], [**Merchant**], [**Chef**].

None of the classes available specialized in firearms, but they could still prove useful and Basil had three levels to assign. He immediately eliminated Merchant since he had nobody to trade with and he could cook well enough on his own to ignore Chef. Trapmaker appealed to Basil, but he could already build traps on his own.

He couldn't say the same for medicine. Basil considered Rosemarine's healing abilities astonishing, but they might not always suffice. She couldn't heal diseases nor poisons.

Alchemist should help compensate for her limits.

Alchemist: A class specialized in making potions and transmuting matter. STR (D); MAG (B); VIT (C); SKI (C); AGI (D); INT (A); CHA (D); LCK (B).

Alchemist Level 1 Stat Gains: +1 STR, +1 AGI, +1 VIT, +1 SKI, +1 MG, +1 INT, +1 LCK. You gained 40 HP and 15 SP.

New Passive: Alchemy I: You can craft alchemical items without a recipe and create your own through experiments. The list of items you can craft includes potions, alchemy tools, mutagens, poisons, chemical mixtures and bombs.

"I suppose firearms don't count as alchemical tools?" Basil joked as he summoned René's old rifle in his hands. He soon ate his words upon seeing the 'salvage' option available.

Salvage [**Duckslayer, Old Hunting Rifle**]? 73%
chances of harvesting the following materials: Ancient
Barrel, Gunpowder Dust.

"Ancient barrel? It's not even forty years old." Basil decided against destroying his only firearm. Even more strangely, the 'repair' option wasn't available with the rifle. Did the System allow Basil to salvage it because the gunpowder counted as an alchemical material?

The System's strange reaction aroused Basil's curiosity. Although he considered the screens annoyances disturbing his peaceful life more than anything, he was stuck with them for the foreseeable future. Destroying the dungeon had brought peace to the Barthes, but there were so many unknown factors: Megabug's organization; the 'incursions,' whatever that meant; Dismaker Labs... Any of them could disturb Basil's peaceful life in the near future, not to mention marauders or wandering monsters.

There were other problems to address too. Basil had all the water and food he would ever need, but he couldn't manufacture medicine or repair tools like his lawnmower if it failed him. Crafting could help offset his dependence on the outside world.

Failing to prepare was preparing to fail. The more he understood how the System worked, the fewer headaches he would face in the future.

Basil retreated to the kitchen to experiment further. He traded his rifle for a water bottle and checked the crafting options available. His menu informed him that he could salvage the container to harvest water and plastic, use it as a crafting material in combination with something else, or refine it.

Basil selected the last option. The bottle in his hands shone brightly for a moment before returning to normal.

[Water Bottle] refined into: **[Purified Water Bottle]**.

The water has been cleansed of impurities, diseases and parasites.

Oh, that was great! With the ability to purify the stream outside, Basil could eliminate the risk of disease in his household!

It tastes better than before too, Basil thought as he sipped the water. For his next experiment, he held the bottle in one hand and a pill of paracetamol in the other. The 'Craft' option showed him a 74 percent chance of success. *Let's try it.*

Both items shone when Basil started crafting. When the lights died out, the paracetamol pill swiftly vanished. Meanwhile, the water inside the plastic bottle turned into a green liquid similar to mint syrup.

New Recipe Unlocked: **[Green Medicine]**.

Green Medicine

Family: Potion (Consumable)

Quality: D

Heals 1 HP per milliliter for those who drink it.

Astonishing. How the hell did this mechanism work? How did the inventory teleport items around? How did the dungeons alter reality? Even if magic existed, it had to follow laws of some kind. How did Dismaker Labs' server tap into a cosmic force? So many questions, so few answers.

Basil repeated the experience three more times to gather more information and noted a twenty percent drop in his crafting chances when he used unrefined water. The quality of the base material influenced the odds of success.

This takes me back to the pharmacovigilance classes, Basil mused as he twice combined paracetamol and refined water into healing medicine. The ones with teachers, not screens.

As probabilities forewarned Basil, his fourth crafting attempt was a bust. Both the paracetamol pill and the water bottle vanished without a trace when he failed to craft.

Warning: Crafting failure will destroy the materials used.

"But where do they go?" Basil asked, incensed. "Where did the bottle go? Matter can't be destroyed, only transformed! Where did it go? Up my ass?"

Dismaker Labs wishes you a happy apocalypse!

The answer only made Basil more determined to get to the bottom of this mystery. He spent the better part of his day analyzing everything he could, starting with the remains of monsters collected from the dungeon. Basil quickly confirmed that he couldn't craft anything from the goblins nor OGREMOCHE, but the System did react to Megabug's stingers. Although the chances of success were around thirty percent, Basil combined one of them with a green syrup.

New Recipe Unlocked: [**Venom Bomb**].

The two items fused into a hand-sized orb filled with green liquid. A short fuse stuck out of its plastic shell.

Venom Bomb

Family: Bomb (Consumable)

Quality: C

Effect 1: Inflicts weak corrosion damage to those exposed to its toxic gas.

Effect 2: Gas has a 10% chance of inflicting the [Poison] ailment when breathed.

A bomb crafted from a monster's venom; environmentally unfriendly.

"A bomb?" Basil frowned in confusion. He had expected to produce an antidote. "Note to self, crafting is a gamble. I can't predict what a combination's result will be until I try it."

Basil noticed a trend: that the higher an item's quality, the more abilities it had. Further experimentation showed that he couldn't refine items ad infinitum either; the option was unavailable with green medicine and Megabug's last stinger. Neither could he use 'salvage' on either.

The 'repair' option proved itself the most straightforward. After scratching a plastic bottle with a knife, Basil undid the damage with the 'repair' option. When he outright removed a piece of the container, the option became unavailable until he held another piece of plastic in another hand. Yet the crafting result was lighter than both of its components.

Why did the System obey the law of conservation of mass in some cases but not in others? Where did superfluous mass vanish?

Basil had the gut feeling that Dismaker Labs' server could help him answer the mystery. He would have to return to

the water control station and bring the husk back home for study.

After further experimentation, Basil confirmed that his Alchemist class allowed him to use the crafting subsystem on medicine, liquids, containers, salts, and cooking utilities like cauldrons. The System also counted anything related to the house's plumbing as alchemical tools for an obscure reason. Basil wondered if he could rework the pipes to pump water from the stream directly; if so, he could set up his own water station in the basement. Maybe even a sweet little lab too.

New Quest: They called me Mad!

Recommended Level: 1.

Objective: Build your own alchemist laboratory and show them all.

Reward: 100 Bonus EXP + New Alchemy Recipe.

"Challenge accepted," Basil said. "But it will wait for tomorrow."

It was cooking time and his pets were starving.

As usual for *Major Chicken* reruns, Basil prepared a bucket of fried chicken seasoned with spice. He meticulously removed the bones to leave only the sweet tender meat. Considering his pets' appetite, he prepared double the usual ration with homemade golden fries. Coke brought out of cryogenic storage in the fridge completed the set.

When Basil brought dinner to the main room, he found the whole gang waiting for him. Plato had taken over his

favorite cushion and the larger Buggy occupied most of the sofa. Rosemarine took root in a plant pot.

"Do you want some of my dirt and water, Mister?" Rosemarine asked. "You need it to grow!"

"The sofa is the only land I need," Basil replied. Buggy coiled to give him the space to sit. "I'm sure the others will agree too."

"Beds and sofas are so much more comfortable than the grass outside." Buggy had tears in his eyes. "I'm so glad I proved myself worthy of a bedroom, Boss."

"Don't cry," Rosemarine said, mistaking the bug's tears of joy for sadness. "You can use my room too! I have glass walls!"

"This is kind... this is very kind." Buggy wiped his tears. "After all the pain and sweat, I'm finally moving up in the world."

"Well, trying to kill me left a bad first impression," Basil replied. "But I believe in second chances. You're part of the household now."

"Can I... can I decorate my room, Boss? With shells and trophies?"

"As long as you clean up after yourself."

"Less talking, more TV," Plato hissed. "Gimme the chicken."

"I'm hungry," Rosemarine complained. Buggy tossed her a piece of fried chicken which she caught in midair before devouring his own. "Thanks!"

"So we're going to watch events that happened in the past?" Buggy asked, being unfamiliar with the concept of television.

"Sort of," Plato said before biting his chicken piece. "The series is fiction, but it's entertaining."

Enough that I recorded the whole series and made TV marathons a ritual under my roof, Basil thought. He attributed the cartoon's entertainment value to the fact that its scenarists had embraced the nonsensical premise and over-the-top nonsense.

"Will it increase our stats too?" Buggy asked naively.

Basil opened his mouth to say no, before realizing that the System had given him experience with weirder stuff.

"Maybe?" Basil replied before opening a can of coke. "It didn't before the System arrived, but it could have changed in the meantime."

Buggy nodded with excitement. "I hope we get levels."

Whether they did or not, Basil knew they would have a good time.

Major Chicken was the archetypal 70s cartoon: heavily censored, horribly offensive to modern sensibilities, full of filler, and yet so utterly absurd that it looped back to funny. Its original fifty-episode run hadn't been allowed to air in Bulgaria, but the reruns after the fall of communism in the nineties became surprisingly popular. Basil had grown up with the series and enjoyed watching it again even in his adult life.

"A warning," Basil said as he pressed the remote's play button. "The cartoon was funded by a fast-food company to sell meat dishes. You might notice a few subtle subliminal messages."

"What does subliminal mean?" Buggy asked with a puzzled expression.

"That you're going to love it," Plato replied. The screen turned black, a song echoing in the background. "Now shush."

"It's starting," Rosemarine whispered.

The first episode opened like almost all the others: with the sight of spaceships soaring the cosmos under the direction of a shadowy conqueror.

"Once the universe knew peace," said the voiceover. "But everything changed when I, Emperor Vegan, unleashed my army across the cosmos!"

The picture of Earth appeared, a bastion of meat consumption standing strong against hordes of vegetable aliens.

"Yet one insignificant planet resists my conquest! Only one hero and his friends dare to oppose me!"

The whole cast of heroes appeared. Frail but brave Sergeant Chick. Loyal and motherly Private Piggie. Big Beef and Little Lamb. And of course, the strong, inimitable, charismatic star of the show...

"Major Chicken and the Meat Brigade!"

The series' eponymous title appeared across the screen in shiny letters.

"But can they truly prevent the future that is... Emperor Vegan?"

The party spent their evening chilling out on the sofa and enjoying good television. It didn't give them any exp, but it did bring them a moment of happiness.

That was all that mattered.

Chapter 9: Man vs Evolution

Of all the things Basil disliked about his university days, the terrible nights spent studying boring subjects had topped his list.

Alas, history always repeated itself. Basil struggled to focus as he skimmed through pages after pages of useless information. A pile of books stood on his table like an ominous mountain and the coffee in his cup shrank with each passing minute.

He would have found the information he was looking for already if the goddamn internet still worked! Couldn't the apocalypse spare his wifi connection? When Plato walked into the main room with a triumphant look, Basil welcomed the interruption.

"Yo dog, we recovered the server," Plato said. "Bugsy is moving it to the garage."

"Wonderful." Maybe it would offer Basil more insight on Dismaker Labs than the books.

"What are you reading?" Plato leaped on the table. "You look bored to death."

"Because I am. These are tourism books and my old history-geography school manuals." They were the only works mentioning Malta and India in Basil's private library. "I'm trying to find more info on the company that created the server."

"Any success so far?"

"Nope."

Plato leaped onto his owner's lap. "If you have time to complain, then you have time to cuddle me!"

Plato's words brought a smile to Basil's face and he started scratching his pet's ears. The cat purred in response. It made Basil's research less boring as he skimmed through the text. He didn't find anything interesting, at least until he caught the word 'Trimurti' on a page.

"History of India: the hundred faces of the Hindus," Basil read the chapter with renewed attention. "Although the Hindu faith's sects and gods are beyond count, most recognize the existence of three deities embodying the universal cycle: Brahma the Creator; Vishnu the Preserver; and Shiva the Destroyer. The three form the supreme triple deity: the Trimurti."

What were the odds? Basil didn't believe in coincidences.

"Other popular Hindu deities include Ganesha, the elephant-headed son of Shiva... the Tridevi goddesses called Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Parvati... the dreaded Kali..."

Unfortunately, school textbooks rarely went into depth about important subjects. Basil couldn't find any other mention of the Trimurti besides the occasional Hindu festival picture.

The System had said that the server channeled the power of the Trimurti to alter reality. Did it mean that it harnessed the power of Hindu gods? Did they even exist?

As an Orthodox Christian, Basil respected other faiths but he couldn't bring himself to believe in the existence of multiple gods. It went against everything he had been taught in his life.

Perhaps he should revise his beliefs. The Bible never mentioned the System's arrival and a goblin invasion.

Plato looked up at his owner. "You've found something?"

"A potential lead, but not much."

"Then find a bigger book."

"We would have to go to Dax or Bayonne to find the nearest library." Dax was the closer city, but Bayonne was bigger. Alternatively, they could go to Mont-de-Marsan or Biarritz.

Basil was half-tempted to visit one of them. It would let him check on how the rest of civilization was faring and he needed medical supplies to fuel his crafting.

There were risks to consider. Cities made for larger targets than isolated houses lost in the woods. Monsters could have turned the nearest towns into nests unless the army or police managed to fend them off. Basil couldn't leave the house undefended either. A wandering beast would break through the fence and eat all of Basil's animals.

If only they could recruit an immobile security force...

Basil shelved the thought in a corner of his mind and snapped his book shut. Plato squealed as his owner rose up and held him in his arms.

"Are we going on an adventure?" the cat asked, his tiny paws dangling in the void.

"Yes, we're going to the garage." The one place even dustier than a dungeon's basement.

Bugsy had beaten Basil to the room. The centipede exhaled after pushing the server's wreck into a corner of the garage, right between shelves full of tools and the shiny Renault Kangoo. Basil noticed a small piece of Megabug's flesh stuck in the forefront wheel. The hours he had spent washing the car hadn't been enough to clean everything.

"It's heavier than it looks, Boss." Bugsy coughed in utter exhaustion. "Much heavier."

"I've got pills against fatigue in the basement," Basil replied. His crafting experiments with medicine other than paracetamol had produced a wide array of different results: anti-paralysis drugs, poison antidotes, even a potion healing SP rather than HP. "Thanks for your work, Bugsy."

"You're welcome, Boss..." Bugsy said before collapsing on the floor. "Nothing to report..."

"We haven't met any monster in two days," Plato said with a look of disappointment. "Not even silly birds. I fear they may have fled south."

"Gee, I wonder why," Basil replied with a deadpan tone as he examined the server. It proved a fool's hope. Basil knew little about computers and the System refused to help repair the device. He couldn't even use the salvage option.

Did he lack the right crafter class? Or did the server's creators put in safeties to prevent people from identifying where it came from?

Basil decided to keep the server intact in the garage just in case. "Guys, why didn't you store it in your inventory

instead of carrying it around?"

"Uh, because we can't?" Plato replied with a shrug. "We don't have a pocket treasure dimension."

Basil raised an eyebrow in surprise. "You guys don't have an inventory of your own?"

"No, Boss." Buggy had recovered enough to rise up again. "I don't even have your crafting option in my menu. Just *Status, Party, Logs* and *Settings!*"

Monsters had access to half a Player's menu? The other features were probably meant to give humans an advantage over the inherently stronger monsters.

If none of his party members could craft, then Basil couldn't scale up his production. He had hoped to teach Buggy or Plato how to make medicine in case they faced an emergency. How disappointing.

Since Basil had run out of paracetamol pills, he would have to harvest the few medicinal plants growing in the greenhouse. It would let him check on how Rosemarine fared with her new home too.

Basil walked into the garden. His chickens and rabbits wandered freely among the grassy terrain without fear of goblin invaders. Although Buggy's presence spooked them at first, the animals had grown used to his presence. The centipede coiled into a half-circle shape when he crossed paths with the chickens.

His action made Plato curious. "What are you doing?"

"Don't you recognize the gesture?" Basil chuckled. "He's doing the 'C for Chicken' sign."

"I'm honoring Major Chicken," Bugsy replied with big naïve eyes. Last night's TV night had converted him to the cartoon religion. "The way he threw Spinach Lord into a volcano to counter his regeneration after realizing chicken fries at a higher temperature... That was so smart, so brave! I hope the chicks will grow as strong as Major Chicken one day!"

Basil almost replied that Major Chicken could never exist in real life, but his thoughts came to an abrupt stop first. His mind struggled to process a detail his eyes had just noticed.

"Plato?" Basil asked.

"Yes, Basil?"

"Why does this rabbit have a horn?" Basil pointed at one of his pets eating grass near the fence with his chin.

Plato squinted at his fellow animal and noticed the tiny yellow horn growing on its forehead. It was so small Basil almost missed it.

"Don't rabbits grow horns naturally?" the cat asked innocently. "Like cows?"

"What's a cow?" Bugsy asked. "It sounds delicious."

Basil locked eyes with his cat. "Are you kidding, Plato?"

"No, of course not," Plato replied with a tone that implied otherwise. "Does it matter? You aren't supposed to understand me either and centipedes don't grow two-meters long. Just go with the flow. Thinking too much will give you headaches."

"I'll manage." Basil stared at the rabbit. "Can you understand me?"

The rabbit looked up at his owner, but it didn't say a word.

"Since I can't understand it, that rabbit mustn't fully count as a monster yet," Basil said. "But he's clearly transforming into one."

"Even after we blew up the dungeon?" Plato raised his chin at the clear skies devoid of magical auroras. "The area returned to normal."

Bugsy suggested an interesting theory. "Maybe the rabbits had started to change before you destroyed the dungeon, Boss? You're only noticing now."

"Maybe," Basil conceded his point. "The System's 'magic' could work like ambient radiation. We destroyed the local nuclear reactor, the dungeon, but its influence has already mutated the wildlife."

Plato tensed up in his owner's arm. He looked up at Basil with his big, fearful yellow eyes.

"What?" Basil asked.

"Do you think I could lose my tail?"

Basil smiled smugly.

"H-Hey, don't joke about this!" Plato hissed. "It happened to other cat breeds! I'm an Earth animal too, I could be mutating as we speak!"

"Just go with the flow," Basil echoed "Thinking too much will give you headaches."

Plato spitefully wagged his tail in his owner's face, which only made him laugh.

Basil worried a bit about the implications though. If a rabbit could grow a horn in less than a week, how would he have looked after a year of exposure to the dungeon's influence? Basil dared not to imagine the resulting abomination. For all he knew, his pet rabbits could have mutated into murderous plushies.

At least none of the greenhouse's flowers had transformed since Basil had last visited it. A sweet aroma filled his nostrils upon passing through its glass gate. Shrubs, vegetables, and flowers grew in rows of pots and small fenced enclosures. Basil mostly cultivated tomatoes, peas, lettuce, and strawberries to cook with, but he had also tried his hand with medicinal herbs like ginseng and urtica.

And then there was Old Man René's special weed... although Basil had never consumed it himself, he could never bring himself to get rid of it. Too much nostalgia.

As for Rosemarine, she had made her nest in a pot. To Basil's astonishment, a perfect copy of her minus the pot stood next to her.

"Hello, Mr. Who-Feeds-Me!" Rosemarine and her double clapped with their vines. "Welcome, welcome!"

Basil struggled to tell them apart, as did his pets. Plato leaped from his owner's arms to smell the two flowers closely. The cat then swiped the one on the left. The false Rosemarine instantly vanished in a shower of colorful sparkles.

"Easy peasy," Plato said with pride. "This one smelled fresher."

"Was that your seed decoy Perk?" Basil petted Rosemarine on the head. The flower wriggled in pleasure, but Plato

brooded over the lack of acclaim. "It was beautiful!"

"When I evolve, I will fill the world with my brood!"
Rosemarine chirped.

Aww, she wanted to become a mommy!

A brilliant idea suddenly crossed Basil's mind. He had found the perfect solution to the house's security problem, the ultimate defense that would allow him to hunt far from home without worry.

"Pure genius," Basil whispered.

"Oh no." Plato sighed. He knew his best friend too well. "Oh please no."

"We're going to build a flower hedge of plant monsters all around the house!" Like every confident visionary, Basil ignored all skeptics. "They will protect the household when we leave and we can harvest their pollen for medicine!"

No invader would dare to step on his lawn ever again!

While Plato sighed in surrender and Rosemarine yipped in happiness, Buggy's faith proved lacking. "Boss, are you sure this is a good idea? How are we going to find so many plants, let alone feed them? That sounds too ambitious a plan—"

"Are you doubting my wisdom, Buggy Alphonse Venture?" Basil's tone turned colder than ice and sharper than a kitchen knife.

"N-No, Boss..." Buggy immediately submitted to his owner's authority. "You're always right..."

"I love democracy." Basil felt proud of his open-mindedness.
"I love unanimity."

"Yay, new friends!" Saliva dripped from Rosemarine's maw.
"New food!"

"Must we really pick flowers in the wild, Basil?" Plato didn't hide his utter lack of enthusiasm. "Don't you know I'm allergic to work?"

"I can craft a cure," Basil replied with a deadpan tone. "Give me time to figure it out."

Bugsy lowered his head. "Boss, uh... can I ask you something?"

His embarrassed tone made Basil frown. "What is it, Bugsy?"

"I have two extra levels, but I can't use them before you assign yours." Bugsy shrunk as if scared. "I know you said that we shouldn't pursue experience for its own sake, Boss, but I still want to get stronger, Boss. I'm..."

The centipede didn't dare finish his sentence.

Basil tried to coax the last words out of his mouth with a reassuring tone. "Bugsy, you don't have anything to fear. I'm not going to hit you if I don't like your answer."

"I'm tired of losing!"

The greenhouse trembled from the strength of Bugsy's voice.

"I'm tired of losing," Bugsy confessed, his voice lower and weaker. His antennae pointed down and he avoided Basil's gaze. "You beat me and then Mr. Megabug... when we

fought him, you... you and Mr. Plato didn't hesitate to charge where I froze in fear. I didn't know what to do."

"Hey, don't beat yourself over it," Plato comforted the centipede. "Basil is a grumpy bear in human form with the temper to match, and I'm a cat. We were born to win."

Basil's jaw clenched at the bear comment, but he didn't say a word. It was rare for Plato to have kind words for anyone.

"If I had acted immediately, you wouldn't have lost a life Mr. Plato," Buggy protested, tears forming in his eyes. The cat's words had only worsened his mood. "Everyone must pull their weight in a swarm and I didn't. Miss Rosemarie healed everybody, but I couldn't even slow Mr. Megabug down!"

"Please don't cry," Rosemarie whispered before spraying Buggy with healing pollen. "Here, your wounds will heal!"

"Thank you," Buggy replied, even though the pollen couldn't heal emotional scars. "I want to win fights like you, Boss. Or like Major Chicken. I need to become stronger, to get more levels."

Basil, who had listened in respectful silence, finally answered. "Buggy, levels will help make you stronger, but strength isn't your problem. What you need is more self-confidence. You'll start by asserting your ideas, even to me."

"But Boss, you said if I questioned your wisdom—"

"It was a joke." Well, sort of. Basil intended to go hunting for flowers no matter what, but he wouldn't force anyone to come along. "I was teasing you, nothing more. If you think I'm doing something wrong or stupid, you shouldn't hesitate to call me out on it."

"I do it all the time." Plato nodded in confirmation. "Of course, Basil never listens to reason, but that's on him."

Basil ignored the jab. "I'm confident enough to know what I want, but sometimes I listen. Next time, I want you to assert yourself and stand for what you believe in. Eventually, you'll do so naturally."

"I..." Buggy wiped his tears. "Alright, Boss. I'll try."

"You won't try, you will," Basil replied as he opened his status screen. "And to honor your resolve, I'll grant your wish."

Basil considered investing in his Alchemist and Tamer classes for their utility, but with the rifle broken he had to rely on his axe to defend himself. Assigning his two last levels into Berserker to obtain a new combat-oriented Perk sounded wiser when preparing for a monster hunt.

Berserker Level 2 & 3 Stat Gains: +4 STR; +2 AGI; +1 VIT; +1 MAG; +2 CHA; +2 LCK. You gained 70 HP and 25 SP.

New Active Perk: Warp Spasm I: Technique, 10 SP. You can apply the [Berserk] ailment to yourself at will for 5 minutes. While under a [Berserk] effect, you relentlessly attack the closest target in melee with no regard for your safety, friend or foe, and cannot cast [Spells]. In return, your strength is greatly enhanced and you feel neither pain nor fear.

Basil shivered as the System empowered him. He sensed his muscles turn to steel and his breathing strengthen. His enhanced stats improved his body and mind both. The rush lasted mere seconds, but it brought Basil immense pleasure.

It felt like a drug. Basil briefly wondered how many would grow addicted to level-ups before the sight of Buggy combusting brought him back to reality.

Bright red flames covered the centipede in the blink of an eye. From his mandibles to his tail, a mantle of smokeless fire obscured every inch of his carapace. His antennae became two bright rods.

"Buggy!" Basil shouted in alarm. Yet the centipede uttered no scream of pain nor fear. The flames consuming him didn't spread to the greenhouse's flowers nor raise the temperature. Plato hissed in surprise.

"He's evolving!" Rosemarine alone rejoiced. "He's evolving!"

Buggy grew. He grew larger and larger until his head hit the greenhouse's roof and broke through it. Basil and the rest of the crew stepped back to avoid falling glass shards.

Only when Buggy reached over three meters in length did he finally stop growing. The flames cleared on their own to reveal a beast of legend. The new Buggy retained the vague shape of a centipede with a crimson exoskeleton and hundreds of legs, but the resemblance with an insect stopped there. Lava flowered through the natural armor's chinks. The antennae had transformed into long blue whips and the tail ended with blades of bone.

As for the head... Buggy still had mandibles, but his yellow mouth and slit eyes belonged to a reptile rather than a bug. Flames burned behind rows of sharp fangs. When the maw opened, Basil faced a fiery gullet that could swallow a man whole.

Congratulations! By reaching level 7, Buggy Alphonse Venture metamorphosed into a centimagma

([**Bug/Elemental**])! Buggy Alphonse Venture learned the [**Firebreath**] Active Perk!

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" Buggy apologized, his whiny voice now a thunderous roar. His mighty skull accidentally shattered a glass panel when it moved. "I'll repair the roof Boss, I swear! I swear!"

Basil was too shocked for anger. Only Rosemarine welcomed the strange event with applause.

"Do you think he can fit inside the Kangoo now?" Plato asked at Basil's side.

"We will have to find a trailer."

And widen the doors too.

Chapter 10: Man vs Stone

The party wandered through the woods with no plant monster in sight.

Once a swampy land before a French Emperor came along, the Landes forest counted among the largest man-made woodlands in Europe. Rows after rows of pine trees grew amidst dense foliage, alongside a few oaks, birches, and willows with moss growing on their barks. The forest was eerily quiet, with only bugs to provide noise.

Basil winced as he heard a pine tree collapse behind him; the latest in a long line of victims. A few birds previously hiding in the foliage flew away in fear.

Basil looked over his shoulder and backpack. As he suspected, Buggy had accidentally snapped yet another tree in half with his tail. The centipede looked at the shattered pine tree with a guilty face.

"I can save them!" Rosemarine hopped to the pine tree's side and blew colored dust at its wound. "Sweet Pollen!"

"Hey, don't waste your Special Points on trees!" Plato scolded Rosemarine. "We might need them later!"

"But they're plants like me!" Rosemarine argued. The severed halves of the tree had joined up again thanks to her magic, but the trunk remained bent and the branches touched the ground. "I healed them!"

At what cost? She had botched the surgery and the pine tree would never stand up again. Vegetal euthanasia would

have been kinder.

Basil glanced at Plato, his axe resting on his shoulder. "Do you smell any plant monsters?"

"I don't smell any monsters, period." Plato squinted at Buggy. "It's as if *something* is scaring them away."

Buggy meekly stared at the ground, his reptilian eyes full of shame. "I'm sorry. All the distances feel wrong."

Size wasn't the only issue with Buggy's new transformation. The centimagma had accidentally exhaled flames at the foliage outside the house a few hours before, forcing the party to dump bucket after bucket of water to douse the fire.

"Boss, do you think..." Buggy looked at his owner with faint hope. "Do you think I can still fit inside my bedroom?"

"We'll refit the garage into a new one easily enough," Basil reassured the centimagma. He no longer needed to park his car there with the Inventory system. "I can't say the same for widening the house's doors so you can fit through them. I ain't an architect."

"I'm sorry," Buggy apologized.

"We'll figure something out."

Something about the falling trees bothered Basil. He had reached a Strength score of 27, just shy of Buggy's 30. If the centimagma felled trees with a mere wrong move, could Basil do the same?

Basil stopped in front of a pine tree, much to Plato's confusion. "What are you doing?"

"Checking something." Basil tightened his fist and aimed.
"One, two, three..."

His fist went through the tree's bark and stopped halfway through the trunk. Basil felt a little pain in his knuckles as they hit wood, but far less than he expected.

"Mr. Who-Feeds-Me, why?" Rosemarine immediately treated the pine tree's wound. "Sweet Pollen!"

Basil removed his hand from the bark. It would take a gorilla to leave a hole as large as the one he just made, but Buggy casually uprooted trees as he moved.

"Relative strength," Basil guessed. "Not absolute strength."

"What do you mean, Boss?" Buggy asked. Rosemarine finished healing the tree, ignoring all of Plato's concerns.

"That if our Strength scores were equal, you would still hit harder than me due to your size." Come to think of it, Health Points seemed to grow depending on the physical stats like Strength, yet Rosemarine and Plato had a lesser ratio than Basil and Buggy. This implied the existence of size-related hidden stat modifiers.

Rosemarine managed to heal the pine tree's 'wound' at a cost. "Mr. Who-Feeds-Me, I've run out of SP!"

"I warned you," Plato said. The cat's mood worsened when Basil looked into his backpack and tossed some SP recovery medicine at Rosemarine. "You're encouraging her!"

"Rosemarine, calm down with the pollen abuse," Basil said. "I need antibiotics to craft SP recovery potions and they don't grow on trees."

Rosemarine swallowed the bottle, plastic included, before belching. "Yes, Mr. Who-Feeds-Me."

"Hey, how is it you obey him but not me?" Plato complained.

"Because when I evolve, he will feed me even more!"

Aww, she was ambitious and cunning!

"This errand is a bust." Plato stretched his legs. "But it was nice to go hiking in the woods again. Seems like everything returned to normal at last."

"I wouldn't be so sure." Basil looked up through the leaves above his head. Barely perceptible streaks of red light tainted the blue skies, the tail of distant auroras. The Ogre Den's influence had covered the Barthes, but it wasn't the only dungeon active in the region. Basil would say another was located near Mont-de-Marsan from the aurora's distance.

Did the plant monsters migrate to new dungeons after the Ogre Den's destruction? If so, Basil could say goodbye to his dream of a fanged flower hedge.

"Boss, I see a house!" Buggy said with sudden excitement. "It's not ours!"

Basil's eyes wandered to blackened walls standing at the forest's edge. The trail the group had followed led to a small suburb of brick houses. Basil immediately recognized the place, having often hiked in the area.

"It's Angoumé, a small village near the town of Dax," Basil explained. "Barely three hundred inhabitants."

"Oh, I remember the place." Plato licked his lips. "The butcher always tosses me a treat whenever we visit."

"The baker is pretty good too." Reminiscing made Basil hungry for croissants, chocolatines, and other French pastries. "Cheap too."

"Let's go." Plato gave his master the cutest, most adorable stare he could. "Please..."

"I want to visit a human hive!" Buggy said with enthusiasm. "I've never seen one!"

Rosemarine joined in. "Can I eat the baker?"

"No, Rosemarine, but I can buy you pastries." Basil was about to assent to his pets' request when he suddenly noticed a worrying detail about Angoumé. He frowned in alarm, his fingers tightening on his axe. "Something is wrong with the place."

"Boss, I don't hear anything," said Buggy.

Exactly. Angoumé had been a quiet place, but never a silent one.

It's not my problem. Basil gazed at the houses with an impassioned look. It's the police's job to protect people, not mine. I should stay out of this and trust the government. If I could do so well on my own, everyone else must have overperformed. There's nothing to worry about.

Yes, he didn't have to do anything.

...

...

Shit.

"Fuck me," Basil said as he stepped inside the village.

"Basil, I'm not that kind of animal," Plato quipped before following his owner. "Find yourself a girlfriend of your own species."

The first person they met turned out to be a woman three decades older than Basil, and he wouldn't take her on a date anytime soon.

Basil raised his axe as he approached the figure. The middle-aged woman stood on the threshold of the first house beyond the forest with glasses on her nose and a torchlight in hand. She looked poised to inspect an overgrown hedge, but would never reach it.

It was difficult to move with a body of stone.

Danielle Jacqueline Hiquet.

Level 0+1 [Humanoid].

Status: Petrified.

A shiver ran down Basil's spine. The statue was a living person.

"Boss." Buggy's joy at discovering a human village didn't last long. "What happened here?"

At first glance, Angoumé looked like a postcard ad: cozy beige houses surrounded by vast gardens of flowers and lush lawns. A beautiful pond of water bordered a road without holes and a yellow hotel restaurant. It was a favorite

spot of old people to stay the night in quietness before enjoying Dax's famous thermal cures.

A closer look revealed grisly details. A car overturned on the road; a hole in a house's wall; a human statue half-sunk into the pond's waters; and most worrying of all, the enormous footprints dug into the walkway.

Plato didn't make a sound as he walked to Basil's side. His steps were slow, his ears raised. "Basil..."

"Plato, you check the houses," Basil ordered with a tone that brooked no disobedience. "I'll investigate the hotel. Rosemarine, pull any statues you find out of the water. Buggy, use your tremorsense and warn us if anything approaches."

"Yes, Mister," Rosemarine whispered back. She had sensed the danger afoot.

"Yes, Boss." Buggy applied his antennae to the ground. "I'll roar if I sense anything."

Basil gritted his teeth as the party split to cover more ground. He walked up to the hotel near the pond and found the glass doors shattered from the outside. Basil carefully stepped inside the entrance hall with his axe poised to strike at the first provocation.

A thin layer of dust covered the peeling paint of the hotel's walls and the lights had died out. A dead television was mounted above an office counter with a pegboard holding the rooms' keys. A petrified man in his forties, almost certainly the manager, stood near it with an expression of abject fear. The breakfast hall was empty, the food safe inside the fridges.

Sorry. Basil pickpocketed the manager until he found his master key. It astonished him that some establishments hadn't switched to keycards yet. *I don't like stealing, but this is an emergency.*

The elevator leading to the upper floors was as dead as the electric grid, so Basil walked up narrow stairs. Rows after rows of closed rooms awaited him. He checked them one by one.

All the hotel's bedrooms looked the same. King-sized beds faced a tv mounted at the center, with a smaller area dedicated to the shower and toilets. Windows opened to a small individual terrace granting the tenants an impeccable view of the pond outside.

Most bedrooms were empty, but not all of them. One housed an elderly couple sleeping peacefully, their flesh turned to stone. A second had a man in his thirties petrified on the toilet, his eyes half-closed in sleepiness.

The dungeons first appeared early in the morning. Monsters must have fallen upon these people before they even knew what hit them.

If I lived in the city, I might have become one of them. Basil felt bad about leaving people turned to stone, but nothing in his arsenal could undo the petrification ailment. Each occupied room had its windows broken from the outside. *They came, they petrified, they left.*

In spite of the tense situation, Basil struggled to keep a straight face upon finding a third room with victims. The two occupants had been petrified mid-coitus. While the man seemed to take pleasure in the act, the much younger woman was clearly faking it. Basil couldn't help but check

the man's belongings. He kept a photo of his family in his wallet, but with a different woman for a wife.

He didn't even bother to remove his wedding ring, Basil noted scornfully. If the man couldn't keep his vows, he shouldn't have made them in the first place. I should call his wife and inform her if I get the chance. It's only proper.

Basil walked to the room's window and studied the hole in its center. The creature that broke through it couldn't be bigger than a soccer ball.

Bugsy's roar echoed outside and made the walls tremble.

"Damn it," Basil hissed as he rushed through the door. "I knew we should have stuck to the forest—"

Click.

Basil's head snapped in the bed's direction right as a small sphere emerged from beneath the bedsheet. He didn't have time to turn around before an orange ray blinded his vision.

Level too high! [**Petrify-Ray**] cannot affect you!

When Basil regained his sense of sight, he found himself facing a floating orb of copper and bronze. A single orange eye of crystal gazed at him from the sphere's core, a strange gear symbol painted on the steely eyelids.

Unity Watcher

Level 2 [Artificial].

Faction: Unity.

"FOR THIS WORLD TO LIVE LEVELS MUST STAY DOWN!" The orb's booming voice made the walls tremble and Basil wince

in pain. His ears! "PETRIFICATION IS TEMPORARY! SUBMIT FOR YOUR SAFETY—"

"Shut up!" Basil snarled before punching the orb. "I ain't deaf, asshole!"

His mighty fist shattered the crystal like glass and sent the orb crashing against a wall. Basil's heart skipped a beat as the creature nearly hit one of the petrified victims, but it narrowly missed them.

"LEVELS MUST STAY DOWN..." The orb's message grew gargled and weaker. "Dooooownn..."

Basil finished the monster off with a swing of his axe and rushed outside the hotel. He ran as fast as his legs could carry him, but his fears turned out to be unwarranted. He found Buggy and Rosemarine near the pond with the remains of a shattered metal orb laying on the shore. Plato quickly rejoined them, unharmed and yet furious.

You earned 1000 EXP (125 each).

"Boss, this thing came out of the water!" Buggy snapped his mandible at the broken watcher and revealed his fiery fangs. "I destroyed it in one blow!"

"I killed two more in the houses." Plato hissed in anger. "They petrified everyone, Basil, even the cats! The *cats*! They got the butcher and the baker too!"

Even the baker? The bastards!

"There was one in the hotel too." Worse, Basil hadn't missed the 'Faction' part when he analyzed the orb. The machines belonged to a larger group. "Buggy, why didn't you notice them?"

"I swear, I didn't sense anything! My tremorsense only picks up vibrations in the ground and the thing didn't make any noise!"

"I mistook one for a metal ball until I poked it," Plato defended Buggy. "It smelled of oil, so I thought it was a harmless gizmo."

Basil's jaw clenched. "Mines. They were mines. Dormant bombs set to activate at the first sign of movement and finish off stragglers."

Basil noticed new statues along the pond's shore, one human in uniform, three goblins, and two dinocranes. Only the rotten remains of a spinotter remained unpetrified, although a powerful blow had ground its skull to fine paste.

"I found them in the water, Mr. Who-Feeds-Me!" Rosemarine boasted with pride. "I dragged them out myself with my vines!"

From the group's composition, Basil guessed that they were a raiding party from the Ogre's Den. The goblins had come expecting to kill helpless humans, only to find themselves facing a more dangerous creature.

This is Megabug all over again. Basil's eyes examined the petrified goblins and then the symbol on the broken orb's eyelids: a gear with six sides and a 'W' mark at its center. *But the orbs belonged to another group than his Apocalypse Force.*

Basil didn't know whether he should take it as good or bad news.

"Can I eat it?" Rosemarine salivated at the sight of the spinotter's carcass. "I'm hungry!"

"That's the only monster they didn't turn to stone," Plato pointed out.

"Spinotters are level 2." Basil quickly put two and two together. "The orb failed to petrify me because I was too high-level."

Plato caught on. "All the petrified people I've found were level 1 or 0+1. They didn't have the time to take a class."

"The orbs can't petrify creatures with a level equal or higher than their own," Basil guessed. The level limit would explain why these weak creatures packed such a powerful ability. "They killed the spinotter because it was too strong."

"There's no way the orbs did the deed, Basil," Plato replied as Rosemarine devoured the spinotter. "They were even weaker than birds."

"Boss, I think I know who killed it." Buggy pointed at the enormous footprints along the road's boardwalk with his tail. "Look."

Basil and his party gathered around the tracks and examined them. Shaped like a mix between a small circle and a larger crux, they were around two meters in diameter. The footprints' depth attested to the weight of whatever creature left them.

"They're pointing towards the town of Dax," Basil noted as his eyes followed the tracks. "I don't think even an elephant could leave such huge footprints."

"Do we go after that monster, Boss?" Buggy asked with a hint of excitement.

That was a risky proposition and Basil's new Warp Spasm Perk wouldn't help much either. He would never spit on new powers, but to lose control of himself in the process sounded like a bad bargain. Especially since he risked attacking his allies.

I should have expected something like that from Berserker. Basil gritted his teeth. *The creature went in the opposite direction to the house, so we should be safe. Everyone else though...*

"Boss, I don't want to sound stupid but... I don't get it." Bugsy cleared his throat. "Why didn't they kill anybody besides the spinotter? Why petrify humans instead of harvesting their experience points?"

"Maybe they stored the food for later?" Rosemarine suggested with a cute belch.

Her idea... Her idea made a disturbing amount of sense. The orb did warn Basil that its petrification effect wouldn't last.

The [**Petrification**] ailment is permanent unless magically removed.

So either the orb had lied or its kind could undo petrification at will.

"What happens if I were to shatter a petrified individual?" Basil quizzed the System.

You will gain experience as normal.

The watchers could have petrified victims so that their allies could kill them to grind safely. Yet when Basil remembered the orb's words, he realized there was probably more to it.

"Did the machines say anything?" Basil asked his party.

Plato shrugged. "I killed them before they could."

"The one I destroyed said something about a barrier," Bugsy said, his tail scratching his head. "I think?"

"For the barrier to stand, levels must stay down,"
Rosemarine quoted.

Basil's jaw clenched. "What barrier?"

"I don't know, Mister."

"So Basil, what do we do? Do we retreat?" Plato's claws came out. "Or do we hunt?"

Basil considered his options. The sensible option would be to return to the house without poking the hornet's nest. If the creature was anything like Megabug, it had to be level 10. Basil would never forget how close to death they had come when they fought an opponent stronger than them. And yet, running away meant abandoning other people to petrification.

It's not my problem, Basil tried to tell himself. The police can handle it. It's their job, my taxes paid for their training and weapons. I didn't spend years contributing to the French State's coffers without expecting a return on my investment.

Basil glanced at the petrified man on the shore and at his uniform. He quickly noticed the words *'police municipale'* written on the shoulders.

"Fuck me," Basil cursed. "Bugsy, fetch me the petrified goblins."

Some warriors drank wine before battle, but Basil preferred to chop heads.

Chapter 11: Man vs Robots

The city was quiet, too quiet.

Dax was somewhat famous among French towns for its hot baths, thermal sources, and water cure industry. Most of its inhabitants worked in tourism, healthcare, or hospitality. The l'Adour river and three bridges separated the historical city center from the satellite municipalities. Dax was never a busy town, but it always enjoyed a healthy level of activity.

Today, Dax was dead.

All its inhabitants had been turned to stone as far as Basil could tell. Statues filled the narrow streets. The wrecks of overturned cars blocked the central lane alongside the occasional broken watcher. Burns covered a few buildings' façades and colossal footprints disfigured the pavement.

And the silence, this ominous silence...

"Boss, I sense something." Buggy applied his antennae to the ground. "Heavy footsteps."

"I hear them too," Plato said, his ears turning in a specific direction. "The bots haven't left the city."

Basil gathered his breath, his axe heavy on his shoulder. "How far?"

"Six to seven streets away," Buggy replied. "The monster is heavier than I am."

Basil glanced at the town's highest points: the twin towers of Dax's cathedral. He would have a good view of the area

from up there.

"Bugsy, you're too big and easy to notice," Basil said. "You stay away in the city's outskirts unless you hear the sound of battle. Rosemarine, to the cathedral with me. Plato, you're stealthy enough for recon. The bots mustn't learn of our presence, do you understand?"

His cat fled into the streets and Bugsy didn't argue against the order. They understood the danger ahead might prove greater than their deadly encounter with Megabug. They would stick to the plan and keep their heads down.

Basil walked to the cathedral with Rosemarine following him without a word. The classical-gothic church's twin towers and massive stone façade cast a dark shadow on a silent plaza. Its open doors screeched with the wind.

Basil ordered Rosemarine to keep watch over the entrance and stepped inside the building. His footsteps echoed within its main hall. Faint daylight crossed through stained glass windows portraying saints and angels. The robots had broken a few of them, much to Basil's fury.

Although he didn't practice much, Basil was an Orthodox Christian at heart. The profanation of a holy place, even a Catholic one, remained a crime in his eyes.

Basil steadily climbed stony stairs up to the left tower's summit. He half-expected a Unity watcher to intercept him. None did. Basil doubted that the fear of God had motivated them to leave the area.

Basil reached the tower's summit without incident. Windows gave him a dizzying view of Dax; enough to see metal orbs flying in the distance, the sunlight reflecting on their bronze shells.

The watchers.

Basil took a pair of binoculars from his bag and scanned the town. He immediately detected signs of battle. Three major bridges usually separated Dax from the other shore and its smaller municipalities. One of them had crumbled into the l'Adour river and the other was clogged by abandoned cars. The third, he couldn't see from his position.

Groups of watchers patrolled the rivershore and a mighty creature followed in their wake.

Basil held his breath at the sight of a living tank. Four black telescopic tentacles of whirling gears lifted an ovoid core of bronze and steel. The machine's body would put an elephant to shame in terms of size and weight. Plates of metal bound by bolts shielded it from attacks, the strange symbol of the watchers painted on its back like an ominous warning. A single crystal eye two meters wide lay exposed at the creature's forefront right above a ventral cannon. The four metal claws at the end of its tentacles crushed the pavement under their weight.

The System provided Basil with a hint of the threat's power.

Unity Gearsman

Level 13 [Artificial].

Faction: Unity.

"Nope," Basil decided after a single look at the creature's level. "Nope, nope, nope, I'm out, I'm done, I've peaked!"

That was three levels higher than Megabug, and if that wasn't enough, a small swarm of watchers swirled above

the machine. The party was outnumbered, outmatched, and outgunned.

They were also a week too late to save anybody. Basil could infer what happened from the sheer number of broken windows and petrified citizens. The watchers had fallen upon the city at night when most of the population slept.

Basil suddenly realized that the attacks on his house had given him the wrong assumption. Since he had fended off assaults easily enough, he thought everyone else would.

In truth, he had survived by avoiding the attention of deadlier monsters. If Megabug or the watchers had attacked his home before his classes gave him the power to fight back, Basil would have died. It wasn't skill that carried him so far, but luck.

Strange, the robots stick to one side of the river. Basil turned his binoculars to Dax's other shore. Satellite municipalities like Saint-Vincent-de-Paul occupied it. Why haven't they crossed over?

The sight of a helicopter flying over the other shore answered his question.

Basil immediately recognized it as a *Colibri Eurocopter* painted white with red stripes. The light utility vehicle didn't carry weapons, but was large enough to transport up to four passengers alongside the pilot. Basil couldn't see the people inside due to the distance and the sunlight-reflecting windshield. The vehicle turned over the bridge still standing as if daring the Unity gearsman to cross it.

"Of course." Basil's eyes widened as he put two and two together. "The military aviation school!"

Basil remembered that the French land army trained future helicopter pilots in Dax with light vehicles. The noise made by their flights usually drew criticism from the civilian population. If an aircraft patrolled a shore the robots refused to invade, then it could only mean one thing.

The French army resisted the monsters!

"I hope somebody picked up that phone," Basil murmured. "Because I called it!"

You earned 750 EXP (93 each).

Basil turned his binoculars towards his allies on the ground in sudden panic. Did the watchers detect them?

He quickly confirmed that Buggy hadn't moved from his post. Rosemarine, however, chewed a watcher's wreckage near the cathedral's entrance.

"Nothing to worry about." A startled Basil looked over his shoulder, only to face Plato. The cat joined his owner with a crystal core in his mouth, before letting his catch roll on the ground. "We scored a few easy kills."

"Don't surprise me from behind again," Basil scolded his cat. "Especially in hostile territory."

"Oh, did I frighten you?" Plato peeked through the window. "Wait until I tell you what I saw."

"I've already noticed the level 13 Gearsman."

"Which one?"

Basil's blood froze in his veins. "You've got to be kidding me."

"I'm not." Plato's tone turned grim. "I counted at least two. One patrolling along the river, the other guarding the arena."

The arena... Basil could barely catch a glimpse of the building's white walls from his current viewpoint. Dax's arena, originally built to host Spanish Corridas, was rarely used for anything more than concerts nowadays.

"Why would a living tank be guarding the arena?" Basil asked Plato. "There's nothing precious there."

"I don't know, but the place is crawling with watchers. I couldn't approach it without risking detection." Plato sat at his owner's side. "So what do you think they're doing running along the shore back and forth? Enjoying the river's view?"

"Looks like the French army controls the other side," Basil replied. "If not them, at least a human group."

"Really?" Plato's head perked up in interest. "Wait, the French haven't run away or started collaborating?"

"Nope, they're resisting." Basil smiled smugly at his cat. "You owe me ten bucks."

"Can I pay you in birds?" Plato sighed, before suddenly frowning. "Wait a second, if there are humans on the other side, why haven't the bots attacked them yet? If a level 10 bug kicked our asses, a level 13 gizmo should wipe the floor with any screaming human whelp thrown its way."

"Your trust in my species is heartening."

"You're welcome, Basil."

Basil remembered that the army's helicopter school was located south-east of his current position, on the side of the city which the robots controlled. Had the French army been forced to abandon the aerodrome to the monsters and move its vehicles north?

Dax was far away from any dungeon so the robots couldn't replenish their numbers. If they had taken losses taking the aerodrome, then it made sense for them to secure existing gains rather than risk a new push. The lack of manpower also explained the absence of watchers patrolling Dax's streets. They needed all available monsters to keep the other shore under surveillance and contain the army's remnants.

Basil achieved superhuman strength after taking a few levels. Professional soldiers with classes would prove a match for even the fiercest monster.

"Megabug was a scout who wanted his Faction to get 'an early lead,' whatever that means," Basil said. "The bots probably followed the same strategy. They took over the city for their masters and now await new orders before continuing their march."

"Sounds quite sophisticated."

"You don't say." Basil studied the gearsman's patrol route to better predict it. "This entire setup reeks of a planned assault."

Unlike the goblins, the machines didn't behave like stupid marauders. They were an occupation force. Considering how they petrified any man or woman they could find, Basil doubted they had mankind's best interests at heart.

"Apollyon." Basil cleared his throat. "Megabug mentioned that name as his superior's."

"I think he said something about this world being too weak for him," Plato confirmed before scratching his ears.

"*This* world. Not *the* world."

"What difference does it make?"

"A big one." Basil lowered his binoculars. "We know Megabug wasn't created by the Ogre Den dungeon like Rosemarine, Buggy, and the goblins. I think he and the robots might have come from another place."

Plato gazed at the bright skies through the windows with big, starry eyes. "Like another planet?"

"I don't know." Basil could only make suppositions at this point. "Maybe the System opened the door for invaders to slip in, or maybe bringing them to Earth was the entire point and the System followed them."

If an army of monsters was willing to send troops to Dax, a small town of utter strategic insignificance... What horrors were settlements like Paris or London facing? Did dungeons manifest out of nowhere to flood their streets with monsters?

What could Basil do? Treat the petrification ailment? He grabbed the core Plato brought him and studied it.

Cannot bypass [?????]'s [**Crafting Encryption**] Perk.

The same message showed up whenever Basil attempted to use the orb's eye to craft. He couldn't even salvage the core's material. Whoever built or commanded the Unity

watchers did its best to prevent people from reverse-engineering their technology.

"What a shitfest," Basil cursed as he stored the orb in his inventory. "But I'm glad the army is holding well. The world might actually return to normal in less than a century."

"So, what do we do?" Plato asked. "We join up with your kindred on the other shore?"

"We can't do that without the bots spotting us."

"Please don't tell me we're going in axe-blazing like last time," Plato pleaded. "Do you think the gearsmen can kill me eight times in a row?"

Basil didn't want to find out anytime soon. "This isn't going to sound very Berserker-like, but no, we won't attack the robots. In fact, we won't intervene at all. Too risky."

"You don't want to drive the bots out of town?" Plato squinted at his owner.

"If we attack them without coordinating with the soldiers on the other shore, we risk sparking a general battle they aren't prepared for. Casualties would mount in the chaos."

At the end of the day, Basil was a civilian with little combat experience surviving in the woods. He would rather leave trained professionals to handle the urban guerilla. He didn't exclude making contact with the army in the future, but only in a way that wouldn't draw the robots' attention.

And more than anything, Basil worried how soldiers would react to his party. Buggy and Rosemarine could get mistaken for hostile monsters and shot on sight. Basil's responsibility was to protect his own first.

He wouldn't give up on finding a way to undo the petrification ailment though. That was a task where he could meaningfully contribute.

"Fine by me, almighty leader." Plato rose to his feet. "Let's go home."

"We're not done here." Basil examined the district with the binoculars. "The machines took over quickly and didn't ransack the town. With the gearsmen busy patrolling the river shore, we could pillage everything in the city's outskirts without them noticing."

Basil hated stealing, but nobody would miss the supplies, and pharmacy medicine might unlock a cure for petrification. The library's books could shed light on Dismaker Labs and the police station contained an armory.

"Oh, we're shopping?" Plato licked his lips. "Could we find fresh fish?"

"It's been a week with no electricity," Basil pointed out as they climbed down the cathedral's stairs. "You'll find no fresh food."

Plato sighed in disappointment. "I hate apocalypses."

"I can pray for it to end soon." Basil stared at the church's dusty altar with nostalgia. The memories of his mother bringing him to Easter celebrations flooded his mind. Leaving Bulgaria had left him uprooted and deprived him of a sense of community.

God, if it's not too much to ask, we need help downstairs. Basil made a hand sign to represent the orthodox cross. *A bolt of divine lightning would be nice, though I can settle for*

a sword of heavenly fire or a bazooka of justice. Anything really.

God answered the prayer with silence.

Basil almost left disappointed when he noticed books on the church's altar: two finely crafted grimoires, one red and the other black.

"Have they always been there?" Basil asked Plato in confusion.

"I dunno, I didn't pay attention." His cat swiped his nose with his paw. "So much dust..."

Basil examined the books and the System immediately provided him with information.

The Missal & The Breviary

Family: Spellbooks.

Quality: C.

A pair of spellbooks used by [Priests of God] to learn [Prayer] spells and angelic [Rituals]. Much ink has been spilled on how to optimize proper SP consumption.

By reaching a sufficiently high Magic stat, you can learn Active Perks called Spells. Spells consume SP to work and are classified by Schools, representing their category, and Tiers, their power. You can learn spells from spellbooks and tutors if you possess the necessary classes, passive Perks, and elemental affinities.

"Spells? Wait, I could do magic with prayers?" Basil read the Missal's instructions on how to hold the mass and a new

screen appeared.

Spell: The Mass

School: Prayer.

Affinity: Support.

Tier: I.

Cost: 10 SP.

Restrictions: Only [Priests] of God with a 10+ Magic stat can cast this spell, and only in a Christian church.

Buffs the Luck of all allies within the church's confines for ten minutes. The blessing lasts even after the targets leave the church's grounds.

Basil checked the books' pages with rapturous attention. They included dozens of spells, if not more. Each liturgy, each church ritual, carried power of some kind; from healing the sick to empowering the faithful.

'Much ink has been spilled on how to optimize proper SP consumption?' What did that mean? And why were all church prayers linked to spells? Had they been spells from the start and didn't work because there were no Special Points or 'magic' to fuel them?

This raised an important question: did the System *give* prayers tangible powers, or was their power *suppressed* before the System came along? In the first case, it spoke volumes about the System's ability to reshape reality. And in the second case... it implied the normal world Basil had lived in since birth was in an abnormal state.

"I guess these books will have to do," Basil said. "I would rather have fiery swords, but God works in mysterious ways."

"By giving you two old books?" Plato sneezed from the dust. "You should have converted to Buddhism."

Basil forgave his cat's blasphemy and registered the books in his inventory for later use. It could be a coincidence, but if prayers carried real magical power with the System's arrival... then one of them could perhaps heal petrification.

"Is everything okay, Mister?" Rosemarine asked upon entering the cathedral's hall. "Have you eaten well?"

"The only food I need right now is the bread and blood of Christ," Basil half-joked. "I will be the Axe of Heaven. God wills it."

"What is Christ, a monster?" Rosemarine pondered with childish innocence. "Can I eat them?"

"When do we take back the Holy Land?" Plato asked with a deadpan tone. Basil's glare only amused him further. "Too soon?"

"Mock me all you want, Plato, but a force greater than any strength point possesses me now." Basil pumped a fist with determination. His words boomed across the cathedral's hall like a sermon. "Faith! Faith in humanity! Faith in our power to defeat the invaders! You say we should take back the Holy Land? I say we retake all the land, starting with this one—"

A Unity watcher suddenly entered the church through the broken window, interrupting Basil's passionate speech.

When he heard the explosions, Buggy knew his moment had come.

As ordered, the centimagma had retreated to the human hive's outskirts so as not to foil the infiltration mission. He spent minutes mentally preparing himself for the epic fight that he knew would come. His tail flailed the pavement in trepidation.

The times when Buggy would clumsily break trees and set grass on fire ended here and now. He would no longer lower his head in shame at his ineptitude. Today, he would prove his newfound strength and mighty combat prowess to the Boss.

"I'm proud of you, Buggy," the Boss would say while patting him on the head, right on the sweet spot behind the antennae. "I thus promote you to my new right-hand cat."

"But I cannot betray Mister Plato!" Buggy would reply, because he was modest. "He is like a brother to me!"

"You deserve to become the top pet, Buggy," Plato would reassure him. "You've worked so hard for it!"

All would fear the name of *Buggy Alphonse Venture*.

I need a war cry, Buggy thought as his tremorsense detected the party rush to his position and the rumbling steps of a colossal beast. You shall not pass... too simple... I have a hundred feet to kick your ass with? I am fire, I am death? Yes, yes, that's badass, that's me, that's fearsome!

Buggy moved in the middle of a lane full of abandoned cars. As the Boss, Plato, and Rosemarine emerged from around a street corner, the centimagma raised his head with pride.

"I am fire!" Buggy exhaled flames through his fangs. "I am —"

"Retreat!" The Boss shouted. His breath was short, his expression one of utter panic. "Tactical retreat!"

"Mister!" Rosemarine struggled to catch up to the Boss because of her short vine-legs. "Wait for me!"

"Huh?" Buggy asked in confusion, his momentum broken.

"Run, you idiot!" Plato snarled as he bolted past the centipede. "Run!"

A tide of metal poured out of the city after the party.

Buggy had expected to fight a few watchers, a dozen at most. Instead a full swarm of flying orbs flew above the lane. They fired petrify-rays in all directions, the lasers failing to affect Buggy due to the level difference.

"WE COME IN PEACE!" The swarm buzzed. "PETRIFICATION IS TEMPORARY! SUBMIT FOR YOUR OWN GOOD!"

I can take them! Buggy tried to muster his courage. *Witness me, Boss! Witness—*

And then the bigger machine stepped into view, a colossus of steel carried by four legs each longer than Buggy himself. The ground trembled when it walked and its cannon's gears screeched upon pointing at the centimagma.

When Buggy read the giant machine's level, the great flame of his bravery petered out.

"[Agility Up]!" Never before did Buggy activate his Perk so quickly. "[Agility Up]!"

The System empowered his hundred legs with new speed. The Boss and Rosemarine leaped on Buggy's back as the centimagma turned around and ran away. Only Plato managed to run faster than him on his own legs.

"THE UNITY IS NON-NEGOTIABLE!" The giant robot broadcasted while running after the party. Fiery light built up in its cannon. "THIS PLANET WILL BE PACIFIED!"

"De-level this, asshole!" The Boss materialized the Venom Bomb in his hand and threw it at the robots. The projectile exploded into a toxic purple cloud that spread through the lane. It failed to damage the robots, but reduced their visibility. A red ray fired through the smoke and melted the pavement to Buggy's left. The blast missed him, but only barely so.

"Faster, faster!" Plato shouted as the giant robot rushed out of the toxic cloud.

"I've got this!" Buggy promised. He ran as fast as his legs could carry him. "I've got this!"

Buggy Alphonse Venture believed he would become his party's frontliner.

But in truth, he had been the getaway driver all along.

Chapter 12: Man vs Merchant

Six hours.

It took the party *six hours* to escape with their lives. Buggy spent all his SP casting Agility Up over and over again as Basil guided him through the Landes forest. The gearsman stopped hunting the party before the watchers, but eventually, all of them gave up. Only when Basil was convinced that nobody would follow them to the house did he and his pets return home safely.

"I am fire..." Buggy collapsed in exhaustion on the house's lawn, under the faint light of the sunset. "I am... death..."

"You've done well, Buggy," Basil thanked the centimagma before stepping down from his back. "I'll cook anything you want tonight."

"Mister, I don't want to go to human cities anymore," Rosemarine whined. "They're scary!"

"I need a sofa," Plato declared. The cat didn't look as winded as Buggy, but he clearly wanted nothing more than to sleep. "My kingdom for a cushion!"

Basil helped Buggy drink a potion to satisfy his thirst. He had believed the Unity lacked forces to properly defend Dax, but when a single watcher sounded the alarm, dozens answered the call. The machines could mobilize quickly. Now that they knew of the party's existence, returning to the city to scavenge for supplies would grow even riskier.

And worst of all, Basil didn't find any monster to build a flower hedge!

"We need a better defensive perimeter." Basil would set traps in the forest in case the watchers sent hunting parties. "We'll keep our heads down and stick to the wilderness from now on."

It was for the better. Monsters prioritized cities and Basil didn't need urban infrastructures. Modern medicine and technology mattered, but he could probably replace both with crafted substitutes given time.

He had work ahead of himself. Buggy's new transformation meant that the centimagma would consume more food than before. Basil kept sizable reserves in his basement, but he would rather avoid tapping into them unless strictly necessary.

I need to enlarge the garden, Basil thought upon entering the house. Plato fulfilled his oath and bolted to the sofa. Buggy tried to squeeze himself through the entrance, but his new size prevented him from succeeding. *And widen the doors too.*

"You can sleep in the garage for now," Basil told Buggy. "We'll go chip wood and pull down the entrance's wall tomorrow. I don't know much about woodworking, but it can't be that hard."

"I'm so sorry, Boss," Buggy apologized. "I didn't want to become a burden."

"You never were one and never will be," Basil reassured him. "You saved us all back then. Without your enhanced agility, the bots would have caught up to us."

When the watchers failed to petrify the group because of their higher levels, they had started throwing themselves at them like kamikaze drones. Failure to escape would have spelled the party's death.

The errand might have been a bust, but they at least gathered information and the cathedral's holy grimoires could perhaps procure a solution to the petrification ailment. And if normal books transformed into spellcasting manuals with the System's arrival, perhaps a few in Basil's library had gained magical properties too.

There was much work to do, but Basil was too tired to start it now. He would cook for everyone and then go to bed right afterward.

His party had earned a moment to rest.

Basil barely enjoyed a few hours of sleep before Plato woke him up.

"Basil, Basil!" The cat kneaded his owner's back. "Come on, wake up!"

"What?" Basil groaned, his head half-buried in a cushion. The sun hadn't yet risen and the world was dark beyond his windows. "I put leftovers on the kitchen counter..."

"I know, I ate them already." The cat hadn't woken up his owner to satisfy his craving for food. "Rosemarine found a clam in the garden."

"A clam?" Basil locked eyes with his cat, his vision blurring from the sleeplessness. "The mollusk?"

"Yes, the mollusk. In the garden."

Basil slumped back into the pillow. He didn't have time for this nonsense. "Just kill it."

"I tried, but it has cannons pointed at the house!"

Basil listened to his cat's sentence, his sleepy mind failing to process the words properly. When it did, he bolted out of bed, summoned his axe from the Inventory, and prepared to clobber his way back to slumber.

Nobody woke Basil Bohem before noon and lived to tell the tale!

"Where is the victim?" Basil asked upon stepping outside the house with Plato. A sleepy Buggy and Rosemarie surrounded a giant shell that washed up on the stream's shore. Indeed it looked like a clam on a closer look, albeit bigger than a cow, light blue, and with a set of steel barrels sticking out of the carapace. The System immediately identified it as a monster.

Shellgirl (Clam Mimic)

Level 6 [Aquatic/Slime]

A girl? Fine by Basil. He was a true feminist: the kind that would hit a female monster as hard as a male one.

"Mister, I can't eat the food inside!" Rosemarie complained. "When I evolve, I will break the shell with my teeth and gorge myself on sweet blood!"

"Do I cook it with my breath, Boss?" Buggy asked. The shell's barrels immediately pointed at the centimagma, startling him. "Hey!"

"Could be a spy from the city," Plato muttered. "Or dangerous."

Since the monster hadn't opened fire immediately, Basil gave her the benefit of the doubt.

"You've got five seconds to explain what you're doing here or get the fuck off my property," he warned the clam. "Starting right now."

A silence stretched on for one second, two seconds, three seconds...

"Psst, psst."

A squeaky, girly voice came out of the shell. Basil lowered his gaze as it opened slightly, two red eyes peered through them.

"Wanna trade?" the creature asked. "Wanna make some sweet money?"

Basil stared back without a word. His mouth went dry from the lack of sleep and the surreal nature of the conversation.

"When I saw your shiny house, I knew you were a potential customer with taste," she tried to sweet-talk him into lowering his guard. "The kind of person who won't settle for anything but the best!"

It's even worse than I thought, Basil told himself. *Much worse.*

"I've got quality stuff to trade in this new brand shell of mine. Weapons, shinies... the real deal." The creature winked at Basil. "My fares are so low you'll have to sit down!"

Basil didn't answer. The tense silence stretched on. Shellgirl winked repeatedly, as if it would break the deadlock.

"Bugsy?" Basil broke the silence.

"Yes, Boss?"

"Throw this thing back into the stream. She's the worst kind of monster." Basil glared at the giant clam. "A door-to-door saleswoman."

"I can't believe this vermin managed to slip in, Basil." Plato hissed at the clam mimic. "I swear, I was on the lookout for these pests!"

"Hey, hey, come on!" Shellgirl protested. "I swear, I'm not that kind of gal!"

"You're sure, Boss?" Bugsy asked, ignoring the clam.

"Throw her down the stream," Basil insisted. "Salesmen are an invasive species. You feed a single one and then they start breeding all over the neighborhood."

Rosemarine slumped in the grass. "Can't we eat her for experience first, Mister?"

"Salesmen don't give exp, they give calls." Basil remained unmoved. "Throw her down the stream."

Bugsy pushed the salesmonster back with his tail towards the river, much to her chagrin. "Stop!" she protested with a shrill voice. "I'll make it worth your time, I swear!"

"They all say that," Basil replied before turning his back on the scene. "Now, if you excuse me, I'll go back to sleep and —"

Boom!

The noise of a gun firing stopped Basil where he stood. When he hastily turned around, Buggy and the others had backed away from Shellgirl. One of her barrels pointed at the skies and steamed mist.

A warning shot.

"Everybody calms down!" The clam's eyes vanished inside her shell and she started muttering to herself. "Where did it go wrong... flatter the customer, I did it... tempt them with elusive promises about your product to foster interest, done... oh, introduce yourself to the customer to build trust! I skipped that part!"

Basil resisted the urge to pinch his nose in annoyance. "Are you reading a business book inside your shell?"

Her brief silence, followed by an embarrassed answer, confirmed his theory. "No, I'm not... Okay, I'm trying to figure it out alright! I'm a, a... what do humans call it..."

Basil picked up the sound of flipping pages. His pets sent him confused gazes, unsure how to react to this nonsense.

"A startup! I'm a startup!" said the clam monster. "Okay, let's start over."

The clamshell widened further to reveal the creature inside: the slim figure of a female humanoid made not of flesh, but translucent green slime. She had arms and breasts, but tendrils growing from the shell below the waist. Hair made of goo flowed down her head above two crimson eyes and a wicked, impish face.

"I'm Shellgirl. I'm the owner of a small import-export business with high potential for growth." Her lines sounded straight out of an MBA seminar. "You wanna invest in the *future?*"

She stressed out the last word as if it had magical properties.

"Do you sell tickets to Mars?" Basil snorted, utterly unimpressed.

The slime girl squinted at him. "Where is this *'Mars'*? Is there money to make there?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then no, I'm not going to Mars." She put a hand on her breasts and grinned. "My only journey is the journey to the grind! I let the current carry me to new opportunities!"

"I don't get it." Plato didn't hide his skepticism. "You want to make money, not levels?"

"I have the urge to level-up too, but it doesn't compare to the joy of filling my shell with wealth. When I add a new treasure inside me, I feel..." Shellgirl gave the party a perverted grin and exhaled. "I feel *satisfied.*"

Basil suddenly remembered that she was a clam *mimic*. If his experience with roleplaying games applied here, mimics were monsters acting as living treasure chests. A clam with its pearl made for a fitting aquatic version.

"You know, I tried to kill humans and monsters for their money," Shellgirl admitted. "But fighting is so risky! I figured I should work smarter, not harder. Get it?"

"By becoming a saleswoman and annoying people in the middle of the night?" Basil asked. "I've waged wars for less."

"Well, uh..." She snapped her clamshell shut and muttered to herself again. "Okay, make jokes to defuse tension... impress them with your past deals as proof of concept..."

Shellgirl was so busy studying that she missed Plato whispering at his owner. "Basil, you give the word and I will silence the pest on the spot."

The cat mimicked a gutting motion with his claw. Rosemarine salivated hungrily, and Bugsy snapped his mandibles in annoyance. Basil only had to give the order and they would tear the shell mimic to pieces. At four against one with higher levels on average, the fight should end quickly.

Basil almost gave the go-ahead when a brighter idea crossed his mind. "You said you traveled across the river?"

"Yes, I did!" The slime girl came out of her shell again in record speed, smelling the opportunity. "I traveled far and wide, collected treasures from the world over—"

"I'm looking for information," Basil cut through her crappy self-promotion attempt. "If you have it, then we could make a deal."

While she was annoying and a pest, Shellgirl was one of the few monsters Basil met that didn't try to attack him on sight. If she wanted to trade with humans rather than kill them, then she must have heard interesting rumors.

Basil couldn't rule out the possibility that she was a spy infiltrating human society either. If she failed to earn his

trust, she wouldn't live to reveal the house's location to anyone.

"Information?" The exuberant mimic suddenly became far more reserved. "Depends, I can't discuss where my merchandise comes from or how much money I make. It makes people violently jealous."

I doubt that, Basil thought. If she had to threaten him into buying her stuff and spill common sales bullcrap, she had to be dirt poor. "I'm looking for intel on two groups calling themselves the Unity and the Apocalypse Force."

"Oh, those guys?" Shellgirl stroked her chin and goo slipped from her cheeks. "Yeah, I might know a thing or two. Not much about the Unity, since they attack on sight... but the Apocalypse Force..."

Basil exchanged a glance with his pets. Rosemarine whined upon realizing that she wouldn't eat the clam anytime soon, and the others looked more skeptical than anything.

"Start talking," Basil all but ordered.

"Well, where should I start? Back to the beginning of my illustrious career!" Shellgirl cleared her throat, mostly for dramatic effect. "I was born in the Water Sanctuary dungeon in Lourdes. A pretty nice place full of undead and aquatic monsters."

"Lourdes?" Plato glanced at Basil. "Didn't we visit that place with René?"

"We did," Basil confirmed. Lourdes was a pilgrim hotspot whose waters had supposedly miraculous properties. They didn't cure René's cancer as he had hoped, but he enjoyed

his stay in the city all the same. "It welcomes millions of pilgrims each year."

"Yeah, when I checked the humans' shops I just knew I had to open my own business," Shellgirl said. "Unfortunately I was born one day after the dungeon appeared, so I couldn't find a good mentor. A zombie's belly is never full, if you catch my drift."

Basil suppressed a wince. "They slaughtered the city's population?"

"Mostly. Some priests managed to fight back, but then the bugs showed up."

"The bugs?" Buggy's mandibles snapped in dread.

"The Apocalypse Force." Shellgirl shuddered as if remembering a bad memory. "Three of them, level 10 each. They went into the dungeon like big hornets in the beehive, killed the old Boss, and took over the place."

The story sounded a bit too familiar to Basil's liking. "What happened afterward?"

"They split us into two halves and ordered that we wipe out the other," Shellgirl admitted without any cheerfulness.

"They had no time for weaklings. *'Levels must go up,'* they said, *'so the Horsemen can cross the barrier and crush the Unity's forces. Low-levels must be eradicated.'*"

The mention of a barrier again... and it appeared the Apocalypse Force and the Unity pursued completely opposite goals. It made sense for them to fight.

"The horsemen?" Plato asked in confusion. "Horse riders?"

A chill went down Basil's spine. The words sparked a memory of his childhood, back when he listened to a fiery sermon.

"And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth," the priest had declared, "to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth."

"The Horsemen of the Apocalypse?" Basil dared to ask, his voice breaking.

"Dunno, I bailed out after the first elimination round," Shellgirl replied. "Way it went, I figured I would end up on the wrong side of the culling sooner or later."

It didn't dispel Basil's doubts. Megabug mentioned a certain Apollyon, and now the name sounded so familiar. Basil must have heard it in a sermon before too. It could be a coincidence, but... somehow he couldn't bring himself to believe it.

Okay, this may be slightly above the French army's paygrade, Basil thought. But things won't degenerate so much, right? Right?

Basil dealt with his anxiety about mankind's future the healthy way: by repressing and trying to forget about it.

"And that's how I decided to retrain professionally," Shellgirl continued her tale. "I wandered around Lourdes when I received a revelation: I could become a merchant and fill my shell with wealth without tempting death!"

"You found a business book in the city's ruins?" Basil guessed, trying to focus on smaller details rather than the scarier big picture. "It's okay, you don't have to hide it. I have a few in my library."

Shellgirl tried not to look too interested, but she lacked the poker face needed for it. "I see, I see," she said evasively, "I also heard rumors of a third faction on the block too. Metal Olympus or something. My best customer advice, don't get involved with Big Business when you're small."

"Wise words to live by," Basil replied. "Have you traded with other monsters?"

"Plenty! A witch in the woods, hobgoblins, an orc clan, spellcasters... Some tried to rob me too, but I shot them right between the eyes!"

"But no humans?"

"Alive? Nope, you're actually my first living human customer! I'm super excited to make this sale!" Shellgirl clapped her hands. "So, what do I get for answering your questions? I'm looking for potions to resell to a witch, but I could settle for the business books you mentioned. For another client, of course."

"You misheard." Basil smirked. "I said that if you had the info I'm looking for, *then* we can make a deal."

"You got her, chief!" Buggy complimented him.

"That's just a devious move!" To Basil's surprise, Shellgirl nodded to herself as if taking mental notes. "I like it. I learned something tonight!"

"Seriously?" Plato complained. "Can't we just kill her and steal her stuff?"

"I made a promise," Basil replied with a tone that brooked no disobedience.

"Just try to kill me, kitty cat." Shellgirl pointed at her cannons with her thumb. "These babies aren't just for show."

Basil showcased his old iron axe. "Mine is bigger."

"Is it?" Shellgirl answered with a coy grin. "What if I told you I could make it longer?"

Basil raised a single eyebrow.

The mimic merchant answered the challenge by joining her hands. An item appeared between her fingers in a familiar flash of light: the same that flared whenever Basil opened his Inventory.

An enormous axe materialized in Shellgirl's hands, as long as a spear and topped with a spike. A cutting half-crescent blade protruded from one side and a cruel hook from the other. The staff was made of strong polished wood, the rest of stainless steel.

La Ravageuse, Swiss Halberd

Family: Weapon (Axe/Spear).

Quality: C.

Power: +13 STR.

Crit: +5%

Accuracy: 70%

Effect 1: Ignores half of a target's defensive stats during damage calculation.

Effect 2: [Empty].

Switzerland's third most popular invention after banking secrecy and pikemen, shamelessly copied by French and English alike.

It was love at first sight.

Even though Basil had been married to his old iron axe for years, the divorce happened in the blink of an eye. He dropped it on the ground without a look to seize the newer, prettier weapon. Shellgirl relinquished the halberd and let Basil examine it. His hands traveled down the shaft with desire.

Bugsy didn't hide his jealousy for Shellgirl's ability. "Hey, how is it that you have an inventory?"

"Unique mimic perk," she gloated.

Basil mentally noted that specific monsters could access Player-exclusive features with the right Perks, but he could scarcely focus on anything but the beauty in his hands. His fingers trailed along the sharp curve of the blade. He needed to own it, to possess it, to make it *his*.

"Mister, are you alright?" Rosemarine asked with concern. "Mister?"

Basil's ears could hear her words, but he didn't listen to them. His doubts about the merchant's motives vanished like the night before dawn. Someone with enough taste to carry such an exquisite ware couldn't possibly be a bad person.

Plato wagged his tail. "I think we've lost him."

Oh my God, Basil thought as he struggled to suppress his ardent desire. *It's handcrafted.*

"Mister Plato, what's happening?" Buggy asked. He sounded somewhat worried. "I've never seen the Boss like this."

"It's a Bulgarian thing," Plato replied. "You can't understand."

That was one way to put it.

"One of my ancestors," Basil whispered softly, "was a Swiss mercenary who fought in the armies of Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Shishman against the Ottoman Empire. He brought his halberd with him, and after the Turks finally conquered Bulgaria, he settled down with a local priest's niece. The weapon has been passed down my family for centuries since."

At least, until Basil's father sold the halberd for booze. His son never forgave him for the blunder. He knew the weapon in his hand wasn't his family's heirloom, but it was probably the closest thing he would ever get to a replacement.

"The shaft is firm." Basil waved the halberd. It felt so light between his fingers. "It's got a long reach too."

"It can pierce through even the moistest shells. I traded it with an undead knight for a sword. He couldn't last fifteen seconds before polishing it." Shellgirl's grin widened further and further. "Know what? If you take this beautiful baby, I'll give you a performance enhancer as a freebie."

"Mister, is she talking about weapons?" Rosemarine asked innocently. "Could I have one too?"

"Yes, of course," Basil replied before deciding he couldn't resist the halberd's lure. "You win, Shellgirl. How much do you want?"

"Now we're talkin'." Shellgirl rubbed her hands. "What do you offer, big guy?"

"Can I pay you in liquid assets? I still have euros stashed away."

"You mean human currency?" Shellgirl wagged her finger at him. "Sorry baby, currency fluctuates too much nowadays. Although I can accept shiny gold and silver."

"I have tools, extra gasoline..." Basil counted what he didn't need. "Spinotter furs..."

"Ogre bones too," Plato said. "Ogremoche's corpse is rotting in the fridge."

Somehow, Basil kept forgetting about that. "If you're looking for potions, I have a few homemade ones too. Mostly healing elixirs."

"Homemade?" Shellgirl's expression turned from cautious to excited. "You're a crafter?"

"Yes, but I can't sell too much of my stock," Basil haggled. "I have a limited supply of raw material and I still need to complete my lab."

It didn't deter Shellgirl. If anything, it only made her more curious. A frog-like tongue of slime stuck out of her mouth and licked her lips.

"Show me *everything*," she whispered.

Upon seeing the naked greed in the mimic's eyes, Basil couldn't shake the feeling that he had made a terrible mistake.

Chapter 13: Man vs Garden

Basil gave Shellgirl a tour of his basement.

The longer she examined his wares, the more her excitement grew. She inhaled and exhaled in shorter intervals. Her shell trembled in anticipation. Her slimy fingers softly touched potion bottles as if they contained liquid gold.

"You've got a big house with a lot of precious stuff." Shellgirl rubbed her hands, her eyes burning with greed. "I'm digging it..."

If she asks me to marry her for the house, I'm throwing her out, Basil thought. He had to put the conversation back on track. "I can't sell too many potions. I have a limited supply of raw material and I still need to complete my lab."

"A lab? You want to..." Shellgirl's grin became downright frightening. "Scale-up your production?"

"This is getting disturbing," Basil complained. "Tell me what items you want for the halberd and go."

"Wait, wait!" Shellgirl corrected her expression until she looked normal again, or at least less frightful. "I have a proposal! Hey, how about we start a... a..."

After struggling to find the right word, the mimic retreated back into her shell. Basil waited patiently as he heard her flip the pages of an invisible book.

"Ah, here it is!" The clam snapped open to reveal Shellgirl's bright smile. "A holistic international joint venture!"

"A business deal?" The proposal didn't surprise Basil in the slightest. He expected her to try to sucker him on the profit part though.

"You make the products, I sell them, and we split the profits!" Shellgirl grinned wickedly. "I would say eighty percent for me, twenty for you is a fair price."

I knew it. As a new merchant, Shellgirl was utterly predictable.

"How about the other way around?" Basil asked mirthfully.

"Hey, I'm taking all the risks there! I'm the one venturing into the world, chatting up customers, grinding it out!"

"But I'm the one covering the production expenses," Basil pointed out. "And profit doesn't interest me. I'm looking for tools to improve my team's day-to-day life, not to accumulate money for its own sake."

Shellgirl looked at Basil as if he had grown a second head. "You don't want to get rich?"

"Never did, and I want it even less now that the world ended," Basil replied with disdain. He already considered the lure of money an illusion getting in the way of happiness before the apocalypse and didn't change his mind afterward. "What's the point of being rich nowadays if you can't trade money for anything? You didn't even accept my currency."

"Wealth isn't about utility," Shellgirl argued, "it's about bragging rights!"

"Exactly. I don't need a mountain of cash to feel happy and confident."

His point flew over Shellgirl's head.

"That's perfect! For me!" She joined her hands, her fingers intertwined. "Then I have a counter-offer. You said you were looking for specific items? I can stash up to six items in my shell for now, which isn't enough space to accumulate a hoard."

Basil crossed his arms. "Go on."

"I'll stock the bounty of our joint venture in your basement warehouse. The company will lease you the items you need or find interesting, while I keep the money and profits! I can even look for specific stuff to obtain! How does that sound?"

Basil had mixed feelings about the proposal. On one hand, he needed medical supplies to find a cure to the petrification ailment and Shellgirl's trade trips would help him scout for information. On the other hand, regular contact with the outside world increased the risk of enemies discovering the house. Shellgirl didn't strike him as particularly stealthy either.

Basil checked his Perks and confirmed the existence of a potential solution.

"I find the proposal agreeable under one condition." Basil raised his index finger. "You must join my party."

"Uh?" Shellgirl tensed up. "Why?"

"My Tamer Perks will kill you if my HP hits zero. That way you won't be tempted to pull a fast one and lead monsters to my house's location."

Shellgirl's smile faltered. "I don't see how that's a win for me. If you want this business relationship to be exclusive, you've got to make it worth my time."

"My Tamer class will grant you stat boosts on level-ups and a unique Perk as long as you remain in my party," Basil tempted her. "You get to keep both even if we split and go our separate ways. Consider them stock options."

"Mmm..." Shellgirl considered the proposal for a moment. Then she retreated into her shell to read her business manual. "Stock-options... I see... so instead of a joint venture, we would merge our corporations and split the party's shares?"

"Yes." Basil tried to translate the arrangement in economic terms. "The party will cover your food and sleep expenses in the house, give you medical assistance, and a few other associate benefits."

"If I leave, will I keep the money I made during our association?"

"Yes."

"Then it's a deal!" Shellgirl emerged from her hideout and extended a hand at Basil. "Happy merger!"

Basil squeezed the merchant's hand and slime squished between his fingers. He prayed that he wouldn't regret this arrangement.

Shellgirl has joined your party!

[**Monster Charmer II**] Perk activated! Shellgirl learned the [**Moneymaker**] Passive Perk!

Passive Perk: Moneymaker: Double the chances of a dead monster dropping valuable items if Shellgirl participates in the battle.

"Ohoh, that's great!" Shellgirl's greedy grin grew wider. "Except the battle part. Can I trust you to take care of it?"

"No pretty freeloaders here," Basil replied harshly. "If the house is attacked, you help defend it."

"I understand the concept of defending private property, thank you very much. Rare monster parts sell for a hefty price too." Shellgirl rubbed her hands. "Let's see what you've got, partner."

Basil was willing to trade away the remains of defeated monsters like Ogremoché, spinotter furs, and extra potions. He made a list of items he was looking for in exchange: tools to build an alchemy lab in his basement; modern medicine to craft potions; a cure for the petrification ailment; and spellbooks to study.

True to her word, Shellgirl surrendered the halberd and presented him with other collected items: a cute pink ribbon; a large pearl the size of a fist; a vial of anabolic steroids; a business book; and one very precious chest.

Basil gasped when he recognized the last item. Lined with gold and cone-shaped, the chest was topped by a small cross. A picture of the Virgin Mary visiting a woman appeared on the front.

"You like this shiny?" Shellgirl patted the cross at the chest's top. "I took it with me when I left my home dungeon!"

"It's the reliquary of Saint Bernadette, Lourdes' patron!" Basil and René had seen it when they last visited Lourdes.

He attempted to analyze it, but the System denied him.

Your Intelligence stat is insufficient to analyze this object.

"Fuck you!" Basil yelled at the screen.

"Not for free." Shellgirl rubbed her fingers. "And you must bring your own equipment."

"Argh, forget it." Basil set the reliquary aside. He simply couldn't trade something so precious.

Lourdes was well-known among Catholics for the supposedly miraculous properties of its waters. Many pilgrims visited its spring and prayed for a cure. Considering how the System now attributed magical properties to prayers and Saint Bernadette was the one who identified the miraculous waters, the reliquary might become incredibly useful in the near future.

After setting Saint Bernadette's remains aside, Basil glanced at the other items, particularly the ribbon.

Pink Ribbon

Family: Accessory (Hat)

Quality: D

Effect: Increases the wearer's chances of avoiding attacks by 10 percent.

A pink little ribbon that makes the wearer beautiful and adorable and cute and lovely and if you hit them you're a heartless monster!

Rosemarine would look pretty with it. As for the rest, Shellgirl held the pearl and book close to her chest. "These ones aren't for lease! Mine, mine, mine!"

Basil gave the book a cursory glance anyway.

Secrets of the Grind: A guide to business and personal fulfillment.

Family: Book

Quality: E

The worst possible mix of self-help propaganda and common business advice pretending to be profound. Rated R for Ripoff.

How unsurprising.

"You can borrow better business books from my library," Basil said.

"Oh?" Shellgirl looked at him with a curious expression. "You sought to invest in yourself too?"

"Sort of. I planned to open an online pharmacy business at one point, but it didn't pan out."

"I've read failure is the best teacher," Shellgirl replied with a grin. "You need to adopt a wealthy mindset if you want to improve."

Basil shuddered. He had to take the self-help booklets out of the library before she could read them.

The party split the next day after Basil enjoyed a few hours of sleep. Shellgirl leaped into the river with new items to

sell, promising to return by the evening. Basil sent Bugsy into the forest to chop trees for the new door; he only had to pick them up where they fell. And Plato went to hunt birds in the forest like the feline serial killer he was.

Which left Basil alone with Rosemarine to expand the garden. With the greenhouse full and too many new mouths to feed, they needed to prepare a new plot of land next to the house for sowing.

"Here you go, my dear." Basil finished putting the pink ribbon around Rosemarine's neck. "Is it too tight?"

"How do I look, Mr. Who-Feeds-Me?" Rosemarine asked, her ribbon jiggling when she turned her head. Acidic saliva dripped down her sharp teeth and onto the grass.

Aww, she looked adorable!

"You're perfect, my dear," Basil said before handing her a small bag of seeds. "Now, I need you to sow these tiny babies after Daddy Bohem labors the ground with his hoe. Each seed category must stay in its allocated plot."

"Can I spray them with my pollen to make them healthier, Mister?" Rosemarine asked with enthusiasm. "Can I feed them the blood and guts of our enemies too?"

Aww, she was such a caring greenhand! "Baby steps, Rosemarine."

Basil unfolded his newest crafting discovery: a brown bag full of red fertilizer, obtained by combining a normal brand with Shellgirl's anabolic steroids. According to the System, this *'power nutrient'* would buff up the stats of all plants exposed to it. Basil hoped that it would hasten the growth of the seeds enough for an early harvest.

I missed gardening. Basil plowed the field with his hoe under the faint morning light. Rosemarine dutifully planted the seeds in his wake, spraying the ground with fertilizer and pollen alike. *A simple, uncomplicated life.*

The System had ruined Basil's daily routine and forced him to deal with crisis after crisis. Megabug, the Unity, Shellgirl... each time he thought he could find a degree of normalcy in a world gone mad, a new problem arose to ruin his hopes.

Well, no more! Basil had planned the perfect post-apocalyptic routine! He would wake up at eleven o'clock, do house chores before his meal, study holy books in the afternoon, dine with his pets, and finally go to sleep after a TV or video game run. Eventually, he would find a cure for petrification, the French army would repel the Unity, and Basil could go back to paying his taxes without worrying about the future.

A simple plan for a quiet life.

"Mister?" Rosemarine's voice grew worried. "Mister?"

I shouldn't tempt fate like that, Basil told himself. He glanced at the plowed rows of the garden. The earth trembled as dog-sized creatures emerged from underground to embrace the sunlight. *It never goes well.*

Basil didn't know whether he should blame Rosemarine's pollen or the power nutrient. Perhaps it was the combination of both on top of the dungeon's leftover radiation. Whatever the case, the results were nothing short of spectacular.

A dog-sized pumpkin was the first to rise out of the earth. It let out a fearsome cry with its maw and unleashed a burst of flames with its burning eyes. Fanged tomatoes emerged from the garden after it, followed by onions with spider legs,

tiny humanoid beans, and strawberries with frightening eyes all over their skin.

Ghostie Pumpkin

Level 1 [Plant/Undead].

Demon Tomato

Level 1 [Plant/Demon].

Bean Ninja

Level 1 [Plant]

Onion Spider

Level 1 [Plant/Bug].

Strawboogie Berry

Level 1 [Plant/Fairy]

Rosemarine's seeds bloomed by the dozens into tiny newborn monsters. The cacophony of their screams made Basil wince. Yet the sight filled him with perverse satisfaction. His experiment had succeeded beyond his wildest dreams.

"Can I adopt them, Mister?" Rosemarine asked, hectic with joy. "We will raise a plant army and eat the world!"

"I've made something better than a monster flower hedge." Basil smirked in triumph. "A self-defending kitchen garde—argh!"

A fanged tomato leaped at his face with a hungry roar. Basil swung his hoe on instinct and sent the creature flying into

the house's fence. A pumpkin monster followed by trying to bite his ankle and received a kick to the teeth for its trouble.

Basil's joy at raising a vegetable army proved short-lived. The monsters snapped their fangs at him and some even salivated with hunger.

"No eating the Mister!" Rosemarine roared, her cute little voice turning from concerned to angry. "Bad seeds! Bad seeds!"

"I am your creator!" Basil shouted to his wayward vegetables. "You must obey me! Submit, and I shall water you each morning!"

The System translated his words to the rabble and some of them listened. A few of the vegetables broke ranks to join Rosemarine, the plants forming a defensive barrier around Basil.

Alas, most of the newborn monsters refused to bow and leaped at the loyalists with murderous intent.

"Is this a revolt?" Basil ground his teeth. "I prefer meat first and foremost..."

He swung his hoe and baptized it in pumpkin blood.

"But I know vegan recipes."

After he wandered deeper and deeper into the woods with nothing to show for it, Plato realized that he had done it.

He had slain all the forest's bird monsters.

"Wow, I didn't think the day would come." Plato sat in the shadow of a tree in disappointment. "I feel empty inside."

The forest was still teeming with critters like rats, mice, and squirrels but... killing them felt different. Amusing, but not as pleasurable as watching the light go out of a bird's eyes. Nothing could beat a close-up murder in intimacy, especially when the target didn't see the fatal pounce coming.

"How am I supposed to contribute now?" Plato muttered to himself. These exercises were training for hunts and battles, to bring meat to the kitchen table, and to make his party stronger by shoring up experience.

Plato understood that as a pampered cat, he was mostly a burden for Basil. His owner tapped into his food reserves for his sake, treated him when he was sick, and removed parasites from his fur when he came back with ticks.

Rosemarine healed wounds with her pollen and Bugsy contributed like a work animal, but the only things Plato was good at were hunting and reconnaissance. With no monster left in the forest, what purpose did he serve?

Plato knew Basil would never consider him a burden in his mind, but his cat pride wouldn't let him act like a... like a human NEET!

I could always scout the city's outskirts and snatch boxes of medicine. Plato picked up the distant sound of trees falling down to earth. *Bugsy sure can't approach the place undetected.*

Plato's amusement morphed into concern. They were far from the house. Why would Bugsy travel so deep into the forest to chop wood? He could pick trees by stepping over the fence.

The rumbling noise grew closer.

Realizing the danger, Plato hid in the tall grasses. His eyesight was terrible, but his ears picked words spoken aloud and his nose smelled steel in the wind.

"Are you kidding me?" Plato whispered, half in fear and half in disbelief. An enormous shadow walked between the trees, causing some to fall with each step. "Damn it."

"TARGET UNDETECTED!" The gearsman's voice boomed across the forest. A group of watchers flew between the trees to patrol the area around their larger brethren. "MOVING ON TO A NEW SEARCH ZONE!"

After making sure the robots wouldn't see him, Plato rushed in the house's direction as fast as his tiny legs could carry him.

Chapter 14: Man vs Bomb

The battle for the garden ended with a decisive loyalist victory.

The rebels nearly overwhelmed Basil and his allies through sheer numbers, until Bussy returned from his woodcutting excursion. The centimagma decimated the left tomato wing with his fiery breath, allowing Basil to collapse the pumpkin cavalry's right flank. They cut the rebels down to the last sprout.

When Basil lowered his hoe at last, a harvest of fresh and crispy vegetables lay at his feet. Only five plant loyalists kept their heads; one individual for each breed sowed today, from the ghostie pumpkin to the demon tomato.

Your party earned 4000 EXP (320 for you).

The experience penalty was starting to show. Basil had slain the equivalent of a goblin army with no new level to show for it.

"Well, that was unexpected." Basil checked his half-full bag of fertilizer. They had enough of it left to seed a second plot of land, but he wondered if it would be worth the risk.

"It must have been a ploy of the Vegan Empire, Boss!" Bussy glared at the vegetable loyalists with suspicion. The Major Chicken marathon night influenced him a bit too much. "They're infiltrators sent to turn us into herbivores!"

The plant monsters cowered in fear of the much larger centimagma. Rosemarine protectively moved between them

and Buggy. "They are good seeds!" she declared with motherly pride. "I won't let you hurt them!"

Aww, she looked so brave snapping her fangs at a much larger monster!

"She's correct, Buggy." Basil patted the centimagma on the back. "They fought to preserve our meat dictatorship over the menu. As promised, I shall water them every day and spare them from the kitchen knife."

The five plant monsters let out screeches of happiness, but none as loud as Rosemarine.

"If you say so, Boss," Buggy said without complaining. "So uh, do they join the party too?"

"I never close the door to new minions," Basil replied. However, he failed to add the newly born plant monsters to his party.

Registration attempt failed. An active party can only have six members. If you want to expand your organization or create interlocked parties, you must create a guild by conquering a dungeon.

Six members? With Shellgirl now included in the active party, that left only one spot. He could add and expel the vegetables from his party in short succession to grant them the extra Tamer Perk, but they would miss out on the improved stat growths.

"Mister?" Rosemarine asked in confusion. "Is something wrong?"

"Change of plans," Basil replied. "The System won't allow me to recruit everyone into my party, so they will form one

of their own under your supervision, Rosemarine. They'll be your interns and you will teach them our way of life."

"Yes, Mister!" Rosemarine took the smaller vegetable monsters in her vines like a mother hen. "I will raise them to eat the meat of our enemies!"

"Hey, why does she get interns?" Buggy complained with clear jealousy. "Mr. Plato and I are the seniors!"

Speaking of Plato, the cat rushed out of the woods and towards the garden. Basil knew his pet's body language enough to realize something terrible happened.

"Basil, we've got a probl—" Plato froze upon noticing the new vegetable monsters. "Am I hallucinating, or does that tomato have fangs?"

"When we all evolve, we will eat the goblins to extinction!" Rosemarine boasted, the plant monsters making noises of approval. Basil suddenly realized that they lacked the intelligence to actually speak, at least until they gained a few more levels.

"Boss, will meat dishes attack us too?" Buggy asked with a worried tone.

"They shouldn't," Basil replied, although he suddenly experienced a moment of doubt. With the System, anything could happen. He brushed off the subject before he could tempt fate any further. "Plato, what's happening?"

"The robots." Plato sat on the garden's grass, a serious expression on his face. "They're patrolling the forest."

A tense silence fell upon the garden and Basil realized that he would never find peace. "How many?" he asked. "How

far?"

"A gearsman and five watchers." Plato gathered his breath. "They're checking every spot of land, but the bog's terrain slows down their progress. I'd say we have a few hours."

"You're sure they're after us?"

"Who else, Basil?" Plato replied ruefully.

Had Basil misread the situation? He thought the Unity lacked the numbers to patrol areas beyond Dax's riverbank and that his party could safely stick to the wilderness. Or did the robots mistake Basil's group for enemy reinforcements? In this scenario, it made sense for them to secure the forest and prevent a pincer attack.

Basil cursed his rotten luck for letting himself be seen in Dax. He shouldn't have overreached.

"What do we do, Boss?" Buggy asked, his antennae applied to the ground. "I don't sense them yet so we have time to flee."

"We can't run this time," Basil replied. "We must destroy them before they can find the house."

"Hello?" Plato put a paw on his chest, right where Megabug once stabbed him. "Last time we fought someone with a level higher than ours, I lost a life. I would rather keep the other eight."

"I would rather avoid unnecessary fights too, but the situation is fundamentally different," Basil pointed out. "We didn't expect Megabug so numbers and initiative were our only advantage. Today we have time to prepare, we know the terrain, and the robots don't expect an ambush."

Would it be enough to make up for the level disparity? What other options did Basil have available? He could make Molotov cocktails from his gasoline reserves or craft bombs from the leftover gunpowder René stockpiled for his rifle, but how could he deliver the payload without blowing himself up?

A brilliant, terrific idea suddenly crossed Basil's mind. He glanced at Rosemarine, the adorable plant fretting at her owner's attention. "Mister? Why are you looking at me like you want to eat me?"

"Could you show me your cute little decoy Perk again?"

Rosemarine nodded and duplicated herself, a perfect copy of herself appearing at her left. The double wore its own version of the pink ribbon, which turned to pollen dust the moment Basil attempted to take it off.

Rosemarine's decoy could duplicate the equipment she wore before activating her ability, but the fakes disappeared when no longer in contact with her body. Basil took it in stride.

"Okay, I have a plan." Basil started giving orders to the party. "Plato, Buggy, you keep us informed on the robots' movement. Hopefully, Shellgirl will return in a few hours to reinforce us. Rosemarine, you drill the vegetables for battle. I'm going to craft you something in the meantime."

"A necklace, Mister?" she asked.

"Better." Basil grinned wickedly. "A shiny belt."

Shellgirl returned early in the afternoon, which suited Basil just fine. He was just finishing his batch of Molotov cocktails

and Rosemarine's new fashion piece.

New crafting recipes: [**Molotov Cocktail**] & [**Explosive Belt**].

The Old Man's stock of gunpowder had proved barely enough to craft a single explosive belt. Tiny bottles filled with flammable substances jiggled on a leather bandolier. A single fuse could set them all alight.

Basil doubted it would suffice to destroy the gearsman in one attempt. But the neat thing was, he could repeat the performance.

"Hey, buddy!" Shellgirl hopped into the basement by slamming her shell shut and open in quick succession. It was a primitive mode of locomotion, but it worked. "So, the bug outside told me we're going to fight off intruders?"

"Something like that," Basil replied. "We'll repel the Unity."

"The robots?" Shellgirl's expression deflated. "I wouldn't mind driving them off since they kill competition and customers alike, but... remember what I told you about not messing with the Big Businesses? Can't we skip this one?"

"Not unless you want us to go our separate ways. Nobody will take this home away from me so long as I draw breath." The Old Man entrusted the place to Basil and it was his home. "You can run away if you want, but don't expect a warm welcome afterward."

"You drive a hard bargain." Shellgirl grunted. "A deal is a deal, so I'll help defend our market share as promised. Can I stay at the back though? As a brilliant mastermind, I do way better in a command position!"

Basil suspected cowardice played a bigger role than tactics in her mind, but with her barrels she should perform better as support artillery. His party had enough frontliners already. "How far can you shoot a target?"

"I never checked my limit," Shellgirl admitted. She put a finger on her slimy lips, her expression thoughtful. "Three hundred meters maybe?"

Farther than expected, less than Basil would have liked. "Alright, let's go then. We don't have time to waste."

"Don't you want to see what I bought first?" Shellgirl waved her hand and a pile of items materialized in a flash of light. "My witch contact was super impressed by your potions and traded me tools to complete your lab!"

Basil gave the bounty a cursory glance. Indeed, Shellgirl brought useful stuff: white pestle and mortar; a ceramic crucible; a copper alembic; safety goggles; and even a sand bath device to heat up liquids. Combined with his cauldron and ovens, Basil held all the tools to build a functional, if primitive, alchemy lab.

Quest: They called me Mad! completed! Your party earned 100 Bonus EXP (20 for you) and you learned the Athanor alchemy recipe.

Quest experience didn't suffer from the usual level penalty. Interesting.

"Good job," Basil complimented Shellgirl. He put on the safety goggles after the System confirmed that it would make him immune to the 'Blind' ailment, whatever that meant.

"Good?" Shellgirl sounded downright insulted. "I did an *excellent* job. All that stuff should have cost us twice as much as what I negotiated!"

"I'll take your word for it," Basil said as he stuffed his travel bag with the explosive belt and Molotov cocktails. "Who is the witch you traded for these tools with?"

"Sorry partner, my clients expect a certain degree of confidentiality. Nobody wants to be hunted for their exp." Shellgirl winked at Basil. "In her case though, I'm sure we could arrange a meeting. She looked very interested in what you could craft for her."

Developing a trade network with monsters would wait until after they destroyed the gearsman. Basil and Shellgirl left the basement for the garden outside. Whereas Bugsy surveyed the area with his tremorsense, Rosemarine was busy teaching the new vegetable guard the basics of human language.

"Murder," Rosemarine said. "Repeat after me. Mur-der."

"Mur-der!" the vegetables repeated, all of them carrying improvised weapons such as wooden sticks with pointy ends. The pumpkin sounded the most articulate of the group in stark contrast with the quiet bean ninja. "Murder!"

Aww, they looked like such a cute deathsquad! Basil's dream of a plant-based house security appeared to be more and more credible.

"Boss, I'm starting to pick up tremors," Bugsy warned. "They're closing in."

As if on cue, Plato returned from his scouting. "They've reached the bog in the southwest," he warned. "The clearing

with the putrid pools."

Then they were less than half an hour away from the house.

"We'll ambush them there. The terrain will favor us." Basil summoned his new halberd from the inventory. "The new recruits will stay here to guard the house in our absence."

"We don't take them with us, Mister?" Rosemarine asked. The vegetables let out grunts of disappointment.

"I welcome more cannon fodder," Plato argued.

"Too risky. At their level, a single watcher could petrify them all." Basil pointed his halberd at the vegetable guard. "You will stay here and protect the house in our absence."

"House!" The pumpkin leader of the team repeated. It reminded Basil of a child learning to speak. "House garden!"

Your vegetables formed a separate party: **House Garden**.

Party Leader: Ghostie Pumpkin.

"House Garden?" Basil frowned at the message. "Wait, you can *name* your party?"

"Yes, you can!" Shellgirl yelled at him. "And I can't believe you left our company unnamed, buddy! How am I supposed to convince people to believe in our brand when we don't have any?"

"Good products should speak for themselves, should they not?" Plato asked mirthfully. "Now let's go, dogs. I can hear them coming."

He didn't need to say it twice. Basil stepped into the marshlands beyond the house first, followed by the rest of his party. The vegetables waved their vines and leaves at the party as they ventured into the wild.

Unfortunately, one member of the team dragged behind.

Basil looked over his shoulder in annoyance at Shellgirl. The rest of the party walked at a steady pace, even the clumsy Buggy, but the merchant struggled to hop a few meters forward.

"It works better in the water!" Shellgirl protested, utterly shamed.

Basil sighed. "Buggy, please carry our artillery piece around."

"Uh, okay boss." The centimagma coiled his tail around Shellgirl and lifted her above the ground. Only the slime's crimson eyes peered through the gap in the shell. "Like this?"

"Good," Plato commented. "If we must run away again, you can throw her in the enemy's face to buy us time."

"Just try, kitty cat." Shellgirl pointed a barrel in the cat's direction. "I don't have to hop fast, just faster than you."

I'm glad they're already getting along, Basil thought with amusement. Plato guided the team through the woods surrounding the house. The faint twilight colored the leaves and tall grass with an orange tint. The odious smell of putrid mire grew thicker and insects made their nest on the remains of broken trees. *Hopefully, they will coordinate well in the heat of battle.*

Only the song of insects and the faint noise of snakes slithering in the grass broke the woods' quietness. The party moved stealthily. Buggy had grown comfortable enough with his new body to walk without shattering trees.

Unnerved by the silence, Shellgirl muttered words to herself. "Shellgirl Incorporated... Sea Commerce Enterprises?"

"Still trying to find a party name?" Plato whispered. If the cat felt comfortable talking, then the watchers were still somewhat far away.

"How about..." Shellgirl marked a short pause, as if suddenly inspired. "*Shell?*"

"Already taken," Basil replied with a shudder. "And it's not a good brand at all."

"*La Bande à Basil?*" Plato suggested with an amused tone.

"Taken too, with an 'e' at the end." Basil suddenly wondered if copyrights and trademarks still mattered in a post-apocalyptic world. He would avoid treading on the big business' shoes, just in case they returned to power.

"The Axes of Heaven, Mister?" Rosemarine suggested. Aww, she remembered Basil had used that term!

"Too violent," Shellgirl vetoed the proposal. "Customers will take us for weapon merchants instead of a future worldwide consortium."

"How about Plato's Perfection?" Plato said. "The Plato Connection? Let's be honest with ourselves, I'm the team's mascot, the band's face."

"Cats aren't market juggernaut material," Shellgirl replied.

"Tell that to Garfield."

Basil glanced at the only member of the team who hadn't offered a suggestion yet. "Bugsy? Any ideas?"

"I, uh..." Bugsy cleared his throat, his eyes blinking in short succession. Clearly, he was afraid of a negative reaction. "The *Bohens*?"

Basil immediately loved the suggestion. It was new, innovative, and *powerful!*

"Uh, it sounds like a sitcom show." As usual, Plato answered this genius proposal with skepticism. "Why, Bugsy?"

"Well, we're living in the Boss' house for free. That makes us the Bohens, no?" Bugsy's eyes widened with hope. "Like a *family!*"

"Good boy." Basil patted Bugsy on the back of the head, which the centimagma liked very much. His antennae wriggled in pleasure.

"I didn't know you kissed asses for a living," Shellgirl said without a hint of sarcasm. "Does it pay well?"

"If Mister Who-Feeds-Me likes it, then I like it too," Rosemarine chirped. "I will eat anyone who makes Mister unhappy."

Shellgirl swiftly voted for the proposal. "I love the family-friendly company branding."

"Looks like you're outvoted, Plato." Basil glanced down at his cat. "Do you *feel* the pull of democracy?"

The cat sighed in despair. "We are going to die before we can regret the name anyway."

Your party name has been changed to: **The Bohens.**

Bugsy tensed up. "Boss..."

Basil didn't need a warning. His eyes noticed crushed branches along the trail and his ears picked up the sound of splashing waters. The group crawled in the tall grass, Bugsy included, to the border of the woodland path.

The trees stopped where the heart of the bog began. A thick tangle of reeds formed the frontier between the forest and a sodden, marshland clearing. Muddy ground surrounding a large pool of water and the gearsman examining it.

The machine that forced Basil's party to flee Dax stood on the mud shore, one of its tentacles wading through putrid waters. It found the remains of a spinotter's skeleton and pulled it out of the pool. Five watchers scanned the bones. They lost interest in seconds and floated around the gearsman as it continued its examination.

The sunlight briefly broke through the clouds above the bog and reflected on the mighty robot's shielding. It dwarfed Bugsy in size, and Shellgirl's barrels looked like toys compared to its cannon. "Wow," said the latter with a fearful voice. "Level thirteen?"

"Not so brave now, huh?" Plato whispered. He watched the robot pull corpses from the pool in confusion. "Do they think we have an underwater base?"

"I could build one," Shellgirl said. "To stash our gold."

"Shush, they will hear us." Basil opened his bag and brought out the explosive belt. "Bugsy, put Shellgirl aside in the grass where she can take a shot unseen."

Plato looked at the explosive belt with concern. "Basil, when I said I had eight lives left—"

"It's not for you," Basil attached the suicide bandolier around Rosemarine's neck and Bugsy quietly dropped Shellgirl in the grass. "Rosemarine, use your seed decoy."

"Yes, Mister." The plant duplicated, suicide belt included. "How do I look, Mister?"

"Like the cutest suicide bomber ever." Basil handed Rosemarine his lighter. "Bugsy, at my signal you'll throw the duplicate at the gearsman. Shellgirl will provide cover fire and the rest of us will act as frontliners. Rosemarine, you will set your clone's fuse alight before Bugsy throws it and create a new one as soon as—"

Basil's mouth went dry. The gearsman pulled a metal piece out of the pool, the paint nearly intact in spite of the acidic waters.

A helicopter's tail rotor.

"CRASH SITE CONFIRMED!" The gearsman tossed the vehicle part back into the pool. Its steel tentacles tensed in alarm. "SEARCHING FOR SURVIVORS!"

They weren't looking for us, Basil realized. The watchers immediately dispersed in all corners of the clearing, all of them on high alert. One flew straight towards the party's location.

"Damn it!" Basil hissed. "Bugsy, throw the double now!"

The watcher noticed the movement in the tall grass and unleashed a strident sound. The screeching made Basil wince and immediately caused the gearsman to turn its cannon in the group's direction.

With the element of surprise wasted, Basil jumped out of the grass and roared into the fray.

Chapter 15: Man vs Machine

The watchers bombarded Basil with petrification rays the moment he showed himself.

His higher level protected him from them. Basil cut the closest watcher down with his halberd, his swing swifter than the wind. A single blow destroyed the robot.

The four others flew in his direction, followed by the gearsman on the ground. The colossal machine nearly tripped on the muddy ground; unlike Basil, who knew the bog's trails by heart, the machine couldn't tell solid ground apart from treacherous soil.

Plato leaped out of his hiding spot to assist his owner, right as Buggy tossed Rosemarine's double at the gearsman. The powerful centimagma launched the much smaller plant as if she were a living arrow.

"I'm flying, Mister!" The clone shouted mid-flight, her belt's fuse brightly alight. "I'm fly—"

The decoy smashed into the gearsman at full velocity and triggered the explosives. A mighty, fiery detonation shook the bog. The dark waters of the nearby pool rippled, the grass sagged from the blast, and a cloud of dust swallowed the gearsman. Basil almost tripped from the shockwave, but his System-empowered body allowed him to keep his balance.

"HIGH-LEVEL THREAT DETECTED!" The four remaining watchers turned red. Their metal shells heated up. "[SELF-DESTRUCT] PROTOCOL ACTIVATED!"

"Copycats!" Basil readied himself to dodge the incoming robots when he noticed a light shining from inside the cloud raised by Rosemarine's explosion. An electrical ray pierced through the smoke.

Basil barely managed to throw himself to the ground. The beam missed him and finished its course in the woodlands behind him, close to Buggy's hiding spot. The centimagma flung another Rosemarine suicide projectile in response.

"Basil, above you!" Plato shouted a warning. "Run!"

Basil raised his head to find the surviving watchers converging on him. Two flung themselves at him, only for ice spheres to hit them at high velocity. Both robots exploded in the air long before they could reach Basil.

He glanced at the source of the suppressive fire.

Shellgirl.

The clam mimic's back-barrels peeked out of the reeds and fired projectiles at the remaining watchers, flooding the sky with smoke. She launched pearls of thick ice so quickly that they left a trail of shining dust in their wake. They looked a bit like falling stars, albeit no bigger than a fist.

This...

This was going well! Surprisingly well! The party blitzkrieged the gearsman's escort and reduced the giant robot to a sitting duck!

"Keep at it!" Basil's voice struggled to carry over the noise of explosions. "Keep at it!"

Another Rosemarine clone was flung at the gearsman's position, much to Plato's astonishment. "How long can she keep killing herself?"

"As long as she has SP left!" Basil grinned in dark triumph. "That's right! I, Basil Bohen, have invented renewable suicide bombers!"

"The younger the better, huh?" Plato mused, only for a lightning bolt to detonate the Rosemarine decoy before she crossed half the bog. "The bot wised up to the tactic."

Indeed, the gearsman shot down another Rosemarine decoy bomb right as it stepped out of the dust. The repeated bombardments had melted off the left side of its ovoid shielding, revealing complex gears and electrical devices underneath it. Fire spread through the machine's circuitry and the crystal eye above the ventral cannon glittered malevolently.

"[MATTER BARRIER]!" A forcefield of bright orange light covered the gearsman's body, from its tentacles to the core. "THE UNITY IS NON-NEGOTIABLE!"

Non-magical damage will be halved!

"Plato, target its legs," Basil ordered his cat. His own hand searched in his bag for a Molotov cocktail. "I'll reduce its visibility."

"Here I go dying again!" Plato ran across the bog, claws out. Shellgirl assisted him by bombarding the gearsman from her hiding spot. The robot didn't bother dodging. The ice pearls

shattered against its forcefield and inflicted only minor damage.

Holes opened all over the gearsman's outer shield and fired out a dozen small missiles. The projectiles rained down on the woodlands. Buggy and Shellgirl retaliated with their fiery breath and ice pearls, but they only blew up half of the projectiles. The remaining missiles crashed on their hiding spots and set the horizon alight with lightning bursts.

Plato reached the gearsman and scratched a telescopic leg. The cat's claws somehow managed to cut through the barrier, leaving a scar on the metal underneath. Basil had no idea how overgrown nails could cut through steel as if they were made of diamond, but they did anyway. Plato's overwhelming Skill stat allowed him to inflict damage all the same.

The System made no sense!

The robot retaliated by pointing its ventral cannon at Plato. The cat ran away to avoid a deadly beam of lightning, the ray pursuing him relentlessly.

I spoke too soon, Basil thought grimly as he tossed a Molotov cocktail at the gearsman. He prayed his allies had survived the missile bombardment. *The real fight starts now.*

Basil didn't have a lighter nor needed one; the flames on the gearsman set the cocktail alight on impact. The gasoline burst out of shattered glass to cover the gearsman's crystal eye. With its visibility diminished, the machine missed Plato. The lightning beam only vaporized grass and reeds.

Basil exploited the machine's blindness to flank it. His halberd smashed through the forcefield and the steel. Both

felt like flesh bending to his halberd's blade. He cut a large gash across the gearsman's body and adjusted his position for a second strike.

"THIS WORLD TOO WILL BE PACIFIED!" The gearsman grabbed mud with a metal claw and used it to smother the flames covering its eye. The crystal orb glared at Basil and pointed the cannon at his face. A swing of his halberd sliced the weapon in half a mere moment before it could open fire.

Basil didn't have time to enjoy his success, for the gearsman swung a telescopic tentacle and hit him in the chest. The blow cracked ribs and sent Basil flying head-first into the bog. The safety goggles Shellgirl gave him prevented mud from infecting his eyes, but some of it traveled up his nose.

Basil saw stars; specks of light at the edge of his vision. He coughed out dust and grass. His ears picked up confusing noises which his mind struggled to assemble into words. The damp woods prevented the battle's fires from spreading, but smoke tainted the skies and made his mouth dry. Basil used his elbow to lift himself up, struggling against the sharp pain in his chest.

The gearsman's shadow loomed threateningly over his head.

Plato leaped on the machine and furiously sliced the machine's eye. His attempts to save his owner were for naught: the forcefield weakened his claws so much that he barely scratched the crystal underneath.

The gearsman stomped on Basil with its metal claw before he could get back to his feet.

Considering the sheer size and weight of the gearsman, Basil was pretty sure the blow should have split him in two and spilled his gut all over the ground. His high Vitality meant that he *lived* to suffer through the attack. When Basil coughed again, it was blood that came out of his lungs rather than air.

He couldn't breathe, couldn't move. His hands held on to his halberd but the sharp pressure on his chest prevented him from moving his arms. Basil didn't feel his legs either; he could only feel the *pain*. He saw Buggy and Rosemarie rush out of the smoke at the periphery of his vision right as the gearsman lifted him above ground.

Next thing Basil knew, he was underwater.

A putrid, rancid liquid filled his mouth and nose. The cold infiltrated his clothes, dulling the pain a little. The more Basil struggled, the tighter the metal claw's grip grew. His head hit the surface of a buried helicopter's broken windshield.

The gearsman was drowning him in the bog pool. It would squeeze the last bit of air out of his lungs and leave his corpse buried under the bog.

Basil failed to swing his halberd. He wasn't even sure if he still held it. His body was cold, he couldn't think, couldn't see. His heart pounded in his chest and a terrible headache seized his brain. System alarm messages flooded his vision with 'critical health,' 'critical health,' 'critical health!'

Basil's survival instinct took over and made him blurt two words, two simple words without considering the consequences.

"[Warp Spasm]."

Bubbles came out of his mouth, but the System listened.

His vision went red, literally. His eyes burned with crimson light reflecting in his safety goggles. The pain in his back and limbs vanished, replaced with a new sensation.

Rage.

Pure, unyielding berserker rage!

Basil's blood boiled in his vein and steam came out of his lungs. His muscles burned with newfound strength and fury. He forced the metal claw holding him back with a burst of strength and swam back to the pool's surface. The heavy halberd in his hand felt lighter than a feather.

Basil leaped out of the pond with murder on his mind. Even though he drank water by the gallon, it didn't quench his thirst for blood. He rose up and roared to face the monsters on the surface.

Goblins.

There were goblins everywhere. Goblinflower, centigoblin, giant robot goblin, and the worst of all, the goblin furry! All of them were disrespecting him with their very existence!

True, the goblin robot had metal skin and a broken cannon for a snout. It didn't matter. Basil *knew* it was a goblin in disguise who would kill his rabbits, rape his chicken, murder his pets, and set his precious house on fire!

The goblin furry scratched at the robogoblin's eye, which brawled with the centigoblin in the mud. Both were heavily wounded. The goblin flower blew dirty dust all over Basil's clothes, enraging him. How dare she dirty his pants!

"Go back to Monsanto!" Basil snarled. He swung his axe at the goblinflower. He missed, his halberd blowing a crater in the ground. "I'll make you run, little goblin!"

The plant promptly fled. Basil would have promptly weeded it out, if the goblin robot hadn't said something that pissed him even more.

"YOU ARE SO POOR THAT EVEN YOUR MOTHER IS ASHAMED OF YOU!"

It angered him all the more because it was true.

Basil screamed and charged.

The furry goblin wisely leaped out of his way. As for the centigoblin, Basil backhanded him with enough strength to send him reeling backward. His halberd sliced one of the goblin robot's mechanical limbs and shattered the forcefield protecting the body.

"YOU DIDN'T HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO SUCCEED!" The robogoblin taunted Basil with its booming, metallic voice. "SO YOU HIDE YOUR SHAME IN THE WOODS!"

"Shut up, cyclops!" There were no tactics to Basil's swings, no thoughts given to his attacks. The skills ingrained in his head by the System guided his hand. Automated technique and wild savagery combined into a deadly dance of steel.

He hacked at the robogoblin's body, dismembering it limb by limb. The machine managed to tackle him in response, but Basil didn't feel any pain at the blow. Rage was one hell of an anesthetic. The blood dripping from Basil's mouth fueled him.

"DEEP DOWN, YOU ARE AFRAID OF THE OUTSID—"

"Enough!" Basil shattered the robogoblin's single eye into a thousand pieces with a mighty swing. "I'm not afraid of anything!"

The machine stopped moving, but Basil kept going. He sliced and smashed and kicked and roared. Gears flew and bolts broke. Only when Basil ran out of breath did his rampage finally end. He stood victorious, drenched in oily blood atop a pile of scraps.

[**Berserk**] ailment lifted.

Your party earned 11000 experience (2100 for you). You earned 2 levels!

"Ah... ah..." Basil gathered his breath. The adrenaline rush receded alongside his inhuman strength. He felt so tired that he had to lean against his halberd to stand upright. The pain in his chest returned, albeit weaker than before. "Ah..."

"Basil?" Plato walked into sight. He kept a respectable distance between his owner and himself. "Are you... are you okay?"

"I'm half-dead," Basil replied. He coughed out a mix of mud and blood. "And I don't know... what the other half is."

"Looks like you calmed down." Plato looked over his shoulder. "It's okay guys, he's back to his stupid self again."

"Don't call me stupid..." Basil took a healing potion out of his bag, nearly spilled the content in exhaustion, and swallowed the drink whole. It made his chest hurt less. "Are the others okay?"

"No," Plato replied bluntly.

Basil's eyes scanned the area. He found a stunned Buggy laying on the ground next to the gearsman with one of his mandibles broken. Rosemarine applied pollen to repair it and shuddered upon meeting Basil's gaze. "Mister, you're very scary..."

"Oh my God." Basil covered his mouth in shame. He suddenly realized what he did under the influence of his berserk rage. "Rosemarine, Buggy, I'm so sorry!"

"It's okay, Mister," Rosemarine kindly reassured him. "I killed myself five times today, all on my own!"

"Boss, I don't want to say it," Buggy muttered once his mandible held back in place, "but you have serious anger management issues!"

Basil wanted to protest, but wisely kept his mouth shut. He should forswear Warp Spasm except for the direst circumstances. The Perk filled him with incredible strength at the cost of making him a danger to *everyone else*.

At least they won without casualties. Basil examined the gearsman's remains. The crystal eye was smashed to pieces, but multiple alien gears and devices survived the fight. A few oddities stood out from the wreckage: a pile of colorful blue dust, shining stones covered in rune symbols, and yellow crystals. Shellgirl's Moneymaker Perk must have caused them to appear.

"We won and nobody died," Plato said. He didn't sound like he believed it himself. "Wait, do decoys have souls?"

"I hope they do," Rosemarine said with enthusiasm.

"I swear this incident won't happen again," Basil promised his pets. "I'm truly sorry, Buggy."

The centimagma shrugged. "It's fine, Boss. You scared me a lot more the first time we met."

Basil didn't know how he should take that remark.

"I can't believe we missed a helicopter crash so close to home," said Plato. The cat examined the rotors unearthed by the gearsman. "How did I fail to hear it?"

"It must have happened last night, when we received Shellgirl's visit, and the bog's vegetation dampened the sound," Basil replied. "The Unity probably damaged the rotor and it couldn't land safely in the city."

What did it mean about the state of Dax? Did the army retreat from it? Basil learned his lesson and wouldn't approach the town unless forced to, but it made him wonder. The Unity might escalate its attacks after losing a gearsman in the field.

"Speaking of Shellgirl, where is she?" Buggy asked. "She stopped firing pearls at the gearsman after you backhanded me, Boss."

How strange indeed. Basil would have expected Shellgirl to claim her share of the loot at the first opportunity. He surveyed the area that the gearsman bombarded and realized the fires had died out.

"Could another robot have ambushed her?" Basil asked.

"Nah, I smell her," Plato replied with a frown. "Blood too."

Slightly worried, Basil walked towards Shellgirl's hiding spot with his other pets in tow. They could salvage the gearsman's remains later.

The party didn't have to search for long. They found their missing teammate amidst the ashes of reeds and lopsided trees. Shellgirl's hands scratched out at a mass of rotting herbs and dirt.

"Hey, Partner!" Shellgirl smirked upon sensing the group's approach. "Victory is ours!"

"Thanks for the suppression fire," Basil replied coolly. He was slightly jealous that she alone appeared unharmed from their struggle. "I worried that you perished from the bombardment."

"Yeah, sorry to have bailed on you. I extinguished the forest fire when you started trouncing the robot. Couldn't allow flames to destroy our HQ, ya dig?" Shellgirl's grin grew sheepish with embarrassment at Basil's glare. "But don't fret, because look at what I've found!"

She tapped at the pile of rotting grass.

It moved slightly in response.

Basil immediately moved to unearth the creature hiding underneath: a humanoid with tangled, mid-long light brown hair sticking out of a riot gear helmet. The rest of the armored uniform belonged to the French police, as did the gun in her hand.

It was a woman.

An unconscious, *dying* woman. Two iron pieces of shrapnel stuck out of her bleeding left flank. Her skin was so pale Basil could have mistaken her for a corpse were it not for the slight, nearly imperceptible breathing sound coming out of her lips.

Plato's eyes widened in surprise. "A survivor?"

"A future corpse to loot!" Shellgirl replied while rubbing her hands.

"Not on my watch!" Basil snapped, his icy tone making the mimic freeze in place. He checked the woman's pulse; though he was no doctor, he couldn't let a fellow human die without acting.

"I can barely hear her heart, Boss," Buggy warned.

"She's still breathing," Basil whispered, his voice trembling from the sheer astonishment. He couldn't believe it. She should have bled to death already! Her Vitality must be through the roof! "Rosemarine, heal her!"

"Yes, Mister!" Rosemarine immediately showered the woman with healing pollen, but her wounds were so large it did nothing more than stabilize her. They needed to surgically remove the blades or the treatment would only delay the inevitable.

"Buggy, help me carry her to the house!" Basil ordered.
"We'll need to tap into the potion reserve as soon as we can!"

There was no time to waste.

Chapter 16: Man vs Introspection

The woman would live.

Carrying her to the house, removing the shrapnel, and force-feeding her half his reserves of healing potions saved her life. Basil had to remove her armor and most of her clothes to patch up her wounds, which felt dirty when done to an unconscious woman. He hoped she wouldn't hold it against him when she woke up.

If she ever woke up.

The woman's wounds had healed, yet she remained unconscious. Perhaps the blood loss caused her to enter a coma. Basil was no doctor and couldn't tell. It astonished him that this woman even survived. Based on the timeline of events, she had crawled out of the helicopter and bled out in the grass for almost a day. Blood loss normally killed a human in minutes.

Basil let the policewoman rest in a spare guest bedroom in the attic. Old Man René took to stockpiling furniture and clothes he no longer needed in it before his demise; mostly mementos of better times when his family cared about him.

Basil opened the one window to let the dust outside and glanced at the garden below. The moon shone brightly in the night sky. Rosemarine soothed the vegetable recruits to sleep in their allocated plot of land. Buggy dragged pieces of the destroyed gearsman from the bog into the garage which Shellgirl then sorted.

Plato himself followed his owner inside the bedroom and sat on the bed. He didn't say a word as Basil examined the sleeping woman's belongings. Her phone was locked and her walkie-talkie was filled with mud, but Basil found a badge and electronic ID card in her riot gear's pockets.

Basil identified his guest as Neria Elissalde, a 'General-Brigadier' of the Dax municipal police. He didn't know what her rank meant, although it sounded like a ground officer. She was twenty-six, only a few years older than him.

Come to think of it, why didn't the System tell him her name and level? It did so with monsters.

Your Intelligence score is too low to analyze a fellow Player's stats.

"Shut up."

"I didn't say a thing," Plato replied, confused.

"Don't think about it," Basil grunted as he examined the police ID card. The woman had black eyes and looked quite friendly in the picture. Pretty too, in a common sort of way. "Elissalde. That's a Basque name."

Unfortunately, Basil had nothing else to hang onto. No way to contact her unit. He didn't know how to repair the walkie-talkie nor how to unlock the phone. She used a code rather than facial biometric security. Should he leave an encrypted message at the crash site in case the army investigated it? What if the Unity found it first?

"Basil?" Plato suddenly asked out of the blue. "Do you think of your mother sometimes?"

"I do not," Basil lied. The memory of his clash with the gearsman came to mind like poison spreading in his veins. "Why the question?"

"I don't know, seeing this woman sleep reminds me of her," Plato admitted. "I remember suckling my mom and her tongue when she licked my fur. Nothing else. I was taken too soon."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I wonder if she's alive." Plato looked up at his owner. "Is yours?"

"I don't know." Basil's mother was holding a shop in Bulgaria on the other side of Europe. He stopped interacting much with her besides wiring her what spare money he could scrounge up. Her son knew that she considered him a disappointment after he failed to find a high-earning job.

Basil would always remember what she told him when he voiced the idea of starting his own company if he couldn't find employment.

'You should ask the French state for unemployment benefits. They pay people for nothing in Western Europe. I've seen it on the news.'

Basil would rather take the most demeaning menial jobs available rather than living on state benefits, which his mother didn't understand. It was her sheer lack of confidence in his ability to prevail that truly shattered him. Their relationship never fully recovered from the following argument.

In spite of their estrangement, Basil hoped his mother would live through the apocalypse. He couldn't exactly journey

across all of Europe to check on her by himself.

Thinking of his mom put Basil in a foul mood and made him want a breath of fresh air. He set officer Elissalde's belongings aside and climbed down the stairs to the first floor. Plato followed after him.

"Any idea how to wake her up?" the cat asked. "Maybe you should pray to her bedside with your magic book."

"I can't cast spells," Basil replied. "Ain't a priest."

"You're missing the obvious solution: if you can't or won't do it yourself, find someone that will do it for you." Plato proudly nodded to himself. "That's my life's motto."

"How unsurprising," Basil deadpanned. "Tell me, do you have a priest on standby I could call upon?"

"Depends, where do they reproduce? I could always try to find a priest's nest."

Basil genuinely couldn't tell if his cat was joking or not. The remark inspired a weird idea in him. "We could always domesticate an angel."

"An angel?" Plato shrugged. "Now that's silly."

"Less silly than giant robots and centipedes?" If Christian prayers now worked as spells, then Basil had to assume angels and demons existed too. For better or worse.

"Granted, I don't know where to find an angel either."

Lourdes might have one or two, but Basil wouldn't visit a new city anytime soon. The one next door already gave him too many headaches. Perhaps Saint Bernadette's reliquary could help with the coma case?

A System screen popped up, much to Basil's surprise.

New Quest: Bernie's Hotline.

Recommended Level: Any.

Objective: Use Saint Bernadette's reliquary to summon an angel, fallen or otherwise.

Reward: Bonus EXP proportional to the summoned angel's level.

"Seriously?" Basil meant it as a joke! At least it confirmed that the reliquary possessed magical powers of its own. "I suppose a set of detailed instructions would be too much to ask?"

Dismaker Labs wishes you a happy apocalypse!

One day, Basil would find the company's board of directors and make them eat their words.

He and Plato strolled out into the garden outside. Rosemarine had successfully lulled the vegetables to sleep and Bugsy piled up what remained of the gearsman next to the garage's wall. Shellgirl examined a handgun salvaged from the helicopter.

"Hey, partner!" Shellgirl waved the weapon at Basil. "That bog pool is a real treasure's trove!"

"Did you find any other survivor?" Basil asked. He didn't expect a positive answer, but it didn't hurt to check.

Shellgirl shook her head. "I found two corpses in the helicopter, partner. They didn't make it."

"I buried them under a tree, Boss," Buggy said. "Like the hanged man on the other shore."

"But I looted them first, to make sure we didn't bury any treasure." Shellgirl studied a damaged walkie-talkie with childlike curiosity. "Can't sell the broken stuff though. My customers expect the best."

Basil examined the gearsman's remains. The telescopic limbs were damaged beyond repair and the armor plates were reduced to metal scraps. The gears and bolts remained mostly intact alongside alien technology he didn't comprehend. The System wouldn't give him the names of the gathered treasures.

Your Intelligence score is too low to—

"I know!" Basil skipped the screen with a grunt of rage.

"Of course you do, you're a fellow entrepreneur," Shellgirl replied. "You understand business!"

Basil grabbed a shiny stone covered in runic symbols. A faint jolt of electricity coursed through his fingers. The primitive carving appeared completely out of place compared to the gearsman's advanced technology.

Come to think of it, didn't one of my available classes mention runes? Basil checked his Status. My only Spellcaster class: Runesmith.

Runesmith: A class using the magical runes to empower their tools and themselves. Growths: STR (A), AGI (D), VIT (B), SKI (C), MAG (A), INT (B), CHA (A), LCK (D).

Interesting. Basil wondered if it could unlock the stone's secrets, but it would wait for later.

"We'll use the broken armor as raw material to widen the doors and build a second garage," he informed his team. "We'll run out of space in the house otherwise."

"How do we do that?" Plato asked with a frown.

"We can weld the shielding plates into walls and doors." It would be all the simpler since Basil's halberd could cut through them. "Bugsy's firebreath should provide the adequate temperature to melt the metal."

Bugsy's mandibles snapped with excitement. "I've got your back, Boss!"

"What about the rest of the loot, partner?" Shellgirl raised a handgun. "Clients will line up for these babies!"

"I'll sort out the stuff we'll keep from what we can part with tomorrow morning." Basil didn't feel confident about selling guns to monsters at all. "I'm too tired to do it right now."

Berserk rage exhausted the mind.

Basil ended up cooking OGREMOCHE's last remains for dinner. He fileted the ogre's meat and served it with grilled vegetables. OGREMOCHE tasted more bitter than his goblins, but everyone finished their meals all the same.

Basil started to worry about the sheer number of omnivores in his retinue. Although they looked content to eat nutrients from the soil so far, the vegetable recruits developed a taste for ogre flesh. Shellgirl preferred the mayonnaise salad over grilled ogre but Bugsy alone consumed as much meat as the

rest of the party combined. Basil estimated that the centimagma required at least a third of his enormous body mass per day.

Bugsy's metamorphosis also implied that Basil's monsters might evolve into bigger creatures at any point, straining their food reserves all the more. Unless the party raised more livestock, the winter would be a tough one indeed.

Study the gearsman's remains. Basil rested on his bed, the windows closed. His Nintendo Switch rested on a pillow with a full battery. *Work on enlarging the house. Complete the lab. Heal petrified victims and the patient upstairs. Summon an angel. Train the vegetables and store more meat for winter.*

Although Basil desired nothing more than a quiet, peaceful life, his to-do list kept growing exponentially. The Unity might lengthen it if the robots kept barging at his doorstep.

All he desired was to be left alone in his little corner of the world. Was that too much to ask?

The gearsman's words haunted his mind, *"you didn't have what it takes to succeed, so you hide your shame in the woods."*

Basil clenched his jaw. He wasn't ashamed of anything. There was a sickness at the heart of human civilization and he quarantined himself from the plague, nothing more. He felt happy with his current station.

His self-reassurance didn't help him find sleep. Basil tried to keep his mind busy with a new Switch game and didn't get past the tutorial. Today's events had left him too exhausted to enjoy it.

How frustrating. He felt too tired to play, but too alert to rest.

His bedroom's door opened and a black cat slipped in.

"What's up, dog?" Plato leaped on his owner's bed. "I hear you turning around in your bed from the next room over. It's maddening."

"Can't find sleep."

Plato sat on his owner's belly. "Is it about the gearsman?"

"Partly." Basil sighed. "The future seems more and more complicated."

"Eh, only because you think too much about it. Take my advice: go with the flow and wing it as problems come along, the cat's way."

Basil snorted. "Should I sleep eighteen hours a day too?"

"If it makes you happier." Plato shrugged. "Life's too short to do things you don't enjoy, Basil. Worrying is one of them."

"Hard not to when we live right next to a killer robot hive and you've got to feed an ever-expanding family of monsters. That fight with the gearsman could have ended with all of us dead."

"Don't remind me how fragile life is, I already lost one." Plato put a paw over the other. "The battle was tough, yes, and we won it anyway. We'll defend our territory if another gizmo comes up, but we shouldn't live in fear all the time. That's what makes rabbits die before they hit ten."

Basil looked up at the ceiling. He imagined General-Brigadier Elissalde sleeping in the room above, far more peacefully than he did over the last week.

"Plato."

"Yes?"

"Do you think the world is ever going to return to normal?"

"What's normal? Picking flowers in the morning and watching TV in the evening?" The cat shrugged. "A few years ago, a normal day involved wandering the roads picking up trash to live. Then René and you took me away to this house. I was scared at first, but then I grew used to my new life. It became my new normal."

"Your point is that we're going to get used to..." Basil struggled to find the right word. "Everything?"

"You can get used to anything and everything." Plato licked his fur. "You know how we killed or scared away all the goblins and bird monsters? They learned not to mess with us. Eventually the gizmos will get the message too and leave us alone. Then we can go picking flowers in the morning and watching TV in the evening."

Basil considered his cat's words. Even if he didn't share such easy-going optimism, he had adapted to unforeseen circumstances too. From leaving Bulgaria to his post-student crisis and the coronavirus, Basil always discovered a new form of stability after a short struggle. The apocalypse was a far bigger stress test, but eventually he would find the right balance.

It didn't matter how much shit the universe threw at Basil, he would always shove it back in its cosmic ass.

"As for the rest, can't your classes help deal with it?" Plato asked. "You gained two new levels. Better make use of them rather than let the power gather dust."

Basil conceded the point and opened his status screen. Yes, assigning the levels could help deal with his ever-growing list of headaches. He checked the available classes and one stood out as all the more useful in the current circumstances.

Gardener: A class harvesting the full potential of plant life, monsters included. Growths: STR (C), AGI (B), VIT (C), SKI (B), MAG (B), INT (C), CHA (C), LCK (B).

The problem with classes was that Basil didn't know ahead of time what Perks they would give him and his experience with Tamer showed that Perks grew in power with more levels. Specialization gave more power in a narrow area of expertise. Generalization meant more options available.

Taking two levels in Tamer would make him better at training monsters in general and thus increase their odds of fending off attacks; perhaps it would even help with the angel quest. Taking one level in Runesmith and one in Gardener would give him insight into the Unity's technology and let him grow more food for the winter.

Neither option was guaranteed to yield results.

"Argh, too many options!" Basil let out a roar of frustration. "I hate choice paralysis!"

"Then I'll decide for you." Plato locked eyes with his owner with his big beautiful yellow eyes. "Look at me. Look at me."

Basil held his breath. His cat only behaved like this when he wanted something inane.

"Basil." Plato gathered his breath, his tail wagging behind him. "I want to become a smilodon."

"A smilodon?"

"Or a lion. I can settle for either." Plato lightly headbutted his owner. "Please! Put all your levels in Tamer! Buggy grew into a bug dragon, so imagine what I could become!"

"Buggy is a Bug/Elemental Type," Basil corrected his cat.

"Pff, I'm sure he'll grow wings before level 30! I'm sure a new Tamer Perk would give me a mane or a set of saberteeth!" Plato kneaded his owner's belly. "Come on, come on, come on! It'll help us win fights!"

"Fine, fine!" Basil rolled his eyes and assigned his levels. "You're worse than a child."

He figured that Gardener would help him with the vegetables and Runesmith with the Unity's tech, but Tamer would benefit everyone. And Plato had a point, the group needed greater strength in case more gearsman came knocking.

Tamer Levels 4 & 5 Stat Gains: +1 STR, +2 AGI, +1 VIT, +1 SKI, +1 MAG, +2 CHA, +1 LCK. You earned 50 HP and 20 SP.

Passive Perk: Monster Lair I: 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.

Plato started shining almost immediately. A purple glow set his fur alight like a cloak of stars. So blinding was the

radiance that Basil covered his eyes with a hand.

"I can feel the power!" Plato laughed with overbearing pride. "Worship me! Worship me!"

When light receded, Basil lowered his hand and gazed upon his cat's new form.

Which looked like the old one.

Plato hadn't grown an inch. He didn't transform into a lion nor grew a pair of giant fangs. The only change Basil noticed was a small, crescent-shaped patch of silver fur below his cat's throat.

Congratulations! By reaching level 9, Plato metamorphosed into a Cait Sith (Beast/Fairy)! Plato learned the [**Swordsmanship I**] Passive Perk! Plato learned the [**Wind Slash**] and [**Luck Up**] Active Perks!

Plato blinked multiple times in short succession. He looked at his tail, at his chest, even at his ass. He checked every part of his anatomy.

"Where are they?" he asked with a confused voice. "Where is the mane? The big fangs? Where's the A-material?"

Basil studied his pet and noticed a small change in his front paws. He grabbed the cat's paws and quickly confirmed that the gap between them had grown slightly larger. They looked more flexible, like a mix between a normal cat's paws and a human hand.

"That's it?" Plato didn't hide his disappointment. "I gained *hands*?"

"Good, I have hands too," Basil replied with a deadpan tone. "You can hold many things with them. Many things!"

"That's not funny!" A sulking Plato whipped his tail in his owner's direction. His expression soured with bitterness. "That's not funny at all!"

Basil grabbed his cat and lifted him above him, Lion King style. "That's okay," he reassured Plato. "You will always be my adorable little Simba."

"Please don't make me call you Rafiki." Plato's mood improved a little. "This System is horrendously designed!"

"It's better than you think," Basil replied with a grin. "Now that you have thumbs and can carry tools, you can help me with the house. I'll teach you how to use screws and hammers tomorrow."

"But that's work for the plebeians! Slaver! Slaver!" Plato shrieked with indignation. "I opened my heart to you and you collared it!"

"Next we'll find you a cute musketeer hat and a fencing sword," Basil teased his cat before putting him down on his belly. "Like Antonio Banderas in the *Shrek* movies."

"Stop mocking me!" Plato glanced at the goblin boots. "I feel weird running on all four with these on my paws already. Can you fathom how difficult it is to walk on two legs?"

Basil suspected the metamorphosis helped with it. "Try again."

Plato squinted at his best friend and rose on his hind legs. To his own apparent confusion, the cat walked gracefully along the bed; perhaps even more than he did on all four.

"Wow. So strange." Plato glanced around the bedroom as if he experienced it through new eyes. "I can look down on smaller animals. Show them how much I disdain them."

"That's the best part of being human," Basil quipped.
"Height superiority."

"You know what?" Plato curled on Basil's chest. "I will purr in disappointment until you fall asleep. That will teach you to mess with me."

After such a harrowing day, Basil couldn't help but laugh at his cat's antics. "Sleep well, Plato."

"Less talking, more snoring."

Basil closed his eyes, his cat's warmth and soothing purrs lulling him to slumber. His worries faded from his mind and his body relaxed. The accumulated stress left his flesh.

After such a harrowing day, Basil Bohen slept sweetly.

Chapter 17: Man vs Do-It-Yourself

Do-it-yourself work was among Basil's small pleasures in life.

He found few greater joys than repairing old things or creating new ones with his own hands, step by step. Crafting made building faster and easier, but in many ways effort was its own reward.

"Here you go, Boss!" Buggy unleashed his fire breath and welded two metal plates together. The bronze and steel fused along a burning line as Basil held them in place with heat-resistant gloves. "Done!"

Basil took a step back to admire the result of their work: a simple, elegant metal shack built entirely from the gearsman's remains right next to the old garage. They had also replaced the house's old entrance doors with enlarged side-by-side versions so Buggy could fit through them. It involved pulling down part of the walls, but it worked well in the end.

It would have taken Basil days to build something like this before the System arrived. Not only could he rely on additional hands—including Plato's, to the cat's dismay—but his enhanced strength and endurance let him work at peak performance for hours on end. Of course he was no carpenter so his work was shoddy, but it was acceptable.

"Now all that's left is transferring the stuff from the old garage to the new one," Basil said. "We'll turn the extra

space into a true bedroom."

"Don't worry, Boss, I'll do it myself!" Buggy replied joyfully. Out of everyone in his party, the centimagma shared Basil's enthusiasm for old school manual labor the most. "I can use the gearsman's leftovers to make a fence around the new garden plots, and enlarge the rabbits' hutch too! More space would make them happier!"

"You're sure you don't need a hand?" Basil asked, slightly worried. The centimagma had grown more comfortable with his increased size, but nobody would call him skillful.

"Don't worry, Boss, I've got this," Buggy replied with fire in his eyes. "I will raise great spikes of wood and bind them with earth! I shall build an impenetrable wall that no robot can ever hope to breach!"

Basil nearly pointed out that the watchers could simply fly over the fence, but he couldn't bring himself to shatter Buggy's enthusiasm. He would rather bolster the centimagma's low self-worth through positive reinforcement.

"Alright." Basil patted Buggy on the head. "I trust you with the task."

"You do? Without supervision?" Buggy wriggled with excitement. "Thanks, Boss, I won't disappoint you!"

It's nice to have helpers for a change, Basil thought as he surveyed the garden. The chickens and rabbits frolicked outside the house under Plato's supervision. The shepherd cat was currently engaged in an intense staring contest with the biggest chicken for dominance. Both animals locked eyes, unblinking, unmoving. Each was of the same height as the other and refused to budge.

Plato rose on his hind legs. He towered over the chicken and looked down on it.

After a moment of desperate resistance, the bird lowered its head in submission.

"Better," Plato declared as he looked down upon his defeated foe with smug satisfaction. "Once a bird, always a bird."

"Mister Plato, you should stop bullying the chickens," Buggy protested. "They lay eggs on time!"

"I can't help it." Plato groomed himself. "Since the birds left the forest, I feel restless. Something is missing in my life."

"I can give you more work to fill the void if you want," Basil replied with a smirk.

"No thank you." Plato hissed. "Hammering nails is the most mind-numbing task I ever had the displeasure of suffering through. It makes me more frustrated, not less."

"Then how would you feel about switching from birds to fish?"

"Fish?" Plato wagged his tail in anticipation. "I'm listening."

"Shellgirl informed me that more aquatic monsters are making their home in the l'Adour river and its tributaries lately, alongside amphibians." She said it wouldn't disturb her trade trips, but it was a trend Basil paid close attention to. "Fishing would help offset our lack of livestock."

Plato shuddered. "I'm all for killing fish, as long as we do it away from water. Dirty evil water."

"Sure, we'll challenge the fish to an honorable battle on land," Basil said with heavy sarcasm. In retrospect, perhaps he should have taken a level in Fisherman and another in Gardener.

"Or we could hunt in the Pyrénées mountains in the south," Plato suggested with more enthusiasm. "I've never killed an eagle before!"

"I'll pass." The Pyrénées were a two-hour drive to the south through a countryside full of potentially hostile monsters.

"Mister Who-Feeds-Me, Mister, look!"

Basil looked over his shoulder and jumped in shock. Rosemarine pointed six police handguns at him, one in each of her vines.

"I have weapons like you!" The man-eating plant waved her firearms around. Thankfully the safeties were still on. "When I evolve, I will have a hundred guns!"

Basil didn't know whether to feel amazed or frightened. A little bit of both, probably. "I think we're onto something, Rosemarine, but please lower your weapons."

After they salvaged everything they could take from the helicopter, Basil put his veto on selling the guns they found inside. Goblins had been dangerous enough with clubs; firearms would make any low-level monster a terrible foe. Shellgirl and Basil had argued for nearly an hour before she gave in.

However, leaving the guns where Rosemarine could find them might not have been the wisest course of action. Basil glanced at the new crop plot and let out a sigh of relief. The vegetables preferred to spend their day growing in the

fertile soil and enjoying the sun rather than wandering around the house with weapons. Only the bean ninja among them had the appendages needed to use a gun at all.

"I'll train you to use guns, Rosemarine, in a safe and controlled environment," Basil said. "You too Plato, if you're up for it."

"I'll pass," the cat replied with a snort. "According to my menu, I can only use my new Wind Slash technique with a sword. Besides, guns are noisy and smell terrible."

"Isn't there a firearm adapted for mandibles?" Buggy asked with a hint of jealousy. "A lightning head-cannon like the gearsman?"

"Hey, don't complain." Plato glared at the centimagma and raised his paws at him. "You transformed into a giant engine of destruction at level seven, while I grew *thumbs!* Thumbs!"

"I-I didn't mean to demean you, Mr. Plato, I swear!"

"You can already breathe fire and set the world ablaze!" Rosemarine pointed out as she relinquished her weapons to Basil, who swiftly stored them in his inventory. "Death by burning alive is the sweetest of them all!"

"I..." Buggy's antennae grew agitated. Clearly, he had no idea how to answer that remark. "I suppose..."

Seeing that everyone had finished their chores for the day, Basil took a minute to check his new Monster Lair Perk. As written in its descriptions, he found a new option in his 'Status' screen.

[**Lairs**] are a powerful monster's customizable den. A Lair's benefits apply to all members of the owner's party. A monster can only have one lair at a time. Once selected, a Lair's choice cannot be changed unless it is destroyed.

You can customize your [**Lair**] by spending Lair Points (LP) equal to your level to purchase Lair Features. LP invested in a [**Lair**] cannot be recovered, even after the location's destruction. A Lair Feature's power can be strengthened at an exponential cost. Lair Features are divided into two categories: Positive Features that improve the owner's quality of life; and Negative Features that weaken invaders.

Please select your [**Lair**] among the following choices:
Basil's House; Water Quality Control Station.

It surprised Basil to find the water station among his possible choices. Did the System consider that he had 'conquered' the area after defeating Ogremoché? Whatever the case, there was only one possible choice.

You registered the Lair: **Basil's House**

LP: 9

Faction: 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.

Unlockable Lair Features available to your Lair:

Positive

Negative

Exp Boost

Toxic Atmosphere

Loot Boost

Confusing Architecture

Attractive

Stealthy

HP Recovery

Burning Steam

SP Recovery

Short-Circuit

Crafter Workshop Magnetism

Basil clicked on the 'Stealthy' option the second he saw it. He would purchase anything that could hide his home from prying eyes!

Stealthy: Non-party members have a harder time finding the Lair.

Tier I: The Lair will benefit from a [Camouflage] effect and blend with the scenery from a distance. Cost: 3 LP.

Tier II: Non-party members cannot register the Lair's location in System Logs. Cost: 6 LP.

Tier III: Magical attempts to detect the Lair's location from individuals with a level below yours will fail. Cost: 9 LP.

"Wait, I have to purchase each step individually?" Basil asked with a frown. "To raise Stealthy to Tier II, I must spend 9 Lair Points in total? No reduction for prior investment?"

Dismaker Labs wishes you a happy apocalypse!

"That's robbery!"

"Is the System messing with us again?" Plato asked with an annoyed face. "How about we hunt down the customer supporter rather than eagles?"

"You speak sense, my friend." Basil quickly checked other defensive features available. Toxic Atmosphere and Confusing Architecture inflicted ailments on intruders and the rest damaged them with different elements. All of them followed the same pattern of price escalation. Even if Basil reached level 100, he wouldn't have enough LP to fully upgrade the Lair.

Swallowing his frustration, Basil purchased the first tier of the Stealthy Feature. A veil of magic fell upon his surroundings. The house's roof took on a grassy color and a layer of moss grew over the walls. Leaves covered the chicken coop, the rabbit hutch, and the metal garage. The greenhouse and the surface of the house's glass panels shifted the least, their surface tinted to resemble water.

"I preferred the old paint job," Buggy said.

"Me too," Basil replied. The camouflage blended in better with the surrounding woods and marsh, true, but anyone studying the area for more than a passing glance would notice oddities. He trailed his hand along the house's wall and felt moss brushing against his fingers.

Of course, the System couldn't make a hideout entirely undetectable, for it encouraged conflict. The other upgrades for Stealthy were circumstantially useful, enough that Basil considered other options. He checked the other options available with a grunt of disappointment.

Exp Boost: Boosts the experience your party earns within one hectare centered around the Lair.

Tier I: x1.2 experience after the level penalty is applied.
Cost: 3 LP.

Tier II: x1.5 experience after the level penalty is applied.
Cost: 6 LP.

Tier III: x2 experience after the level penalty is applied.
Cost: 9 LP.

Basil reread the text multiple times. He was pleasantly surprised and the other positive Features proved quite enticing. Loot Boost improved the drop rate of monsters dying near the house, Crafter Workshop did the same with crafting chances, while HP and SP Recovery accelerated the natural rate at which party members regained both. Only Attractive didn't appeal to Basil, since it would subtly lure rare monsters to his house; an anathema for a peaceful man like him.

"Very interesting." Basil turned to his party members. "It seems that besides improving the security, my new Perk can potentially make our life easier."

"Can we grow more food?" Plato asked.

"No, unfortunately." That was a Feature Basil would have killed for. "But we could gain more experience and loot if we kill creatures in the vicinity—"

"Did somebody say loot?" Shellgirl hopped out of the stream near the house like a flying fish. She rushed as quickly as she could to Basil's position with surprising speed for a giant clam. "I'm all ears!"

How did... when... Basil's mind struggled to compute her sudden appearance. Was she like a genie, summoned to this earthly realm with the right word of power?

"You're back early." Basil was surprised by her surprise appearance. "I didn't expect you until sundown."

"I suspect her hearing is even better than mine," Plato said with amusement.

"Well, well, well, did you worry about me?" Shellgirl grinned. "I couldn't wait to tell you the good news, but now I can! What did you say about loot?"

Why did Basil have the feeling he had unleashed a terrible force upon the world? "To put it bluntly, I can improve the house so that it gives us bonuses within one hectare of itself," he explained. "I, however, do not have the resources to access all of them. I need more levels."

Basil described the various features to his team. Shellgirl obviously only had eyes for the potential riches they could bring. The others' opinions were more diverse.

"Boss, if I may." Buggy cleared his throat. "Wouldn't it be smarter to take the Exp Bonus first? That way you can gain

levels quicker and then improve the house afterward?"

Plato nodded in support. "Agreed, that feature sounds like it will pay for itself quickly."

"We only benefit from the bonus experience within one hectare around the house," Basil pointed out. "We would need to bring monsters to our home alive for the slaughter."

"Yes, and?" Plato shrugged. "Didn't you want to raise livestock or fish at the stream? We would get meat and experience both ways."

"We could use the fertilizer to grow more vegetables too," Buggy protested with enthusiasm. The centimagma was always eager to gain more levels. "What if we took Attractive—"

"No," Basil said.

"But—"

"No, Buggy," Basil repeated, more harshly. "No way in hell. I won't budge on this."

Surprisingly, Rosemarine protested against the plan too. "No killing plant babies! They are the seeds that will bloom when the world ends!"

"Nope." Plato came to their support. "No more tin cans wandering into our turf."

"But Mr. Plato, you were alright with killing fish a minute ago!" Buggy protested. "What's the difference?"

"I was fine with killing things that *can't fight back*," Plato clarified, putting emphasis on his last words.

"I aspire to live a quiet and peaceful existence," Basil declared. "Levels make life easier, Bugsy, that is a fact, but they are not an end in themselves."

"Exactly, experience is not the best thing in the world: money is!" Shellgirl rubbed her hands. "Don't you see? Who needs to kill monsters when we can produce more goods from the safety of our HQ! With Crafter Workshop, we'll improve productivity and flood the market!"

She never lets an opportunity go. Basil privately agreed the Crafter Workshop would prove the wisest investment. It wasn't as flashy as the others, but it trumped them in practicality.

"Anyway, Shellgirl," Basil said, changing the subject. "What good news did you want to share?"

"Well, remember my witch contact?" she asked. "I was chatting her up for a nice good deal when she invited me for a tea brew. I accepted, of course, friendly saleswoman that I am. Can't forget the personal element and proximity—"

Basil interrupted her. "Less self-gratification, more hard facts."

"It's important context, not self-gratification! Anyway, I told her all about our little trouble with the tin can and how we harvested good loot from it after bombing it to oblivion."

"You did what?" Basil gritted his teeth. "You told our battle tactics to a potential foe?"

"She's not a potential enemy, she's a customer!" Shellgirl protested. "And how are we supposed to show we mean business if we don't brag about our successes?"

"If she shares that information with someone else, it will come back to bite us in the ass!" Basil pinched his nose in annoyance. The damage was already done. "Go on..."

"Well, anyway, she was super duper interested in your explosives and the rune thingie we harvested from the gearsman. She wanted to meet you before, but now she insists I bring you along for my next trip!"

"No," Basil replied flatly.

"I predicted you would say that!" Shellgirl chuckled. "So my witch contact asked me how I could entice you to come, and I told her about your troubles with the comatose woman upstairs, the petrified people in the town, your angel summoning project..."

"Did you tell her where we live too?" Plato asked with a sarcastic tone. "Or about the panic room? Did you tell her about our secret panic room?"

"We have a panic room?" Buggy asked, suddenly curious.

"Yes we do," Basil confirmed. The Old Man always feared the police wouldn't arrive in time in case of a home robbery. "I'll show it to you one day."

"Of course I didn't tell her where we lived," Shellgirl protested. "Hey, I promised I wouldn't."

"My bad, I should have specified a greater list of forbidden information." Basil struggled to keep his anger in check. That was exactly why he was worried about trading with the outside world. "What were you thinking?"

"Partner, you're drawing the wrong conclusions." Shellgirl put her hands behind her jelly hair, trying to look relaxed. "I

wouldn't share intel if I didn't trust my customer. She's clean. Almost a friend."

"Even if this witch is 'clean', she might reveal sensitive information to people who don't have our best interests at heart," Basil pointed out. "If two people know of a secret, ten more will learn it in time."

"Yeah, I get that," Shellgirl replied with a serious expression, "but if you never take a leap of faith, then who's ever going to trust you?"

Basil clenched his jaw, but didn't answer. She had struck a nerve.

"Someone has to take the first step, partner," Shellgirl said. "You trusted me to help you out and I did. I brought you the tools you needed for your lab, juicy info too. I trust my contact and I gave her the benefit of the doubt. You should try too."

Her response surprised Basil in more ways than one. There was wisdom in them, something he didn't expect from Shellgirl. The clam mimic based her identity on business manuals and hearsay, but her words came from her heart rather than a self-help booklet.

Even when created from dungeons, monsters possess free will. Basil already guessed as much from Buggy's self-doubts and Rosemarine's strange maternal behavior towards the vegetables. *They can mature and develop beliefs of their own.*

Did that mean peaceful coexistence between monsters and humans might become possible one day?

Basil crossed his arms in skepticism. They still had a long, *long* way to go. "I suppose this witch told you she could solve everything if only I would visit her?"

"Yes, and she gave me a token of her goodwill to prove it." Shellgirl snapped her fingers and a purple potion appeared in her slimy hand. The glass container was crude, no longer than ten centimeters; a little ribbon with the words '*From V with love*' and a tiny heart symbol written on it was attached to the plug. "Here."

Basil carefully took the potion in his hand. It weighed almost nothing, like bottled feathers.

Dreambrew

Family: Consumable (Potion)

Quality: C.

Effect 1: Cures the [Sleep] ailment.

Effect 2: Cures [Nightmare] effects.

A witch's brew harvested from dreams so bad, they'll make anyone drinking this potion wake up from sheer disgust.

"V?" Plato asked.

"Vasilisa, that's her name," Shellgirl explained. "Pretty neat, huh? She said it will help your damsel in distress wake up from her slumber, sleeping beauty style!"

Vasilisa, that was a Slavic name; it had been over a year since Basil heard one. Somehow hearing it made him

nostalgic for his homeland. "What did it cost you?" he asked Shellgirl.

"Nothing, she gave it away free of charge. Said it was a gift from one crafter to another."

Basil was always wary of the kindness of strangers. It sounded to him like the witch wanted something from him—probably the gearsman's remains—and was trying to sweet-talk him into surrendering them.

But well, if she could indeed help with his other problems... that would be a win-win proposition.

"That's not all! When she made her proposal, it inspired a brilliant idea!" Shellgirl raised her hands as if expanding an imaginary banner. "A networking event! I read—I mean, I invented this brand new concept. We bring monsters interested in trading together in a safe zone where we can exchange business tips and rumors of new opportunities! Like the orc tribe! How does that sound?"

Like a terrible idea. The more people aware of Basil's existence, the more trouble down the line.

The more naïve Rosemarine salivated in anticipation. "More food!"

"I don't do social events," Basil replied with a bear-like grunt.

"Oh come on." Shellgirl pumped a fist. "Everybody wants to meet the ogre lord of the marshes!"

"The ogre lord? Ogremoché?" Buggy squinted in confusion. "But we ate him yesterday night!"

"Ergo, that's why Big B's the new ogre in town." Shellgirl licked her lips with her slimy tongue. "Killing enemies is the natural way of life. Cooking them afterward with salt and pepper? That forces respect."

Basil opened his mouth to protest, closed it as he mulled it over, and realized that it made sense in a strange way. He did look like an ogre, eating monsters with his pets in his corner of the marsh.

"I don't do networking," Basil declared, standing his ground. "But if this Dreambrew works... then I'll be happy to meet with your witch contact."

He would still bring his halberd.

Just in case.

Chapter 18: Man vs Police

With the athanor up and running, Basil's basement reminded him of a drug lab.

The cylindrical alchemical furnace roared at the center of the room. Basil crafted it from the gearsman's remaining bronze and a leftover cauldron. Tiny flames burst out of its base where coal crackled and burst with heat. A closed door held a boiling potion at the device's top. The liquid's color slowly changed from dark green to that of emerald as smoke exited through a pipe.

Athanor

Family: Tool.

Quality: C.

Effect 1: Slowly improves the Quality of liquids placed within with no chances of failure. The improved item's final Quality cannot exceed the athanor's.

Effect 2: Can be used to incubate [Slime] monsters with proper chemicals.

The lazy alchemist's best tool of mad science, invaluable for the creation of a philosopher's stone... or beer distillation.

A shame the Dreambrew's Quality was already at C. Basil would've preferred to have improved its quality before administering it to his patient upstairs.

"Mister, I am done!" said Rosemarine, his new lab assistant. The carnivorous plant proudly showed Basil a bottle full of her harvested pollen mixed with water. "I am done!"

Basil wanted to cultivate a new fertilizer that wouldn't transform plants into voracious monsters. He intended to experiment with Rosemarine's pollen and the old fertilizer separately until he figured out a harmless recipe.

"So am I," Basil replied as he took the green medicine's container out of the alchemical furnace with heat-resistant gloves. The process took hours to complete, but the results spoke for themselves.

Emerald Medicine

Family: Consumable (Potion).

Quality: C

Effect 1: Heals 1 HP per milliliter for those who drink it.

Effect 2: Buffs Vitality for 5 minutes if drank to the last drop.

The perfect tool for the sick and the voracious newlywed!

This confirmed Basil's theory that each Quality rank added a new effect to the item. He wondered how high it could get.

Basil stored the new potion in his inventory and put the pollen elixir in the furnace for refining. Although the refining process took longer than when he crafted directly with the System, the athanor method also removed the error margin. The Crafter Workshop Lair Feature he purchased only granted a mere 5 percent bonus to his chances, not enough

to make a big difference. Basil could afford to wait without the risk of losing supplies.

It's time. Basil ascended up the basement's stairs with Rosemarine following him closely. He hadn't been willing to administer the Dreambrew to officer Elissalde without additional healing methods at hand. For all he knew, she might react badly to it.

The Tamer made his way to the policewoman's room and found her soundly asleep. Were it not for the slight rising of her ribcage, Neria Elissalde might have looked stiff as a corpse. Basil summoned the Dreambrew from his inventory and uncorked the bottle.

"Can I eat her if she doesn't wake up?" Rosemarine asked.

"I forbid you to even try," Basil replied, much to his adorable plant's disappointment. She was a child, innocent but needing to learn manners. "No eating humans, friends or strangers."

"But I can eat everybody else?"

"Sure, if I don't forbid it." Basil pressed the bottle against Officer Elissalde's lips, pinched her nose, and force fed her the potion. It would have been easier with a medical tube. He should raid an abandoned hospital someday. "Prepare to use your pollen on her if she doesn't react well."

Rosemarine didn't need to. The moment Basil emptied the bottle down her throat, officer Elissalde started to move in her sleep.

Basil set aside the bottle on a shelf and waited. His honored guest groaned in her bed, her fingers fidgeting. Her eyelids slowly opened to reveal tired black eyes.

"Uh..." Officer Elissalde grunted as she slowly regained consciousness. Basil waited patiently for her to finish peacefully waking up.

But then she noticed Rosemarine.

She screamed in surprise.

"Hey, it's alright!" Basil tried to reassure officer Elissalde. The policewoman, in the throes of panic, ignored him. Her hands moved to her waist to grab a gun that wasn't there. "Calm down! You're alright!"

"Monster!" Officer Elissalde fell off the bed, quickly rose to her feet, and adopted some kind of fighting stance. Basil recognized it from Krav Maga youtube videos. "Back off!"

"It's okay." Basil raised his hands to show he carried no weapons. The officer's eyes moved from Rosemarine to him, but her posture didn't relax. If anything, she seemed even tenser than before upon realizing she was outnumbered. "You're in a safe place."

The officer's jaw tightened as she glared at Rosemarine. "Safe?"

Basil suddenly realized that this woman's only interactions with monsters involved fighting gearsmen and watchers for survival. She had never encountered non-aggressive creatures, let alone friendly ones.

Rosemarine glanced up at Basil in confusion. "Mister, do I use my pollen? Is she wounded in the head?"

"Shush, Rosemarine." Basil locked eyes with Neria Elissalde. "She's nice. I'm a Tamer, domesticating monsters is what I do."

Officer Elissalde's fists tightened, ready to strike at the first sign of danger. "Who are you?" she asked. "Where am I?"

"You're in my house in the Barthes close to Dax. I'm Basil, Basil Jean-François Bohén."

To Basil's surprise, officer Elissalde seemed to recognize his name. "Basil Bohén? From the René Lamont inheritance case?"

Basil's jaw clenched in silent anger. "Yes, that's me."

"Mister?" Rosemarine noticed his frustration. "Are you okay, Mister? You look furious."

"Yes, an old battle's memory came to me." A legal one. "I defeated some bad people."

"How did they taste?" his plant asked naïvely.

"Bitter."

Keeping her guard up, Officer Elissalde glanced around the room and noticed her belongings on a chair. Her eyes briefly wandered to her chest and the shirt and boxers on herself. Basil had changed her clothes in her sleep to extract the shrapnel and clean the blood off them.

Please don't make assumptions. Basil cursed in his head when Officer Elissalde stared at him with an offended look. *Oh God, she did.*

"Did you do anything to me while I was unconscious?" the policewoman asked, her eyes full of terrible suspicion.

"Yeah, I saved your freaking life!" Basil replied with heavy sarcasm. What, just because he lived alone in the woods

made him a potential sexual predator? What kind of logic was that?

"And I sprayed you with my seed!" Rosemarine chirped in, not helping her owner's case.

Neria glanced at the plant with a mortified face. Rosemarine grinned in response. Her fangs drooled with saliva and made the policewoman even more uncomfortable.

"Not even remotely what it sounds like," Basil said with a sigh. "I extracted metal fragments stuck in your flesh and she used healing pollen to heal your wounds."

"I am deep inside you now," Rosemarine whispered. "I hear your heart pounding in your chest..."

Neria Elissalde didn't dare to ask for details. "Where's the rest of my unit?"

"Your helicopter crashed in the marsh." Basil looked for a way to sugarcoat the truth, but he could see in her eyes that she would know. "You were the only survivor."

Officer Elissalde winced as if he had slapped her in the face. Her eyes widened in shock and examined Basil's face, searching for any hint of a lie. He could see her thought process written all over her face. Denial; doubt; and finally, the crushing weight of acceptance.

Officer Elissalde's shoulders crumpled like a sandcastle falling down and the fight left her. Her empty eyes glanced down at the ground. Her crestfallen expression made Basil's stomach turn.

Even Rosemarine appeared a little touched. "It's okay, Miss. We put them in the ground so flowers may bloom from their

remains."

"I'm sorry," Basil replied with sincerity and immediately cursed himself for how banal he sounded. This woman probably lost friends and teammates in that crash. "We found you after dealing with a gearsman and buried the dead in the marsh."

Officer Elissalde found the strength to look up at him again. "How long?" she asked. "How long did they lay out in the open?"

If I say nearly two days, it will be burned in her memory for the rest of her life. "It couldn't have been more than a couple of hours."

Officer Elissalde bit her lower lip. "I see," she answered with a heavy, heavy voice. "I see."

"Honestly, I'm surprised you survived at all considering how much blood you lost." Basil immediately regretted his words. That woman needed comfort, not curiosity. He wasn't good at dealing with emotional shit.

"My Guard Duty Perk protects me from ailment damage." Officer Elissalde put a hand on her waist's bandages; the place where shrapnel hit her. She stared at them with sorrow. "That includes bleeding out."

The hell? The System considered bleeding out an ailment? Basil struggled to grasp the concept's implications. One could bleed out and yet not die because a magical force said so?

"I'm sorry, perhaps we can delay this conversation for later," Basil said. "It's a lot to take in. You should rest first. I can

bring you something to eat or drink if you want. I've got tea, coffee, chocolate..."

"I... I wouldn't mind a coffee." Officer Elissalde lowered her fists. Although she remained apprehensive of Rosemarine's presence, her expression softened up slightly. "Thank you for treating me, Mr. Bohem."

"You're welcome, officer." Basil pointed at her riot gear. "You can find your phone and belongings there, although I stored your gun somewhere else. Your walkie-talkie didn't survive the crash."

After a moment of hesitation, Officer Elissalde responded with a short nod. Realizing that Rosemarine's presence still unsettled his guest, Basil patted his plant on the back of the head. "Rosemarine, can you go downstairs and water the vegetables? I'll take it from here."

"Yes, Mister." Rosemarine crawled out of the bedroom. Officer Elissalde's suspicious gaze followed the plant until she vanished beyond the door.

Basil left the bedroom for a few minutes and came back with two cups of coffee. When he returned, he found officer Elissalde staring at the window, phone in hand. She could see Buggy working on enlarging the chicken coop from her vantage point.

"Is that a giant centipede in the backyard?" Officer Elissalde asked. Her eyes betrayed her apprehension, her fear, her distaste. Basil thanked his foresight for taking her gun away. She might have opened fire on Rosemarine on sight out of paranoia.

"Yes." Basil handed her a coffee cup. "He's domesticated."

"You can tame these things? My sister can talk to dogs but..." Officer Elissalde took the coffee without looking away from the window. "I never imagined bugs."

"Neither did I a few weeks ago, but here we are." It felt so weird to have a conversation with a fellow human after so long. Basil hadn't had one since the postman last visited his house over a month ago. "You're in a safe place."

She didn't believe him, not entirely, but Basil could tell that she wanted to. "How long was I out?"

"Two days now," Basil replied.

"Two days." Officer Elissalde sounded halfway reassured. "Then there's still time."

"Time for what?"

The policewoman marked a short pause, as if afraid to reveal important information. She examined Basil in silence a moment before answering. "To evacuate."

"Ah, of course." It made sense. She probably needed to return to the army as soon as possible. "Is there a way to contact your superiors?"

"I already did." Officer Elissalde raised her smartphone. "I sent a distress signal."

Basil gritted his teeth. He didn't like the idea of an army raid near his home. It could alert the watchers to his house's position. "Your phone still works?"

"Mine does. Our radio officer can listen in on calls from afar with her head. I still don't understand how." She scoffed. "Magic."

"Don't tell me, I made a car burst inside a bug's head." Basil sipped his coffee and enjoyed the warm bitterness washing over his tongue. "I would like to arrange your pick-up away from my house. I don't want gizmos following soldiers here."

"I understand. We didn't even know there were survivors hiding out in the marshes." She sat on the bed, her eyes set on her coffee. "We thought everyone in the countryside had been killed or turned to stone."

Something in the policewoman's voice told Basil that she had lost people in the initial attack. He wanted to offer his condolences, but she was probably tired of hearing them.

"You don't sound French," Officer Elissalde noted, changing the subject.

She had sharp ears. Basil thought he had improved his accent. "I'm Bulgarian."

"Bulgarian?" She smiled sheepishly. The policewoman had a friendly face, the kind that inspired trustworthiness. "I'm sorry, I didn't know. You must have been confused to see me nod."

"I've lived in France long enough to pick up your ways." Nodding in Bulgaria meant refusal rather than agreement, but Basil had adapted to the strange customs of the westerners. "And you sound like a Basque."

"I come from Biarritz. I thought it would be a quiet transfer to a troubleless town." She chuckled joylessly. "Then the world went to shit. Next thing I knew, I shot a robot breaking through my windows, got a screen stuck in my eyes, and I was drafted into the army."

"You tell me." Basil shrugged. "Seems like you're holding out great. I saw your helicopters patrolling the other side of the river."

"We weren't holding out." She took another sip of her coffee. "We're leaving. That helicopter raid was a parting shot."

"A parting shot?" Basil put two and two together. "When you meant evacuating, you meant evacuating Dax?"

"Yes. Orders from above. What's left of it." Officer Elissalde's smile faded. "Nobody wants to die for a town of statues."

Especially one without any strategic significance. Basil couldn't blame them, though the news worried him. He wondered how the Unity's machines would react without a frontline to keep them occupied.

"Is it that bad?" Basil asked. "I kept my head down for weeks, so I've no idea what the situation is elsewhere."

Once again, he saw the hesitation on his guest's face. She had many things to say but didn't trust him enough to tell him everything. Basil couldn't blame. He was, after all, a stranger living with monsters. His kindness could hide darker motivations.

"I don't know much," Officer Elissalde confessed with a sigh. "We've lost contact with Paris and the countryside is crawling with invaders. Troops in the southwest were ordered to evacuate to Bordeaux with civilians. Monsters overran most cities in the region, but not this one."

Basil would have hoped the French army fared better than that. The absence of news from Paris was extremely worrying. The French state was heavily centralized around its capital. "I see."

Officer Elissalde set her empty cup aside on the bedside table. "You could come with us."

"Where?" Basil asked with a frown.

"To Bordeaux." She glanced at the window with a frown. "It will be safer."

Safer than here, with the monsters, was left unsaid. But it bothered Basil all the same. "No thanks," he replied, politely yet firmly. "This is my home and I fought to protect it. I'm not abandoning this place."

Officer Elissalde looked at Basil with a worried expression that screamed *'you are making a terrible mistake,'* but she didn't try to talk him out of it. She had sensed the determination in his voice.

"Anyway," Basil changed the subject. "Any idea what's happening? I've been looking for info about the Trimurti's significance and Dismaker Labs, but came up short. Is the army investigating them?"

"We are, but..." She looked embarrassed all of a sudden. "I'm..."

"Not authorized to share?" Basil asked. She nodded slowly. "I understand. But if you're looking for information, I've got a wrecked, dungeon-summoning server stored in my garage."

Officer Elissalde's face paled. Her fingers fidgeted with nervousness.

"What?" Basil asked.

She unlocked her phone and showed him a picture. He immediately recognized Dax's arena. The angle implied the

shot had been taken from above, almost certainly with the helicopter. Two gearsmen worked to raise a tower of steel on the sandy battlefield, surrounded by collapsed stands.

The machine was an incomplete cylinder of gears and circuitry, yet Basil immediately recognized the device for what it was.

"That was what our parting shot was meant to destroy," Officer Elissalde explained. "We didn't understand why they were building it, but from what you said... now I do."

A server.

The robots were building a server inside Dax's arena. It was a different model than the one Basil found in the water control station, bulkier, using both ancient gears and new technology. But its existence could only mean one thing.

The Unity intended to raise a new dungeon on Basil's doorstep.

Chapter 19: Man vs Witch

"Shit," Basil said.

"Thirty-one," Plato replied.

With his supply bag weighing on his back, Basil and his cat followed Shellgirl along a meandering trail. The clam mimic hopped in the shadow of gnarled trees. Basil didn't recognize their species, but they certainly shouldn't be growing in the Barthes. The vegetation in the area was foreign to the region, from the trees to the strange purple grass under his feet.

"Damn," Basil whispered. "Bloody hell."

"Thirty-two, thirty-three," Plato replied.

"What are you doing?" Shellgirl asked with a curious look.

"I'm counting how many times Basil has cursed since morning." Plato chuckled. "We're thirty-six swearing words short of the all-time record."

"We're fucked," Basil said. "So utterly fucked."

"Thirty-four, thirty-five. You can do it, buddy. I believe in your swearing spirit."

"It's fine!" Shellgirl waved a reassuring hand at Basil. "I told you, she's clean!"

The forest witch didn't worry Basil; the dungeon under construction in Dax did. Officer Elissalde swore to him that her team successfully bombed it from above, but the robots

would try to rebuild it again. They would have the means to fully focus their resources on the task once the army retreated to Bordeaux.

Basil cursed his short-sightedness. He should have seen it coming. If an Earth company successfully built a dungeon-summoning server, then an army of magical machines could do the same.

He had to expel the Unity's forces from the region before they completed their infernal machine and flooded the countryside with robots. Could he convince the army to make a last-ditch attempt at wiping them out? Officer Elissalde had arranged her pick-up for tomorrow and Basil left her at home with the rest of his party to recover until then.

"Why won't they leave me alone?" Basil asked out loud. "All I want is to live in peace and harmony. Yet whenever we solve a problem, another pops up! It's maddening!"

"Take it from me, Basil." Plato mimicked a beheading motion. "No birds, no problems. Same with the gizmos. I say we pick them off one after another until they leave."

It... it could work actually. The Unity's forces in Dax were stretched so thinly that they couldn't properly patrol their own conquered city. The gearsman ambush nearly cost the party their lives, but their victory deprived the robots of a heavy hitter. If the group avoided direct combat and continuously thinned down their enemies' numbers, they could force them out of the region.

The Second Neighborhood War appeared inevitable.

"Perhaps it's time to introduce everyone to an ancient Bulgarian tradition then." Basil smiled cruelly. "Guerilla

warfare."

"Could I sit this one out?" Shellgirl asked with little enthusiasm. "Or at least stay at the rear? I'll be all for funding a war, but participating is another matter."

"That's the neat thing about guerilla attacks: if done well, you're gone before the enemy can strike back." Basil stopped at the end of the trail and the witch's house. "Is this the place?"

A field of purple flowers bloomed within a ring of leafless trees. A two-story izba hut dominated the grove, its walls built from logs, its roof from dirt and straw. The light of candles pierced through its windows. A fence of wooden spikes topped with shrunken goblin heads and burning skulls surrounded the building.

Basil found the decoration aesthetically pleasing. Inspiring even.

"I see someone shares our neighborhood problems," Plato commented. "Why do I have the feeling you'll get along with her, Basil?"

"Because he will!" Shellgirl hopped to the hut's door and knocked on it. "Vasi, my dear! It's me!"

"Coming!" a muffled voice answered from within the house. Her accent sounded vaguely Belarusian. "Welcome!"

The door opened and the witch walked out.

Years of pop culture indoctrination had taught Basil that witches were either ugly as sin or dazzling beauties, and his neighbor clearly fell into the second category. She looked around his age, with a lovely heart-shaped face and crimson

eyes. Her skin was an inhuman pale shade of olive green. She wore a short sleeveless black dress, an elegant red scarf, a rounded wizard's hat atop mid-long raven hair, and a pair of heels.

Vasilisa 'Vasi' Yaga, Changeling

Level 13 [Demon/Fairy]

Demon. Did she hide horns under her hat?

Basil was immediately on his guard and looked for any sign of weaponry. The woman didn't carry any wand to cast spells with. Her nails weren't claws ready to tear his throat out. When she smiled kindly at the group, white teeth showed under her lips rather than fangs.

In short, she appeared oddly harmless for a fiend.

"Shellgirl, how good to see you again!" The witch exchanged a high-five with the clam mimic. "Have you combed your slime hair? I love it."

"My, I did!" Shellgirl grinned with pride. "I'm glad you noticed!"

"I didn't," Plato said. Neither did Basil.

"Who is that handsome human with you?" The witch put a finger on her lips as she examined Basil from head to toes. "The ogre of the Barthes?"

"Basil," he replied with a blank face. He would go on a rampage if that nickname caught on with the local monsters. "Basil Jean-François Bohén."

The two studied each other for a few seconds. Basil was ready to summon his halberd at the first sign of treachery. The witch's Dreambrew potion worked as advertised, but he couldn't rule out the fact she lured him into a trap of some kind. Her name also sounded familiar to him, although he couldn't put his finger on why.

"Mmm, you are quite the good-looking fellow," the witch said with a fox-like smile. "A fine connoisseur of potions and a warrior. It's a winning combination."

Basil looked flatly at her. He knew her type and refused to play her game.

The witch sighed in disappointment upon realizing her flirty façade and insincere flattery wouldn't work with him. "You didn't even blush. I must be getting rusty."

"Your assets are useless against me, woman." Basil liked girls, but not enough to fawn over them. "No pretty smiles will buy you favors from me."

"You've been single for too long, Basil," Plato said with a sad, *sad* voice. "I fear your dating life is beyond saving now."

"I do like a man with his head on his shoulders," the witch mused playfully, taking the rejection in stride. "Sorry, old habits. I used to trick would-be paladins into running errands for me with a wink and a smile. One jumped off a cliff trying to look for a dragon egg, if you can believe that."

"Natural selection at its finest," Plato commented.

Basil kept a poker face and did his best not to show surprise. The witch mentioned the anecdote like something that

happened often enough to become a habit. This implied a long history, yet the dungeons only appeared weeks ago...

She's different from other monsters somehow. Basil could tell from her behavior. *Wiser, more mature.*

"Anyway, the name's Vasilisa Yaga or 'Vasi' for short." The witch knelt and petted Plato behind the ears. "What's yours, oh mighty king of cats?"

"His Majesty Plato the First." Plato glanced up at his owner. "Can we keep her? She *understands* my greatness."

"Nobody owns me, Your Majesty." The witch stood up and invited the group inside. "Come along, let's have a drink inside."

"Her liquor is amazing, you'll see!" Shellgirl declared before crawling into the house. After a short moment of hesitation, Basil followed alongside Plato. The witch closed the door behind them.

The group entered a comfortable room with a wooden table in its middle. A colossal white bear's pelt carpeted the floor and the stuffed head of a reptilian creature overlooked a chimney. Bundles of dried herbs, potions, and grimoires occupied rows of shelves along the walls. Their neat organization contrasted with the empty bottles on the ground, the dust on the windows, and the stench of alcohol in the air. An unused broomstick waited in a corner.

"Are you a student?" Basil asked.

"I study magic, yes." Vasi squinted at him. "How did you know?"

He pointed a finger at the empty bottles. Vasi chuckled as she invited the group to sit. "Don't mind them, I'll clean tomorrow."

In student slang, 'tomorrow' meant 'never.' Basil had learned this subtle difference to his dismay when he last shared an apartment.

Vasi proved a good host and served drinks to her guests: a bowl of milk for Plato and bottles of orange beverages for everyone else. Basil recognized them as krupnik, a sweet Slavic liqueur. Shellgirl thirstily grabbed her drink, but he didn't touch his own.

Vasi smiled at his reaction. "Are you afraid of being poisoned? In my homeland, we believe in hospitality."

"I don't drink alcohol," Basil replied. Too many bad memories associated with it.

"Don't you know the proverb? Never trust a man who doesn't drink?" Vasi grabbed a bottle off a shelf while sipping her own krupnik. "I have beet juice mixed with carrots, if you prefer."

"Careful Basil, the vegan revolution has begun," Plato mocked his owner. He licked the bowl and then his lips. "Tasty. Is this goat milk?"

"You have a good sense of taste," Vasi complimented him. "Shellgirl traded it to me a few days ago."

"I got it from the orcs," gloated the mimic. "I exchanged a beer bottle for six bottles full of milk."

Basil felt slightly guilty since the alcohol in question came from René's old cave. He had decided to trade most of his

liquors away considering how little use it would find otherwise.

"Speaking of drinks, did my Dreambrew work?" Vasi asked Basil. "You can't fathom how many dreams I had to catch to craft it."

"It worked fine." Which was the reason why Basil accepted this meeting at all. "How do you catch a dream?"

"With the right spell." His question seemed to amuse the witch. "Your ignorance doesn't surprise me. You strike me more as the Fighter-class type with more brains than most."

Basil would storm off if she ever asked for his Intelligence score. "I didn't know monsters could take Spellcaster levels."

"We can't, but we may still learn spells with the right Perks." Vasi uncorked her bottle. "To what do we toast?"

"To a good quarter!" Shellgirl yelled as she raised her bottle. Vasi chuckled at that and answered with 'prosit.'

Basil glanced at Plato with amusement. "You too, you have hands now."

The cat groaned but joined the toast nonetheless. After analyzing his juice with the System, Basil sipped his juice. The drink tasted quite good, much to his surprise. He waited pointlessly for a poison to take effect and relaxed upon realizing that there was no danger.

"The frog prince potion is on the shelf to your left," Vasi said with a wink. "I keep it for special occasions."

"I gotta say, I'm pleasantly surprised," Basil replied with a chuckle. "When I saw your house I expected the worst. Yet you seem to be quite the friendly fellow."

"See, see?" Shellgirl gluttonously sipped from her drink. "Told you she was clean."

"I like guests, but not the uninvited kind," Vasi explained. "The skulls and shrunken heads outside keep the fools from disturbing me when I study. I'm not from this place so I had to establish clear boundaries."

"Perhaps that's what we were missing, Basil," Plato said. "The corpses of our dead enemies impaled on the fence. That will send a message."

"When they start rotting, they'll spread diseases," Basil replied before focusing on his host. "By 'not from this place,' you mean the marsh? From which dungeon did you come?"

"The better question would be..." Vasi smiled coyly. "Which world?"

Basil's hand tightened on his drink and Plato raised his head from his bowl in shock. Only Shellgirl didn't appear surprised. "Astonishing, isn't it?" she asked her allies. "I had the same reaction when I heard it for the first time!"

"I came from a place called the Winter Kingdoms, a land of magic, dragons, and fairies," Vasi explained. "We have our own System there, slightly different from this world's. I suppose that's why I could cross over."

Cross over. Megabug had used the same wording. Basil studied the witch's face for any hint of lying but didn't find any. "Another world?" he asked. "How?"

"How did I get into this one?" Vasi shrugged. "I don't fully understand it myself. Sometimes humans from other worlds reincarnate in ours, but they had to die first. I remember seeing a screen offering me to participate in an *'incursion'* into another world."

"And you just accepted?" Basil asked in shock.

"Yes I did, and next thing I know I had been teleported to this marsh." The casual way she answered Basil's question left him feeling incredulous. "I felt stuck in a routine. Wake up in the morning, have a drink, decide against going outside because it snows too much... I wanted to shake things up a bit, to study new magical traditions. It wasn't like I had anyone to tie me down in my old place either. Do you see what I mean?"

"I do, a bit." Basil abandoned civilization to live in the woods. Abandoning Earth sounded like too big of a jump though. "I left my homeland to study too."

"Good, traveling builds character. We should exchange stories someday."

"Maybe another time," Basil replied, though he would take her up on it. He found the witch's friendliness disarming.

Her odd behavior made more sense now. After encountering Megabug and the Unity, Basil had considered the possibility that some monsters came from other worlds. Vasi only confirmed his hypothesis. It made sense she didn't possess the urge to kill humans on sight if she had been born naturally rather than spawned from a dungeon.

However, her confession raised disturbing possibilities about these *'incursions.'* The Ogre's Den dungeon warned that its destruction wouldn't prevent the phenomenon and that

more information would be shared in the next 'event.' It meant more monsters would invade Earth in the near future and that some would be like Megabug: deadly.

"We came for business." Shellgirl summoned an item stored in her inventory on the table: the lightning runestone harvested from the gearsman. "What do ya think of this? That's the pretty stone we harvested from the big machine I told you about!"

Vasi's eyes flashed with greedy curiosity. Her nails fell upon the stone like an eagle's talons on prey and seized it. "Hey!" Shellgirl complained, but the witch didn't listen. "Careful, it's precious!"

Vasi's behavior changed from that of a friendly student to a scientist muttering observations to herself. "It resembles a lightning powerstone, but not quite... synthetic? Shades of fire and ice too... very interesting."

"Powerstone?" Basil asked, hope rising in his heart. Were they finally making progress on the petrification problem?

"A mineral formed from the fossilized remains of very powerful magical creatures, mostly ancient fairies and dragons. It doesn't surprise me to find one powering a big machine." Vasi nodded at Shellgirl. "It would fetch a good price in my world."

"I knew it," the mimic rejoiced. "Partner, are there dragon graves around to exploit?"

"If komodo dragons count, then we have one on the other side of the world," Basil quipped.

"Ever heard of the Unity, Vasi? The Apocalypse Force? Metal Olympus?"

"Mmm..." Vasi pressed a finger on her lips, her eyes thoughtful. "Doesn't ring much of a bell. They must come from elsewhere."

"Other worlds?" Plato asked. "How many are there?"

Vasi shrugged her shoulders. Basil opened his bag and spilled out its content on the table: the remains of a watcher.

"These creatures turn people to stone on sight," he explained as the witch examined the scraps. "I tried to reverse-engineer their method but a safety feature blocked me."

"Crafting Encryption." Vasi nodded to herself. "I can't break it either. Their creator must have a very high level."

"So you can craft monsters?" Basil probed for information. He already suspected it, but wanted confirmation from an outside source.

"Crafters can make golems, homunculi, robots, wicker men... or at least they could do it in my world." Vasi pushed the watcher's remains with an apologetic expression. "Sorry, I can't make use of them."

"You can't cure petrification?"

"I didn't say that." Vasi toyed with her alcohol bottle. "I know a recipe that can cure petrification. The issue is manufacturing it. How many potions would you need?"

"Considering Dax's population..." Basil winced. "At least ten thousand."

The witch laughed in his face. Basil sighed, having expected as much.

"Yo dog, don't make that face." Plato patted his owner on the shoulder with his paw. "I know, we give the recipe to the army and they can deal with it."

"We could," Basil agreed without enthusiasm. Officer Elissalde made it clear saving Dax's population wasn't a priority as far as the army's strategy was concerned. They had bigger fish to fry.

"Or you could kill two birds with one stone," Vasi said. "Shellgirl told me you were looking to summon an angel."

"We are." Basil frowned. "You can cast Prayers?"

"Of course not," she replied with a short laugh. "I'm a witch, a demon, and an unbeliever. I don't pray to anyone... but I can run a Ritual. They're spells that demand very specific circumstances to cast, but form the strongest school of magic. I happened to learn a thing or two about summonings."

"Do we need to sacrifice a virgin?" Basil asked with a snort. "Because if so, you're a few years late to use me."

"Nothing so quaint, but good to know," the witch mused. "How about this? I keep the powerstone for my personal research and in exchange, I help you summon an angel. They're annoying, but nobody can contest their healing powers. Sounds good?"

"Deal," Basil replied immediately.

After a short silence, Plato squinted at Shellgirl suspiciously. "Why aren't you protesting?"

"About the shiny? I call it sound investing." Shellgirl put her hands behind her hair. "Think about it. If we figure out a cure for petrification, families will pay us an exorbitant price to heal their stoned kin! More than we could ever hope to gain from the stone alone."

She never lost an occasion to milk an opportunity for all it was worth.

"Oh, how good it is to collaborate with intelligent people," Vasi said. "I'd be down to trade potions and spellbooks too. I can make my own items, but I lack the material needed to say... experiment."

"You can come visit my lab anytime," Basil proposed. "We'll trade recipes."

"With pleasure."

His offer confused Shellgirl. "Didn't you want to keep our HQ hidden, partner?"

"She showed us her home," Basil shrugged. "If she causes us trouble, we know where she lives now."

"Mutually assured home destruction?" Vasi noted with some amusement. Basil felt like she didn't truly believe that he would follow through with his threat. "For the Ritual, I will need a sacred place to cast the spell and a powerful object related to angels. Do you have anything like this in your repertoire, handsome?"

"Would this relic work as a focus?" Basil summoned the Reliquary of Saint Bernadette from his Inventory.

"Ohoh, an artifact!" Vasi immediately grabbed the Reliquary with the same delicateness she showed with the runestone.

"Wonderful! With it, I can summon a big shot! Should be fun!"

"As for the place, I know an old church up the stream," Basil suggested. He had fond memories of the place. "It's been long abandoned, but it was consecrated and everything."

"Good idea." Plato's head perked up with interest. "It's been a while since we visited his tombstone."

Far too long in Basil's opinion. The constant attacks on his household had distracted him from his monthly visitations. He already knew which flowers to bring.

Shellgirl winced. "The church up the stream... you mean that crumbling wooden shack with the engraved stones in its backyard?"

"Yes." Basil frowned. He didn't like her tone. "Shellgirl, why the sorry face?"

"Remember what I said about aquatic monsters showing up more often?" she asked. "Well, some mermaid necromancer from Lourdes took refuge in it. I tried to trade with her but she cast spells at me and—"

Basil sent Shellgirl a furious glare and she didn't dare finish her sentence. Plato tensed up, his body utterly still.

"Necromancer?" Basil asked, his voice icy. "You mean someone who raises the dead as zombies?"

"Skeletons, mummies, undead, etc," Vasi clarified. "A good necromancer can do many things."

Basil felt his blood boil within his veins and his head hurt from silent rage. His beet-carrot juice bottle shattered from

his grip. Shards cut into his flesh and Vasi gave him a frown of disapproval. He didn't care. He was too furious to feel pain or shame.

"Plato, Shellgirl, pack your things." Basil rose from the table. His jaw tightened so much that he thought that his teeth might break from the pressure. "We're cleaning the church ourselves."

"What, right now?" Shellgirl asked in shock.

"Right now!" Plato's claws came out. "If a fish dared desecrate his corpse—"

"She won't live to regret it," Basil promised.

"Hey, calm down, what's happening?" Vasi rose from her seat. "Is a friend of yours buried at that church?"

Yes.

The Old Man himself.

Chapter 20: Man vs Mermaid

The sun was setting on the horizon when the group reached the church.

The ancient wood building remained elegant in its simplicity. Although locals called it a church, it was closer to an abandoned wayward shrine. Ivy grew on its walls and windows. The Catholic cross atop its roof oversaw a dozen tombstones and a stream ford. In spite of its dilapidated appearance, the place breathed peace and quiet. The air was fresh and only the sound of running water broke the silence.

No wonder the Old Man had been so fond of the place. He used to rest in the shrine's shadow after a walk in the woods before his death, reading a book under the fading sunlight.

Woe to whoever would dare to despoil this sanctuary. Basil's halberd would separate their head from their body.

"I'm surprised you came along," Basil told Vasi. "It's not your fight."

"If I have to summon your angel in this place, it makes sense to help clear it out first." The witch followed the party, but didn't walk. Instead, she rode her broomstick as it floated a meter and a half above the ground. "It's saddening to see a place like this in ruins."

"I don't remember it any other way," Plato commented. The cat followed after Basil on foot. As for Shellgirl, she hid in

the stream. She could move more swiftly in the water than on land. "It's part of its charm."

"The shrine was abandoned decades ago as locals moved away from the countryside to cities," Basil said. "A friend of mine met his wife at this place almost sixty years ago."

"Is that why he's buried here?" Vasi asked.

Basil answered with a sharp nod and froze in place as Plato raised a paw. "I'm smelling corpses," the cat warned, "and fish."

Basil clenched his jaw. If the mermaid had dared to raise René's corpse, he might activate Warp-Spasm out of sheer anger.

"You two, stay behind," he ordered. "I'll act as bait."

"I would rather follow you," Vasi said. She climbed down from her broomstick and carried it with one hand. "I work better with a brave warrior covering me in melee."

"As you wish." Basil glanced at Plato, who sneakily hid in the tall grass near the wayward shrine. "A shame you're a higher level than me. I could have added you to my party and given you a new ability."

"Hold your horses, handsome, no man can tame me," the witch replied with a chuckle. "But I wouldn't mind sharing spellbooks if you own any."

"I have Prayer grimoires, but you can't cast them."

"That doesn't make them valueless, for all spells are precious. I try to keep an open mind." They walked toward the tombstones without encountering any enemy. "It's a

waste you didn't take levels in a Spellcaster class. You have pretty strong and rare affinities."

"How do you know that?" Basil asked with a frown.

She winked at him. "I have enough Intelligence points to see your stats."

It took all of Basil's willpower to keep a straight face. If that cursed System dared to mock him...

Your Intelligence is too low to see the full stats of—

"I hate you, screen," Basil rasped. "I hate you so much."

Vasi smiled in response, but her amusement quickly turned to worry as they reached the tombstones. To Basil's relief, they didn't look damaged in any way. Moss and ivy had grown over the stone because he hadn't taken care of them in a while, but the graves remained undisturbed; René's included.

However, someone had done a little decorating. A crudely carved wooden idol stood in the middle of the graveyard. It represented a hand with the thumb missing and a fanged mouth inside the palm. A reptilian, slitted eye glared from within the maw. Basil wasn't afraid of symbols, but something about the totem left him vaguely unsettled. The eye seemed to watch him with malevolence.

And according to the System, someone *did*.

Apocalypse Idol

Family: Altar.

Quality: D

Effect: Allows the Maleking to observe the world through his symbol.

An idol heralding the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and the coming of Hell Unending.

The four horsemen? Basil tensed up upon realizing who was behind this mess.

"That's creepy," Vasi said.

Basil responded by vertically splitting the idol in half with his halberd. The weapon sliced a line through the hand symbol and caused both halves to fall on the sides. Smoke came out of the device before it turned to dust in the blink of an eye.

"Show yourself," Basil declared loudly. "Come out now!"

"If you say so," a lovely voice answered.

Two shambling corpses emerged from the waters and stepped onto the shore. They had been men once, but water had bloated their bodies and turned their rotting skin pallid. A nauseating, unbearable stench followed them. A layer of barnacles covered their chests. One of the zombies was slim and wielded a rapier. The other was big and strong, with rusting iron gauntlets for weapons.

Draugr Warriors

Level 9 [Undead].

Faction: Apocalypse Force.

Basil immediately moved in front of Vasi to shield her from the undead. The witch didn't seem concerned. Flames

flickered in her hand, ready to ignite her foes.

"Shielding your girlfriend? How romantic!" A new creature hopped out of the waters after the undead and stayed along the rivershore. "That's it, you're now my new boyfriend."

As Shellgirl warned, the necromancer turned out to be a mermaid. The upper half of her body belonged to a naked woman of great beauty, with long red hair, startling green eyes, and a shell necklace. The lower half belonged to a giant trout. She lay on the shore, arms on the ground, tail in the water.

Disa the Mermaid.

Level 13 [Aquatic/Fairy].

Faction: Apocalypse Force.

I knew it, they belong to Megabug's faction, Basil thought. However, the undead and mermaid felt nowhere as threatening as the insect drone himself. They lacked his palpable aura of menace and lethality.

"Careful," Vasi whispered to Basil. "Her kind can charm men into obedience."

"I assume you're from Lourdes?" Basil asked the mermaid, trying to stall until Plato and Shellgirl were in position to flank their enemies. The former was crawling in the grass, while the latter hid in the waters nearby.

"You're well-informed. I was indeed born in the Water Sanctuary dungeon." The mermaid gave Basil a sensual smile. The two undead moved to Basil's left and right, waiting for a signal to attack. "The new Boss sent me here to raise the dead and kick the Unity out of the region, but

the old geezers in the ground won't answer my call. They've been goners for too long I suppose. It works better when I drown them myself first."

Basil promised to drown her himself like an unwanted puppy. *She's just a pawn of a greater evil*, he thought. *A newborn monster sent to test the waters as cannon fodder. She's what Shellgirl would have become if she'd stayed in Lourdes.*

His eyes wandered from one undead to another, trying to figure out which of them would be the weak link. The fencer appeared to be a safer bet than his bulkier counterpart, but striking him would expose Vasi to retaliation... better deal with the bigger threat first.

"Now, you owe me an apology," Disa said. "You've committed sacrilege by destroying the hand of the Maleking."

"Who?" Basil asked. He'd better get as much information as possible.

"The Maleking! It is he who will become the new Overgod after his Horsemen pave the way for his arrival! He shall rule the Earth and only his chosen will survive!" A malevolent light flashed in the mermaid's eyes. "There's a place for good warriors like you in his army. You should join as I did, trust me. Everybody else will die."

"Don't..." The draugr fencer gargled words. "Hell... Unending..."

"Don't mind them," said their mistress. "These two are my ex-boyfriends. They won't get in the way of our relationship. If anything, they support me in all of my endeavors."

"Kill... us..." the bulky undead rasped.

"Already did that," the mermaid replied with a smirk. Basil felt a strong urge to wipe it off her face. "I hope you'll last longer than them. It takes a lot to satisfy me."

"And here I thought I treated my paladin suitors harshly," Vasi said with a disgusted expression.

"You know what they say, sister. Love them, leave them, kill them." The mermaid shrugged. "Does it matter? I give them untold pleasure, so they owe me eternal gratefuln—"

Basil struck without warning.

His halberd split the bulky undead's skull with enough force to send him stumbling backward. No sooner did he make a move than the fencer draugr flanked him. His sword lunged at Basil's neck with deadly intent.

Vasi spoke a word of power and snapped her fingers. A burst of fiery embers erupted from a fingernail and burned the fencer's face. The undead let out a snarl of pain and barely missed Basil's carotid artery.

"Calm down, my boy," the mermaid said, undisturbed, before clearing out her throat. "How about a song to soothe your furious heart?"

She started humming to herself.

Basil had bigger fish to fry. He slashed the bulkier undead in the chest once and dodged a retaliatory punch. The draugr's fist hit the ground with enough force to send dirt flying in all directions.

Plato leaped out of the grass by surprise and struck at the bulky undead's spine. His claws cut through flesh and bone alike as if the monster's back was made of butter. The fencer draugr switched targets from Basil to Vasi, but an ice pearl hit him on the side of the face before he could reach the witch. Shellgirl's barrels peered out of the stream's waters and began bombarding the undead with projectiles.

The mermaid's song grew higher pitched. Her voice drowned out the noise of battle until Basil could only hear her. The song affected his brain in a way few of them ever did.

Basil abandoned the fight with the undead to approach the mermaid. It was stronger than him. Something pushed him to her. She smiled and extended her hands at Basil, as if to take him in her loving arms.

[**Charm**] ailment...

Basil punched the mermaid in the face.

It failed! It failed miserably!

Basil Bohem doesn't find mermaids attractive!

"Stop singing off-note!" Basil snarled with anger. "It's unbearable!"

The blow sent the mermaid head-first into the ground. One of her teeth flew into the river with a 'plop' sound. She looked up at Basil with astonished eyes and river mud all over her cheeks. "Y-you hit me! You hit me, you little shi—"

Basil slapped her hard enough to break her nose.

"I am a feminist," Basil boasted proudly. The half-fish put a hand on her mouth, blood dripping between her fingers. "I will defend gender equality to my last breath."

"By hitting a woman?" the mermaid asked incredulously. Her smug expression had turned into one of shameful anger.

Basil remained unshaken by her accusation. "Chivalry is the truest expression of sexism! It demeans women by implying they need a man to protect them!"

When in fact, everyone had the fundamental right to a punch in the face.

"I'm not sure I agree," Vasi said as she blasted the draugr fencer's face with volley after volley of embers. The undead simply couldn't get close enough to strike her with his rapier. The witch thoroughly trounced him, his eyes burning in his skull.

His bulkier ally struggled to hit Plato at all. His powerful fists shook the ground with each blow, but none of them managed to strike the agile cat. Shellgirl supported her allies by blasting one undead or the other with ice pearls whenever they threatened to break the deadlock.

Finally realizing her situation had grown precarious, the mermaid tried to escape into the water. Basil grabbed her hair first. He lifted her out of the stream and threw her at the shrine like a piece of ham.

"I only hit you because I respect you as a half-woman," Basil informed the mermaid as she hit a wooden wall with enough strength to crack it. "Because I know you can take it like a man."

The mermaid tried to sing again, but it only made Basil wince in pain. By God, she sounded like a tortured cat! As if her desecration of the dead wasn't enough!

He attempted to silence her with a halberd strike to the face, but she managed to roll to the side. His blade carved wood and nothing else.

"What is that song supposed to do?" Basil asked the mermaid, raising his halberd for a new attempt on her life. "Anger me?"

"To make you fall in love with me!" she replied in shock and humiliation. Blood ran down her broken nose. "I don't get it! It worked on all my other boyfriends!"

"Really? Damn, this world is full of sexual deviants." Basil looked at her fish tail with disgust. "You're half-trout! Fucking you would be an act of bestiality!"

It must have been why the Charm ailment failed to affect Basil. He simply couldn't find it in himself to become a fish furry.

"Sleep!" The mermaid pointed a finger at Basil, a surge of magical light erupting from her finger. "Sleep at once!"

[**Sleep**] ailment negated by [**Coffee**].

So much coffee ran through Basil's veins that he might as well have bled caffeine.

"Help!" the mermaid shouted. Whereas Vasi had long turned her fencer into a burning crisp, her bulkier servant powered through Shellgirl's suppressive fire to flank Basil. Plato clawed at the undead's heel, making him stumble, and his

owner welcomed the draugr with a swing of his halberd. The strike bisected the monster and felled him on the spot.

Deprived of backup, the mermaid slammed her hands and pointed them at Basil's group. A stream of water erupted from her palms. Plato and Vasi took cover behind the tombstones, but Basil wasn't so fast. Pressurized liquid damaged his clothes and forced him to cover his face with his arm.

His opening came when Shellgirl fired an ice pearl at the side of the mermaid's skull. The attack interrupted her water spell, allowing Basil to recover. He glanced at the battlefield, and noticed to his fury that René's tombstone was drenched in water.

"Wait, wait!" the mermaid panicked upon seeing Basil's furious face. She raised her hands in surrender. "We, we can talk this out! I can make it worth your while, I swear!"

Basil grabbed his foe by the neck with one hand, dragged her to the stream screaming, and then drowned her face in the water. The mermaid's tail strummed the shore and her hands tried to get Basil off her.

"Die fishwoman!" he shouted. "Die!"

"Basil," Plato said.

"What?"

"You're waterboarding a *mermaid*."

Basil froze for a moment and watched bubbles rising to the surface. The mermaid kept struggling against his grip, her nails scratching ineffectively at his arms.

"Aren't they like whales?" he asked naively. "As in, they can stay underwater for long periods of time but eventually have to go to the surface to breathe?"

"No," Vasi replied. She sounded somewhat exasperated.

Basil sighed, tossed the mermaid on the shore, and gave her the Marie-Antoinette treatment. His halberd cut her pretty neck cleanly and sent her head rolling.

"You're not the gentleman I took you for," Vasi commented with an amused look.

"No," Basil confirmed, his bloody halberd resting on his shoulder. "I'm just a man."

It sounded far better in his mind than in his mouth.

Your party received 13,400 EXP (2612 for you). You earned 2 levels.

"Well, that was easy," Shellgirl commented. She hopped on land with a pleased grin. "I expected more from a level 13 foe."

"We're getting better at fighting," Basil replied. They also had a balanced group including a frontliner, a long-range sniper, a sneaky cat rogue, and magical artillery. In contrast, the mermaid overspecialized in ailments and could only count on two meat shields. She would have done far more damage if her song had worked on him. "Some of the experience is missing though."

"I landed the killing blow on the undead fencer, so his experience points went to me rather than your party," Vasi explained. She searched the mermaid's corpse without any

emotion, at least until she grabbed her seashell necklace. "Do you mind if I keep it?"

"Not at all," Basil replied. She had contributed to the battle so she was entitled to part of the loot.

"You're sweet," Vasi replied with a charming smile. "I'll return the favor."

"I call dibs on the corpses and the weapons!" Shellgirl declared.

Plato grabbed the fencer's rapier with a curious look. The sword matched the cat's entire body in length, but he wielded it with grace. "Nice," he commented with a few thrusts. "I'll stick them with the pointy end."

Basil glanced at the mermaid. "Do you think it would be cannibalism if I cooked her? She is a monster, but she looks half-human..."

"I would say that it only counts if you eat the upper half," Plato replied. He licked his lips with anticipation. "The lower half smells like tasty fish."

Basil decided it was an acceptable compromise, though he wouldn't partake in the feast himself. His monsters deserved a treat.

"Sorry, Old Man." Basil cleaned the water off René's tombstone. Fortunately, the mermaid's spell barely sprayed it without inflicting damage. The epitaph *'In the depths of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer'* remained intact. "At least you can rest in peace. I'll clean your stone and bring you flowers later, I swear."

"I'm sure he's okay with waiting." Plato sat at Basil's side. "He always took his time with everything."

"Was he your father or something?" Vasi asked Basil. She swung her broomstick to remove moss and dust off the tombstone, for which he was grateful.

"Fathers?" Shellgirl scratched her head. "Ah right, humans have those. I still find the concept weird."

"He wasn't my father, but he was a mentor to me," Basil replied with a smile. He had fond memories of the Old Man. "A dear friend too."

He still remembered the day they met; Basil was still a university student then, looking for a summer job to pay his rent. Eventually he'd noticed an offer for a personal caretaker on his university's website. The salary was good, so Basil didn't mind spending months in the wilderness.

"I don't need help all that much, actually," René had confessed soon after they met. "I'm old, but not so much that I can't walk."

"Why did you call me then?" Basil had asked.

René had answered with the saddest thing Basil ever heard. "Because I feel lonely, young man. Because my family forgot me. Because I haven't had a visit in years and it kills me more than age ever did."

The Old Man had been so devoid of human contact that he was willing to pay someone to spend time with him. After hearing that, Basil returned to visit him whenever he had holidays to spare.

Free of charges.

"I hope he feels less alone on the other side than this one," Basil said. *If there was another side.* "Anyway, let's bury the dead and be done with it. How much time do you need for your Ritual, Vasi?"

"Well." The witch cleared her throat. "I guess we'll have time to watch the sunset."

Basil wouldn't mind.

Chapter 21: Man vs Angel

It took until nightfall for Vasi to complete her preparations.

In stark contrast with the ease at which she blasted an undead's face into oblivion, the witch took her time to draw a complex circle on the church's grounds. She traced symbols on the dirt with her broomstick's shaft as Basil watched, humming a song to herself.

Meanwhile, Plato trained with his new sword near the river and Shellgirl sorted through the various trophies gathered from the team's latest victims.

"Two gold teeth, a pair of rusted iron gauntlets, and best of all..." Shellgirl showcased a bloated blue organ wriggling in her hand. "An undying liver!"

"You found an undying liver?" Vasi looked over her shoulder and grinned when she noticed the nauseous treasure. "That's marvelous! Can I take it?"

"What use could you have for an undead's liver?" Basil asked with slight disgust. Imagining his organs living on after his demise soured his stomach.

The witch's eyes flared with horror as if he had blasphemed in her presence. "Are you kidding? You can use undying livers to craft highly efficient detox potions! It wipes away drunkenness and hangovers in an instant!"

"We would make a killing selling this to the orc tribe down the stream!" Shellgirl snapped her fingers, an idea crossing her mind. "We could make a package with beer and wine!"

"Whatever," Basil replied, leaving the two ladies to decide what to do about the organ. Shellgirl swiftly negotiated the liver against a percentage of the detox potion Vasi would create with it.

Basil had a more important matter to deal with: assigning his new levels. He could finally invest in Gardener, Runesmith, or Fisherman. He would take a level in Gardener as it was a priority to help increase the food supply, but he hesitated between his two other options. On one hand, Fisherman would help him deal with the aquatic monsters moving into the river; he doubted the mermaid would be the only threat to come from Lourdes. On the other hand, Runesmith might give him an edge against the Unity's gearsmen. It would also be his first spellcasting class.

"Vasi." Basil turned to the witch, who was about to complete a hexagram design within her circle. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," she replied.

"You said I should consider becoming a spellcaster because I had strong and rare affinities. Can you elaborate on your reasoning?"

"I stand by what I said. It's rare to have someone with strong affinities in the full Wood, Metal, and Corrosion triad, let alone Fire and Water. Usually, a strong affinity in one of these elements is balanced by a weakness in their counterparts. Few humans also possess a strong Ailment affinity." Vasi finished tracing the circle in the grass. "I suppose it's counterbalanced by your weaknesses in key elements like Soul, Wind, Lightning, and Light. This closes nearly a fourth of the magical repertoire to you."

Basil frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You can't learn special Techniques or Spells from an element in which you have a weak affinity. To give you an example, the Ritual I'm about to cast depends on Soul and Mythic elemental affinities. I'm strong with Soul and neutral with Mythic, so I can learn and cast the spell. If I had a weak affinity in either, I would have failed to even learn it."

"But you don't need a strong affinity in both elements," Basil noted.

"No, although a strong affinity in Mythic would have made it easier for me to learn the spell and empowered it further." Vasi smiled at him. "Did you listen to my advice and consider a spellcasting class change?"

"Somewhat," Basil replied. "I've considered investing a level in Runesmith."

"Good, I own a spellbook about runes. I could lend it to you as payback for letting me use your lab." Vasi set Saint Bernadette's Reliquary in the hexagram's center. "Runes aren't as flashy as other schools of magic, but they're practical and can be used for many things. Reinforcing your equipment, fueling magical items, traps..."

She had him at 'practical.' Basil assigned his two new levels.

Runesmith & Gardener Level 1 Stat Gains: +1 STR, +2 AGI, +2 VIT, +2 MAG, +1 INT, +2 CHA, +1 LCK.
You gained 50 HP and 30 SP.

New Perk: Runic I (Passive): 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.

New Perk: Jardin Secret I (Active): You can determine an area equal to 1 hectare per Gardener level as your [Jardin Secret]. Seeds planted in the area will have their growth period divided by your gardener level multiplied by 2; [Plant] Monsters grown from these seeds will be naturally friendly to you and can be immediately added to your Party. You can change your [Jardin Secret]'s location once per week, but if you do, the previous area loses all of its [Gardener]-related benefits.

Monsters grown from these seeds will be naturally friendly to you and can be immediately added to your Party...

"Partner, why are you looking like you want to kill someone?" Shellgirl asked him.

"Because I am a stupid, stupid man!" Basil replied angrily. If he had taken Gardener early he wouldn't have had to purge most of his vegetables! At least the Jardin Secret Perk would make harvesting food much easier.

To Basil's surprise, a new screen appeared before his eyes.

Congratulations, you've completed the hidden requirements to unlock the secret [**Technomancer**] Spellcaster/Crafter hybrid class!

Technomancer: A class harnessing the power of runes and science to create magical technology. STR (C), AGI (C), VIT (C), SKI (B), MAG (B), INT (B), CHA (C), LCK (C).

"Hybrid class?" Basil asked. "What's that?"

Hybrid classes are special classes that count as two categories at once. For example, [**Technomancer**] levels count both as Crafter and Spellcaster levels; its

Perks offer benefits for crafting items and casting spells. Hybrid classes need special requirements to unlock and have a lower level cap than normal classes.

[Technomancer] class requirements: strong [Metal] affinity; level 10+; Magic 15+; can cast [Runic] spells; can craft science items without a recipe; completed a laboratory-building quest.

Basil wondered how many people would fit these requirements. What struck him the most, however, was the possibility of unlocking new classes other than the ones available from the start.

"Basil, check this out!" Plato called out to his owner and raised his rapier. "Wind Slash!"

Basil watched with amazement as air swirled around the tip of Plato's sword. The cat swung his weapon and unleashed a sharp blade of wind across the stream. It cut neatly through the water's surface, carved a line on the other shore's dirt, and sliced a tree in half.

"Nice!" Shellgirl clapped, as did Vasi.

"Thank you, thank you." Plato offered a mock bow. "I deserve it."

"Now you can help me chop wood," Basil quipped. His cat hissed at him in response.

"Something is missing though," Vasi said with a chuckle. She took her witch hat out, moved closer to Plato, and put it on his head. It was a bit too large for the cat at first, but quickly shrunk to adjust to his size. Basil had to admit it looked good on his pet. "Here you go! You look dashing!"

"You're wrong." Plato checked his reflection in the stream and brandished his sword at the moon. He had become a true puss-in-boots. "I look perfect!"

"You're sure about the hat?" Basil asked Vasi.

"Keep it, I have plenty more at home." She winked at him. "Though I wouldn't mind a few potions in compensation."

"You'll have them," Basil replied with gratefulness. He didn't know how much of the witch's generosity was natural or a calculated move to earn favors, but it wouldn't go to waste. "Are we ready to begin?"

"Yes, although I must warn you that the Ritual does not give me any control over what I'm about to summon." Vasi joined her hands. "I would keep your halberd ready if I were you, in case I call someone in a cranky mood."

Basil summoned his weapon to his hand and turned to his other allies. "Shellgirl, Plato, you heard the lady."

"Our foes shall suffer the agony of a thousand deaths by my sword!" Plato declared with the tone of a dramatic actor. "Give me a glove to duel with! Woe to the first dog to cross my path!"

With such a talented star, Basil thought they should start a theater troupe.

Vasi's hands burned with sparks of magic. She touched the circle's edge with her soft fingers, the energy within them traveling through the symbol and the hexagram within it. The design shone brightly under the faint light of the night sky's moon. The otherworldly energies coursing through the symbols burst into a purple geyser of particles and the Reliquary of Saint Bernadette vanished in their light.

"Here it comes," Vasi whispered.

A humanoid shape formed at the center of the particle geyser. Shellgirl pointed her cannons at the figure and Basil prepared to strike at the first sign of hostility. He had been taught all his life that angels were a force of good, but the world went mad a long time ago...

The otherworldly lights died to reveal a strange creature. It was a humanoid no taller than Basil himself, with elegant feathered white wings growing out of its shoulders. The rest of the body didn't look like any angel from the scriptures. It wore a yellow coat with a cowl, green boots, latex gloves, and a black rounded hat. A white plague doctor's mask hid the angel's face and a bandolier full of potions was strapped on its chest. The outfit didn't leave a single spot of skin exposed to the outside world.

Basil expected more holy light from an angel. This one appeared humble, almost mundane; it didn't even possess a halo.

Zachariel, Junior Angel of Healing

Level 13(-7) [Angel]

Basil couldn't identify the name and he didn't know what to make of the 'junior' part.

"Hello!" The angel waved a friendly hand at Basil. His voice was nasal, masculine. "My name is Zachariel, but please, call me Zach! Did you summon me for a consultation? Do you fear for your spiritual health?"

"I..." Basil didn't know how to respond to that. He hadn't prayed for a long time and the presence of an angel right in

front of him begged many, many theological questions. "I don't think so—"

"Did you take a baptism booster?" the angel asked before he could finish.

A baptism booster? "I've been baptized at birth, if that's what you meant."

"Good, good." The angel nodded. "But you should take a second baptism shot, to be sure. You seem in good spiritual health for now, but even the most faithful can propagate coronatheism to their sicker brethren."

"You mean the coronavirus?" Basil asked with a frown.

"No, the coronatheism," the angel replied. "It's a rampant affliction that ravages the victim's spiritual health. We haven't found a vaccine yet and the faithful haven't yet developed collective immunity."

Basil stared at the angel in utter confusion. The gospels hadn't prepared him for... whatever this was.

Shellgirl scratched her head. "He's a bit strange, no?"

"He's half-bird," Plato snorted and pointed at the angel's wings. "That's never a good sign."

Their words brought Zachariel's full attention upon them. He examined them one after the other, lights shining through the glass eyes of his mask.

"I see your cat suffered from agnostic cancer, but it is safely in remission," the angel informed Basil. "I advise a steady diet of holy water in the morning, noon, and evening. Your

mimic is late for a baptism shot, but we can arrange that right now."

"Wait, did you say cancer?" Plato's eyes widened in horror. "I have cancer?"

"In remission," the angel replied. "For the witch, I'm less optimistic. She has accumulated a lot of negative karma cholesterol."

"Here we go," Vasi said with a sigh. "If you try to sell me a karma insurance package, I'm leaving."

"That's not my department," Zachariel replied calmly. "What I can do is to register you to our new convent shock therapy. The karma recovery rate reached seventy percent last year."

"I don't understand," Basil said. None of this made sense. "Do you serve the Lord? Is this God's plan? The Apocalypse, the Four Horsemen?"

"The apocalypse?" The angel appeared truly puzzled by Basil's questions. "What do you mean? I thought the event had been canceled decades ago?"

The angel's response plunged Basil into an abyss of existential dread. Things he had taken for gospel brought nothing but confusion from a heavenly messenger. This didn't bode well.

"Wait, were we Christians..." Basil gulped. "Were we wrong? Were the Muslims correct? The Jews?"

Zachariel observed Basil without a word for a long minute before finally answering. "I'm sorry, but what are you talking about? What's a Muslim?"

"It's my fault, Basil," Vasi apologized. "I messed up."

"I don't understand," Basil said. He understood nothing!
"How so?"

"He is an angel from heaven, alright." Vasi smiled sheepishly. "But not your world's heaven."

Basil blinked a few times as he processed the witch's words. His eyes turned to his allies, who shrugged their shoulders, and then to the angel.

"On which planet," Basil asked, "do you think we are?"

"Outremonde?" Zachariel answered, immediately realizing he had guessed wrong. "No?"

"No, this is Earth," Basil replied, his teeth grinding together in frustration. "*Earth*."

"Which one?" the angel asked innocently.

At this moment, Basil realized that the universe *hated* him.

"Can we get another try?" he pleaded with Vasi.

"Not without something like the Reliquary, I'm afraid," the witch replied. The artifact had vanished alongside the summoning circle. "My spell consumes the focus."

They used the consecrated remains of a Catholic saint on a church's grounds...

And they still messed up the summoning!

"The fact you're from another world doesn't absolve you from respecting the right spiritual health procedures," Zachariel declared with the boundless enthusiasm of a

medical intern. "You must pray three times a day, quarantine the unbelievers, and avoid sexual relationships unprotected by the bonds of marriage. It's the best way to protect yourself from coronatheism."

"Can we talk about my cancer, please?" Plato asked. He sounded very worried. "If I lose a life again, will it go away?"

Vasi chuckled lightly, as did Shellgirl. Basil couldn't bring himself to share their amusement. Between the Reliquary falling on his lap and the angel-summoning quest, he'd thought God had some kind of mysterious plan to help him. He should have known better. The existence of more than one heaven also bothered him on a theological level.

Okay, maybe it's not so bad. Basil tried to remain optimistic as Zachariel reassured Plato about his spiritual health. *He's an angel of healing. He's got to be able to help somehow.*

Basil did wonder about the strange negative value right next to the angel's level.

Monsters exceeding the Incursion Level Limit will suffer a level penalty from the Trimurti System if prematurely summoned to Earth. Experience points will instead allow them to regain their lost levels, stats, and Perks rather than gaining new ones.

"Thirteen plus seven..." Basil counted. "His real level is twenty?"

"Oh, I hadn't noticed." Zachariel looked at his hands. "How odd. This is the first time I've heard of anything like this."

Well, Basil was glad he wasn't the only one asking himself questions. "System, what does 'Incursion Level Limit' mean?"

Information locked until the next Incursion event.

Of course. Basil had the nagging suspicion it had something to do with the Unity's warning about levels needing to stay down.

"Anyway, Zachariel, Vasi summoned you at my behest," Basil explained after regaining his composure. "We need help to cure people petrified by monsters. Can you help?"

"Of course," the angel replied, much to Basil's relief. "My blessed hands can heal any ailment of the body, petrification included. Where are the victims?"

Okay, maybe this summoning wasn't a bust after all.

Quest: Bernie's Hotline completed! Your party earned 9000 bonus experience (1800 for you). You earned a level!

The day had been profitable level wise. And if Zachariel was correct and could cure the petrified victims of the Unity, then it made retaking the city and scraping the bots possible. All Basil had to do was convince the army to help.

Somehow, he didn't feel good about his odds.

Chapter 22: Man vs Army

The D824 departmental road was silent in the night.

Oak trees bordered it on both sides, three of them having fallen onto the asphalt. Basil waited with his back against his Renault Kangoo, while Buggy, Rosemarine, and Plato surveyed the area for any sign of trouble. Shellgirl had remained at home to protect the house alongside the House Garden party and Basil hoped they wouldn't need her artillery support. Officer Elissalde had informed her comrades through phone calls that the party's monsters were friendly, but he couldn't rule out the possibility that this meeting might degenerate anyway.

How is it that I'm more disturbed by the idea of meeting fellow humans than monsters? Basil glanced at Elissalde. The police officer had put on her riot gear and recovered a handgun which she kept ready to fire at all times. She looked tense as Zachariel gave her a medical checkup, as if expecting the angel to transform into a demon at the first sign of trouble. *Unless I'm the exception that proves the rule?*

"You are in relatively good spiritual health, officer," Zachariel delivered his analysis. "But don't forget to pray three times a day to stay in good shape."

"I'll keep it in mind," Officer Elissalde replied politely. Basil could tell that she accepted the angel's request for a check-up out of curiosity, but didn't put much weight in his judgment. "You... you are unlike how I imagined an angel to be."

"I understand," Zachariel replied. "My division gets that all the time since the boys in marketing messed up the last healthcare campaign. I told them black plague imagery scares patients away, but they cling to the nostalgia market."

Officer Elissalde listened to the angel's words in silence and bit her lower lip. Basil hadn't dared yet to explain that Zachariel came from a world other than Earth. She would break if confronted with too much information at once and hearing the feathered doctor talk was a lot to take in already.

Zachariel was a one-man test of faith.

"Nothing yet, Boss," Buggy said, his antennae against the road. "Are we too early?"

"I don't know." Basil turned to Officer Elissalde. "Are we?"

"My party should arrive soon." She inhaled sharply. "Unless... unless something unforeseen happened."

"Unless the Unity happened," Basil corrected her. He had brought his halberd, Plato his sword, and Rosemarine a handgun for each of her vines, but he hoped they wouldn't have to use them. The road would make a deadly location for an ambush and Zachariel didn't look like much of a fighter.

"It's all right miss, we'll deal with it," Buggy tried to reassure Officer Elissalde. "We've reached level twelve now, one short of the gearsmen! They don't scare us anymore!"

"I..." Officer Elissalde cleared her throat. "That's good."

"Levels don't mean everything, Buggy," Basil warned. They had slain far too many monsters above their weight class to rest on their laurels. "It does feel good to close the gap in power though."

"I'm a few levels away from metamorphosis," Rosemarine whispered. "I can feel it. And when I evolve... when I evolve..."

The plant giggled to herself, which made Officer Elissalde take a step away from her. Basil found it adorable.

Come to think of it, he should assign his newest level so his allies had a better chance of transforming into stronger forms. Basil didn't hesitate about his choice for long. The Technomancer class looked tailor-cut to help fight the Unity and more crafting options would make his team more self-sufficient.

Level 1 Technomancer Stat Gains: +1 VIT, +1 SKI, +1 MAG, +1 INT. You gained 20 HP and 10 SP.

New Perk: 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.

An unused effect spot? Didn't his halberd have one?

You need a rune to refine: [**La Ravageuse, Swiss Halberd**].

So Basil *could* strengthen his weapon once he learned to cast runes. Vasi had given him a spellbook about them, but

he didn't have the time to check it out yet.

The witch had declined to help further. Vasi was fine trading magical tips and items, but waging war on a machine army went beyond the call of good neighborhood relationships.

Basil checked Officer Elissalde one more time. To his surprise, a System screen appeared over her head.

Neria Elissalde

Level 11 [Humanoid] (Guard 10/Gunslinger 1)

Party: Aztain Ahizpa.

Officer Elissalde raised an eyebrow at his insistent stare. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Because now I'm smart enough to," Basil replied with great satisfaction.

"Nerd alert, nerd alert," Plato replied mockingly. Officer Elissalde smiled in embarrassment, probably because she didn't know how to answer.

"Also, Aztain Ahizpa?" Basil asked. "It's Basque, right?"

"It means shepherd sisters," she explained. "I didn't come up with the name. My sister did."

"You formed a party with your family?"

"If you can't rely on your family, then whom can you trust?" Officer Elissalde asked. Basil made a face at her answer, which she immediately noticed. "Did I say something wrong?"

"Yes, a lot of bullshit," Basil replied. Her words had left a bitter taste in his mouth. "Shared blood is just that: blood."

Her lips twisted at his venomous words. "Is this about the Lamont case?"

Partly. Basil's family wasn't a model of dependability either.

"His children didn't see him for ten years. Ten. *Years*. Not a visit, not even a single call." Basil spat on the ground. "They didn't even visit his grave when he died. No, they went straight to the notary and to the judge a fortnight later. They sued me for showing basic human decency."

"I... I see." Officer Elissalde cleared her throat. "There are always rotten apples."

That was one way to put it. René's children had accused Basil of having 'exploited an old man's vulnerability' to steal his house and inheritance. The bitter fight that followed had soured his opinion of the justice system. Although Basil won his case, the monetary inheritance René left him went down the lawyer drain.

"If he had lived to see it, I don't think René would have been disappointed," Basil said. Plato listened to the conversation on the side, utterly silent. "Just sad."

"Is that why you live in the woods so far from the city?" Officer Elissalde sighed. "I've been doing this job for five years, Mr. Bohen. I've seen men beat their wives, someone shooting a neighbor over a hedge's size, and more human stupidity than you can imagine. But I've also met single mothers struggling to send their children to university. I've witnessed people working hard to support their aging parents so they wouldn't die in a heartless retirement home and a woman rescuing a child from drowning at great risk to

herself. Whenever I'm confronted with crime, I try to remember these good men and women."

Basil snorted. "If you're making a point about mankind's inherent goodness—"

"My point is that there are rotten apples and good apples, and that you shouldn't throw out the full fruit basket to get rid of the former." She cleared her throat. "If it makes sense."

She looked about as good at conversation as Basil himself; which was to say, not much.

Thankfully, Buggy spared them from further embarrassment. "Boss, I hear a large object approaching us."

"Me too," Plato said, his sword raised. "A big, heavy car."

Headlights flashed at the end of the road. Basil held his breath as he began to distinguish a large shape through the darkness. Officer Elissalde took a few steps forward and stood in the middle of the road, waving her hand and indicating at the vehicle to park itself next to the Renault Kangoo.

Basil identified the incoming car as a VAB: a wheeled, amphibious troop transporter. The vehicle made surprisingly little noise even though it dwarfed his Renault Kangoo in size. Its thick shielding showed steely scars along its left flank. An armored gunner manned a mounted machine gun on the VAB's top. The front windows were marred with traces of bullet impacts.

Although the vehicle parked itself peacefully, the gunner cautiously pointed his weapon at Buggy. The centipede

raised his head as high as possible in an attempt to look intimidating.

"Basil, I smell a dog and other humans inside the vehicle," Plato whispered. "Two, maybe three."

Basil remained on his guard and ready to strike. The gunner hid his face behind a goggled helmet and a black facemask, his expression unseen.

Major Matteo Lionel Grange

Level 13 [Humanoid] (Soldier 7/Gunslinger 6)

Party: Aztain Ahizpa.

That man didn't look like a sister to Basil, but he was too classy to make a joke about it.

Officer Elissalde saluted the gunner. "Major Grange."

"Officer." The gunner surveyed the party before settling his gaze on Basil himself. "And... Mr. Bohem, is it?"

"Lower your weapon," Basil replied. "Don't get twitchy."

"Step away from the vehicle," the major replied, his voice flat and authoritative. "Now."

Bugsy snapped his mandibles and Rosemarine raised her guns, but Basil stopped them with a glance. The party stepped away from Officer Elissalde and closer to the trees. At no point did the gunner stop pointing his weapon at them.

The tense standoff stretched on for a minute. The Major broke the silence by muttering something to his VAT's driver which Basil couldn't hear. A hatch opened at the back of the

military vehicle, and a teenager no older than sixteen in riot gear stepped out alongside a doberman. An eyepatch covered her left eye. Basil immediately noticed a family resemblance with Officer Elissalde; same nose and hair, similar cheeks. She carried a whip instead of a firearm.

Maya Elissalde

Level 9 [Humanoid] (Houndmaster 9)

Party: Aztain Ahizpa.

Mylène, Doberman

Level 8 [Beast]

Party: Aztain Ahizpa.

The young teen's grim expression disappeared upon seeing Officer Elissalde. "Sis!" She dropped her whip and immediately moved to embrace her sibling. "Thank God, you're okay!"

"I'm here, Maya." Officer Elissalde clearly struggled to hold back tears. "But Thomas and the others... I'm so sorry..."

The female doberman sniffed the air left and right before turning her head in the Major's direction. "I don't smell anyone else, chief."

The gunner seemed to relax a little, although he kept a tight grip on his machine gun. He nodded gratefully at Basil, his deep voice softening. "Thank you for saving my teammate. You've done the army a great favor."

"But you're still going to point your weapon at us," Basil guessed. The vehicle's driver didn't come out either.

"I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt. Don't push your luck." The Major turned his mounted weapon in Rosemarine's direction. "One of these things ate one of our men not two weeks ago."

"Did he taste good?" Rosemarine asked innocently.

The Major's hands nearly pressed his weapon's trigger, but he held back at the last second. "And worst of all..." he glanced at Plato. "You have a trained cat with you."

The grim, almost fearful way he said it surprised Basil; as did the rest of his crew's reactions.

"Cats are dangerous," the hound mistress whispered, her doberman glaring at Plato. "They kill without mercy."

"I was scared a bit at first too when I saw," Officer Elissalde admitted. "But this one is well-trained and obedient."

"Do you have something against cats?" Plato asked in outrage. "That's racism!"

"I don't understand either," Basil said. "What's the problem?"

"You don't know?" Officer Elissalde frowned. "Cats have an inherently advanced proficiency with claws. They inflict a lot of damage at early levels."

"Yes, we're born winners," Plato replied. "What about it?"

"What about it?" the Major nearly choked. "Since the System arrived, fucking stray cats aren't afraid of humans anymore! They fight us for territory, raid our food supplies, and attack those who resist! A group of them wiped out a full squad by slitting their throats in the night!"

"They kill so many birds that they soar in levels quickly," Maya Elissalde added. "I saw one reaching level fifteen. *Fifteen.*"

Basil wanted to say that he was surprised, but after all the dead flyers Plato brought home, he had half-expected that scenario.

Speaking of Plato, his kindred's dark deeds pleased him greatly; almost as much as they scared Buggy.

"Basil, the feline revolution has started," the cat said proudly. "It's not too late to submit. I'll make sure you're well-treated as my slave."

"Don't force me to give you the river puppy treatment," Basil joked with a cruel smile on his face. "With eight lives left, you can drown more than once."

"Oh yes, we live near a river and cats are weak to water!" Buggy realized with relief. "We're safe!"

"Anyway, fair, keep your gun ready," Basil told the Major. "But press the trigger and we'll respond with deadly force."

The Major snorted. "You'll try."

"Sir, I swear these people are on our side," Officer Elissalde said upon gently pushing her sister away. "I owe them my life. One of them can cure petrification."

"That remains to be seen," the Major replied with skepticism. "We have a petrified teammate in the back. If they cure her, then we'll talk."

"We also have a server in ours." Basil pointed at his Kangoo with his halberd. "You can take it... if you answer some

questions."

"About the Dismaker Labs shitshow?" The Major snorted.
"Fat chance with that."

"Because you won't tell us?" Plato asked.

"Because we don't understand much ourselves. Whole world turned into some freaky video game. How can you explain that? It makes no fucking sense!"

"Major." Officer Elissalde straightened up. "I request permission to share information with Mr. Bohem. I promised him as much."

Her superior shrugged. "For all it's worth..."

"Does the name Anton Maxwell mean something to you?" Officer Elissalde asked Basil.

"Vaguely," he replied. He remembered seeing the name floating among his news feed before the System arrived.

"He was the CEO of Dismaker Labs before the System came along. Some half-Indian tech entrepreneur with a big bank account and an even bigger ego, a pioneer in cryptocurrency, the Metaverse, etc..."

"So, a hype man," Basil said. His words made the Major chuckle a little, although the Elissalde sisters remained stone-faced. "Is he behind the dungeons?"

"We think so," Officer Elissalde confirmed. "Dismaker Labs is a multinational corporation specialized in hardware and software, especially microprocessors and next-gen chips. According to our investigation, they started cooperating with UNESCO on a cultural project two years ago."

"The Trimurti Initiative," Maya Elissalde whispered. "That's the name."

Basil clenched his teeth. "Continue."

"Dismaker Labs partnered with UNESCO to create a, I quote, 'cultural metaverse.'" The very name made Officer Elissalde shiver. Basil guessed he wasn't the only one skeptical about the technology in question. "They would set up new-generation devices in all current and candidate world heritage sites, historical landmarks, and nature reserves."

"Nature reserves?" Basil immediately caught on. "Like the Barthes?"

"Yes, like the Barthes," Officer Elissalde confirmed. "When you told me where you found the server, I immediately made the connection."

"We've heard reports of similar devices to your server in Bordeaux, Biarritz, and other towns," said Major Grange. "All of them were found in dungeons that spontaneously formed over a historical monument or museum."

"According to our investigation into Dismaker Labs, the devices would digitally reconstruct landmarks at the apex of their glory," Officer Elissalde explained. "Put on a VR headset at home, and you could bet on gladiator fights in a reconstructed Roman Colosseum, visit the Taj Mahal, or hunt digital mammoths in Siberia. At least, that's how Dismaker Labs presented their project."

"Well, I can't fault them for false advertising," Basil replied with a deadpan look. "If anything, they overachieved."

"That's one way to put it." Officer Elissalde smiled bitterly. "But it doesn't look like the company's employees knew

what would happen. Those who we managed to interrogate were as lost as we were. They didn't even understand how the servers work."

"We smelled no lies from them," the female doberman rasped.

"What happened to Anton Maxwell?" Basil asked. "Where is he?"

"Do you think we would be here if we knew?" Major Grange asked. "Man turned into a ghost. He's probably hiding in a hole on the other side of the world."

"The French army and police are actively searching for information on Anton Maxwell's whereabouts," Officer Elissalde said. "Studying your server could help us with a lead."

Basil doubted it would yield much information. The sheer degree of secrecy around Dismaker Labs' leader and operations implied that the System's arrival had been long-premeditated. It must have taken years to spread the servers across the globe and to earn the trust of an institution like UNESCO.

No world-ending mastermind worth their salt would leave a lead for investigators to find. And although the company's lower employees were probably innocent, Basil suspected that the higher-ups had been on the plan. A single man couldn't hide a secret so large from everyone else. He must have had accomplices.

What bothered Basil wasn't how Dismaker Labs pulled off the apocalypse, but why. What did they hope to gain from destroying the world? Unless the apocalypse was a mere stepping stone to reach a greater prize.

"The jackass wants to become the Overgod," Basil guessed.
"It's all clear to me."

"That's our running theory for now," Officer Elissalde replied. "But we can't confirm it yet."

"It's big work and we're small people dealing with shit on the ground," Major Grange said. "Killing all the monsters we find."

"You aren't even good at it," Buggy muttered under his breath. "We scrapped the gearsman ourselves."

If the Major heard the remark, he didn't show it. "Neria, Maya, bring the other dog out of the hold. We'll put their cure to the test."

The Elissalde sisters moved to the back of the military vehicle. When they returned, they carefully carried a petrified Basque Shepherd dog and set it on the road. Plato looked back and forth between the stone animal and its handlers.

"Seriously?" he asked. "This is your teammate?"

Maya Elissalde grit her teeth. "Stupid cat."

"Let's be honest here." Plato stared at the doberman with a smug face. "Do you have an advanced proficiency with claws?"

The dog's ears lowered in shame. "Medium with bites."

"And that's why cat lovers will inherit the earth." Plato put his paws behind his head. "Dog thralls denied our inherent superiority. They gave canines the lion's share of love

instead of gaining our favor with treats and hugs. Now you will pay the price for your arrogance."

"But we buff masters with our barks!" the doberman defended her species. "We help each other!"

"That is so cute!"

"Plato, stop demeaning dogs," Basil chided his pet.

"I'm not demeaning anyone, I'm stating facts," Plato declared with pride. "All I'm saying, Basil, is that once we felines have cleansed the Earth of birds and taken back our rightful place as masters of the universe... you'll be on the winning side."

Basil couldn't argue with that. "Zachariel?"

"I'm not sure how to tell him the truth, sir," the angel whispered back while staring at Major Grange. "It's terminal."

That wasn't the answer Basil wished to hear. "You can't cure petrification?"

"No, I cannot cure coronatheism. He caught a militant variant." Zachariel let out a sigh of despair. "At this stage, I fear the disease is incurable."

Basil rolled his eyes. "Yes, Zachariel, France is one of the countries with the most atheists in it. Big deal. You can coexist with coronatheism."

The angel looked at him as if he had grown a second head. "You can?"

"Yes, I can," Basil replied with a shrug. "If they respect my faith, I respect their complete absence of it. I'm free to live my life as I see fit and so are they."

"I see..." Zachariel scratched his mask with his hand. "You are aiming to develop herd immunity among the population by exposing them to the virus. The losses will be terrible, but it could work."

"Sure, let's go with that," Basil lied through his teeth. "Would you follow them to Bordeaux if your magic works?"

"Of course, if it can help cure the sick. I have a large quota to fulf—" Zachariel coughed. "I mean, it is my holy duty as an angel."

Basil was seriously starting to wonder what kind of heaven this weirdo came from. He had the feeling the truth would induce a tremendous crisis of faith.

The angel proved as good as his word though. Zachariel touched the petrified Basque Shepherd's head, his fingers glowing with green light. His magic turned stone to flesh and fur in an instant.

"—stress, get down!" The Basque Shepherd leaped in alarm, starting Zachariel. "Huh?"

"Diane!" Maya Elissalde hugged the confused dog. "You're back."

"Mistress? Where are the robots?" The Basque Shepherd looked around and immediately barked at Bugsy upon noticing him. "Danger! Danger!"

"H-hey, calm down!" The centimagma snapped his mandibles at her. "Don't bark at me!"

Officer Elissalde observed Zachariel with a pleased smile. "Major, it worked."

"It doesn't change anything," her superior replied gruffly. "Even if we succeeded in destroying the machines and freeing the civilians from stone, what then? The countryside is overrun by monsters, food is scarce, and the whole region is in shambles. We would have to evacuate Dax's panicked population to Bordeaux, which will stretch our resources thin."

"We can't leave the population at the machines' mercy either," Officer Elissalde argued. "Not when we have a cure."

"I don't like it either, but the orders from the top were clear. We are to abandon the region and retreat to Bordeaux." The Major remained uncompromising. "This is bigger than either of us, officer."

Basil sneered in contempt. Of course, he wouldn't get a return on investment with his taxes. Why should he have expected anything else?

"I should have known the French army was better at retreating than fighting back," he muttered.

A tense silence set on the road, until Major Grange slowly turned his machine gun in Basil's direction. "Dare to repeat that out loud, smartass?"

"Where is your resistance spirit? Where's Joan of Arc?" Basil admonished him, refusing to cower. "The gearsmen aren't even German!"

"France won more battles and wars than any other country except the British!" Major Grange raised his head to better look down on Basil. "Aren't you a Bulgarian citizen? Your

fucking country only exists because the Russians took pity on you!"

"What?" Basil saw red. His jaw clenched so hard he thought his teeth might shatter. "What did you say?"

"Please, please, everyone calm down," Officer Elissalde tried to defuse the situation. "Don't—"

"Russian military help was a small detail of Bulgarian independence!" Basil snarled. "We could have kicked the Ottomans out of our homeland alone!"

"By burying them under your dead and incompetence?" The Major replied with a mocking tone. "You haven't won a war since the Byzantine!"

"At least we didn't need a Corsican immigrant to win ours!"

"How dare—" Basil's response left the Major burning with rage. "We're throwing a pointless battle to win the war! That's the very essence of strategy!"

"That's the very essence of surrender, yes!" Basil taunted him.

"Don't force me to come down and kick your ass!"

"Come if you dare! I'm the one paying your minimum wage!" Basil tossed his halberd aside and pulled up his sleeves. "You're not shitting on me, you're shitting on Bulgaria!"

"Fine!" the Major rose from the VAB's top, leaving his machine gun aside. "I'll colonize your face... with my fist!"

"Yes!" Rosemarine chirped. "Blood!"

"Kick his ass, Boss!" Bugsy encouraged Basil. "I believe in you!"

"Do your best!" Zachariel gave them thumbs up. "I can cure anything short of death and dismemberment!"

Plato looked up at Officer Elissalde, his face one of utter indifference. "So, is yours always like this?"

The policewoman let out a long, deep sigh as Basil prepared to defend his country's honor.

Chapter 23: Man vs Countdown

The fight ended in a tie.

"Was this spat really necessary?" Officer Elissalde asked Basil and the Major with a frown of disapproval. "That was stupid and barbaric."

"Backing down would have shamed my ancestors," Basil replied with patriotic pride. He walked away from the fistfight with sore pains in his chest, a broken rib, and a black eye. Nothing Rosemarine's pollen couldn't heal. "My honor required it."

"Your honor, or your idiocy?" Officer Elissalde took out a pack of cigarettes and lit one. "Madness. It was madness."

"It's okay Boss, you won the battle!" Buggy reassured Basil, having encouraged him with Rosemarine all the way; Plato had spent the fight licking his own ass instead. "He's twice your age and you still beat him into the ground!"

Rosemarine nodded in approval. "You will eat him next time, Mister."

"He won't," Maya Elissalde replied. The houndmaster and her dogs had acted as the Major's cheerleading squad during the duel. "The chief went easy on him."

"So did the Boss!" Buggy defended Basil's honor. "He didn't even use the Carmehameha secret technique!"

Officer Elissalde raised an eyebrow at the centimagma's boast, but didn't comment.

"What are you eastern Europeans made of, stone?" the Major asked as Zachariel healed his broken nose with a mere touch of his finger. The French soldier looked vaguely Iberian without his helmet. Basil pegged him as thirty-five years old or so, with short black hair and dark eyes. "You hit hard for an immigrant."

"You didn't do too bad either, for a frog-eater," Basil replied. The Major was better in hand-to-hand combat techniques due to his training, but Basil surpassed him in speed and strength. Both accepted the tie with gracefulness.

Nothing better to build mutual respect than a nighttime brawl.

The Major let out a long, heavy sigh. "It's the Yankees' fault, you know?"

"What?" Basil asked.

"The meme! The cheese-eating surrender monkeys meme! The Yankees used it because we wouldn't follow them in Iraq, and that shit took root! Centuries of victories and sacrifices forgotten with one half-assed propaganda campaign!" The Major grunted. "I know the second world war wasn't our finest hour, but we won the first, damn it! I'm sure we'll win the tiebreaker!"

"I would prefer that we win this war first," Basil replied.

"Me too." Maya Elissalde petted her two dogs behind the ears. "We're leaving people behind."

Basil glanced at her eyepatch. It didn't take a genius to guess what happened. "Did a watchman..."

"Shrapnel," she replied with a wince. The event still seemed fresh in her mind. "From a gearsman."

Officer Elissalde gave her sister a crestfallen look, and Basil turned to Zachariel. "Can you heal her eye?" he asked the angel.

"I can cure blindness of an eye, but not regenerate one," Zachariel replied with a saddened voice. "I can file a demand to the miracle department, but I must warn you that they barely approve three or so per century."

"I see," Maya Elissalde replied. She didn't look surprised, only disappointed. Her doberman and Basque Shepherd licked her hands in an attempt to cheer her up.

"Let me try!" Rosemarine showered Maya Elissalde with pollen. It only made her sneeze. "One day, I will grow a flower in your eye!"

"Keep faith," Zachariel told Maya with optimism. "More healing options will come up as I regain my lost levels and earn new ones. A fellow human with the correct class might also help you regenerate your eye."

Officer Elissalde raised an eyebrow. "Classes can do that?"

"Of course. The most powerful Prayer spells can split the sea in two, regrow arms, and even bring back the deceased." Basil's head perked up in interest as the angel continued his explanation. "If this world's System is similar to mine, then it can do almost anything under the right circumstances."

Zachariel's last comments earned him confused glances, Basil's included. Raise the dead? He had seen the System's magic create a dungeon out of nowhere and raise corpses as monsters, but to raise the dead resurrection-style... could a powerful Priest say the right prayer at René tombstone and return him to life? Their prayers had become spells after all...

Stop dreaming, Basil scolded himself. You would have to be very high-level to achieve a miracle of that magnitude, or fulfill some godly quest.

Still, if the System could indeed raise the dead, what other wonders and terrors could it unleash on Earth?

"Maybe we'll find a healer in Bordeaux, young mistress," said the doberman. "Yes, someone who can make you a new eye!"

"I don't want to retreat from this place." The Major sounded so frustrated that Basil took him at his word. "Not before the job's done. But the general won't take no for an answer. I already had to beg to organize Neria's pickup. A VAB can hold up to ten soldiers, yet we came with half as many, dogs included. That's not the troops you send on key missions."

"The higher-ups didn't believe in a cure for the watchers' stone curse," Maya Elissalde said. "Everyone else left."

"Everyone left?" Basil put the two and two together. "The rest of the army evacuated to Bordeaux already?"

"Yes," the Major confirmed. "We're the last troops in Dax."

Basil clenched his fists. There went his hopes of convincing the army to clear the region for his peace of mind. "What about the petrified citizens?"

"We put the statues we could carry in trucks and brought them with us to Bordeaux," the Major replied with a heavy heart. "The rest, we left behind."

"Do your superiors know the robots are building a dungeon?" Basil asked. "If you don't take them out now, they'll fortify the city and you'll never take it back."

"Our parting shot delayed the server's construction, but won't stop it," Officer Elissalde added. "We're leaving thousands behind at the machines' mercy."

"I know, Officer," the Major replied sadly. "But what can we do? Desert the army to stand our ground? If we unpetrify civilians, it will make evacuation difficult and our supply situation even worse."

"We don't have to unpetrify them," Officer Elissalde argued. "Not immediately at least. We can continue transporting petrified victims to Bordeaux and heal them there."

"And who will keep the machines busy while we organize these convoys, Officer? You heard General Leblanc: everyone must regroup in Bordeaux."

"I'll fight," Basil said, catching everyone's attention. He would rather have stayed under the radar, but with the Unity building a dungeon on his doorstep that was no longer an option. He would never have peace so long as the robots remained active in his backyard. "I was already considering guerrilla actions against them. Hit and run."

"Partisan warfare?" The Major chuckled. "You would fight for France?"

Basil glanced at his monsters. "I'll fight to protect my home and friends. No more."

"I'm with you, Boss," Bugsy said. "We beat a gearsman, we can do it again."

"I told you, Basil." Plato shrugged. "This is our territory. The gizmos will get the memo one death at a time."

The Major listened in silence, before asking Officer Elissalde for a cigarette. "You know the army ordered a general mobilization?" he asked. "Every able-bodied French citizen can get drafted into the army."

"I'm not French," Basil replied gruffly, "and I'm not leaving my house."

"I've got a better proposal in mind." The Major lit his cigarette. "You are now an official auxiliary of the French armed forces, Mr. Bohem. Your mission, if you accept it, will be to protect your home, disrupt enemy actions behind the front lines, and bleed the machines for every inch of ground."

Basil snorted. "So keep doing what I've been doing?"

"Yes, but with the army's blessing." The Major glanced at Maya Elissalde. "Give him a radio."

"You're sure, chief?" the houndmaster asked with a frown of skepticism. "We don't have many of them."

"If this Bulgarian immigrant wants to prove his manhood, then we'll let him."

A few minutes later, Basil became the proud owner of a military radio. The device resembled a cube of steel with a keypad, a wired phone, and a small screen. A little French flag was painted on the side.

"That way you'll receive intel from us, maybe even weapon shipment drops if we can arrange it," the Major explained. "Don't lose it. That piece of tech costs more than you earn in a year."

"Welcome to the maquis, Basil," Officer Elissalde said with a small smile.

"Don't expect me to leave the countryside for Bordeaux," Basil replied with a smirk of his own. "But thank you for your trust."

"You better earn it," the Major replied before shrugging his shoulders. "We'll leave after I finish my cigarette and see if we can arrange statue pick-ups later. Your angel is coming with us."

"If Zach wants to."

The angel raised a thumbs up. "I am always up for missionary work, Sir."

Although the meeting didn't go as well as Basil wanted, he felt a little bit of satisfaction at having made a difference. Zachariel would heal people who needed it.

Basil prepared to say goodbye to the Major's unit and drive his pets home, when Plato leaped to his feet without warning. The cat looked up at the skies, his tail tense as a bowstring.

"What?" his owner asked.

"Do you feel that?" Plato's whiskers wavered. "In the air?"

"We do," the dogs present replied, their ears raised. "Everywhere."

Bugsy raised his antennae. "Boss, I sense vibrations."

"I sense them too, Mister," Rosemarine said, her roots digging into the soil. "Everywhere."

By the time Basil grabbed his halberd in alarm, Officer Elissalde and her teammates had brought out handguns. But no gearsman came crawling out of the woodworks to attack them.

Instead, Basil picked up the tension in the air; a vague feeling of a faint electrical current coursing over his skin. An invisible force blew over his face like a soft, feeble wind before continuing its course across the forest. Birds, bats, and bugs flew out of the trees' branches by the road to flee; never a good sign.

And then the night sky caught fire.

The stars appeared to go supernova all at once. They flared with a bright red glow, tainting the heavens with a bloody, crimson hue. Golden lines spread to connect them like a great spider's web or a computer's circuitry. The first nodes spread from Dax in all directions, bringing the entire night sky into the network.

Plato's eyes widened in alarm. "It's coming from the city!"

"Elissalde!" The Major snarled, the dogs echoing his anger with panicked howls and barks. "Didn't you destroy the server?"

"We did!" Officer Elissalde insisted. "We bombarded the arena! They shouldn't have been able to complete it so quickly!"

"It's not the server," Basil replied grimly. The Barthes' dungeon produced green auroras, not a circuit between the stars.

An ominous screen message appeared before his eyes and confirmed his worst fears.

Congratulations, Players of Earth! Thanks to your hard work, you have unlocked an [**Incursion**] event!

[**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; you can check the closest location with your [**Logs**] option. Additionally, experience gains will be boosted within the rift's vicinity.

To foster healthy competition, a barrier will prevent Players and monsters too powerful for locals to defeat from crossing over. The greater the average level of Earth's population grows, the weaker the barrier will become and [**Incursions**] will become more challenging.

Thanks to your hard work, the [**Level Barrier**] has now been raised to 25! Players, monsters, and dungeons up to level 25 will be able to cross over! Some existing dungeons will also increase in difficulty!

The [**Incursion**] will begin in 60 minutes and last for 5 hours. Don't miss it! Only one of you can become the new [**Overgod**]!

Basil said the only thing appropriate in these circumstances.

"Aww shit!"

Dismaker Labs wishes you a happy apocalypse!

"The hell?" The Major dropped his cigarette, his fingers trembling. "Level 25?"

One of the VAB's front doors opened. The driver, a mousy woman with short black hair and glasses, stepped out of the vehicle. "Major, I received an urgent communication from HQ! It's happening in Bordeaux too!"

Basil hastily opened his Logs option. It showed a map of the region, Dax included. A black, swirling whirlpool symbol covered the city's arena.

Rift Destination: Electon Cluster.

Ruling Faction: Unity.

Max Spawn Level: 20.

Bonus: Experience gains are increased by 50% within one kilometer of the rift.

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.

"Level 20." It was even worse than Basil expected. "That's too much!"

The behavior of the Apocalypse Force and Unity made sense now. The former purged the low-leveled ones to raise the worldwide average level as fast as possible to trigger Incursions, and the latter petrified everyone its watchers could find to artificially keep the number down.

"Shit, shit, shit..." The Major clenched his fists. "Shit!"

"The rift is located in Dax's arena," Officer Elissalde said with a heavy face. "Did they know it would appear there?"

"Probably," Basil replied. "It can't be a coincidence that they tried to build a dungeon in the same location."

"Boss, uh..." Buggy cleared his throat. "Didn't the server in the station say that you would have to stay inside to defend it?"

"Yes, you need a Boss to protect a dungeon." Basil frowned at the centimagma. "What are you getting at?"

"Well, uh... maybe I'm wrong, but the robots built a dungeon without any strong creature to defend it. I mean, gearsmen are tough but we managed to defeat one anyway."

Officer Elissalde caught on first. "You think a Boss is going to cross the rift."

It made a worrying amount of sense to Basil. He had suspected the gearsman were awaiting reinforcements before kicking the army out of the city. These additional forces would arrive tonight, albeit without a dungeon homebase.

But what could Basil do? His party had punched above its weightclass before, but interfering with the rift would mean

fighting high-level creatures in hostile territory. It would be a suicide mission with nothing to gain.

"Everyone, we're returning home," Basil told his teammates. "We'll weather the storm and wait for it to calm down."

"You can't." Maya Elissalde bit her lower lip. "You can't."

"And why not?"

"The statues."

Officer Elissalde's face lost all colors. "You gain extra experience within the rift's perimeter," she whispered. "The robots will have free target practice."

A shiver traveled down Basil's spine. The Unity petrified low-level humans to keep the barrier strong enough to prevent Incursions. Now that they had failed, their petrified victims were of little use.

"We can't be sure," Basil said. "The Unity could keep its victims in storage to prevent the Level Limit from rising even further."

"Can you guarantee it?" Officer Elissalde asked.

Basil's jaw clenched. No, he couldn't guarantee it. Not unless he moved to Dax to personally make sure that the Unity wouldn't open fire on its prisoners.

"From what I read, the Incursion connects to a cluster," Officer Elissalde added. "If by that the System means a star cluster, then more than Unity machines might cross over. We don't know what kind of creatures will come through the rift and how violent they might be."

Her sister nodded grimly and glanced at her superior.
"Chief? What do we do?"

"Fuck me," the older soldier replied as he climbed up on the VAB and moved behind his machine gun. "Can't just stand by. Everyone buckle up, we're checking for ourselves."

"Are we going too, Mister?" Rosemarine asked Basil. Plato, Buggy, and Zachariel looked at him expectedly. None of them showed much enthusiasm, but Basil could tell that they would follow him into the city if he asked.

He felt no emotional attachment to the people of Dax. His closest interaction with one had been bringing Plato to the veterinarian. He owed the locals nothing.

But Basil couldn't close his eyes and hide as alien monsters threatened to slaughter them. Not when he could make a difference. It would be an act of untold cowardice.

"Yes." Although it killed Basil a little to say so. "We'll pick up Shellgirl and join in."

"Thank you," Officer Elissalde bowed slightly. "Your help will be precious."

"Let's hope you can hit the bastards as hard as my pretty face," the Major declared before putting his helmet on.
"We'll strike from two fronts to try to save as many civilians as we can and coordinate through the radio."

Officer Elissalde, her sister, and the hounds climbed into the VAB's hold. A minute later, they were driving away towards the city.

"Are you certain, Basil?" Plato asked his owner. "Nobody will know. Nobody will care."

"I will," Basil replied with a sigh. And even if they ran, the robots would come for them eventually all the same. "Let's go."

They would either kick the Unity out of the region for good or die trying.

Chapter 24: Man vs Raid

The countdown to destruction had fallen under fifteen minutes, but the party came prepared.

Basil drove his Renault Kangoo across Dax's streets. A trailer carried Buggy at the back, alongside enough weapons to blow up a city block.

The number of chemical weapons Basil could make from household products with the System's help frightened him. He managed to craft thermite with rust, aluminum, and leftover magnesium; napalm bombs from refined gasoline and polystyrene; white phosphorus from his rabbits and chickens' manure; and even a chlorine bomb from bleach.

Basil had stockpiled these devices since the gearsman's attack to defend his home, but he would rather avoid using them at all. His lack of training in explosives made using them a dangerous proposition.

"Why did we bring the fertilizer too?" Plato asked, sitting in the passenger seat right next to him. Shellgirl, Rosemarine, and Zachariel squeezed in the back of the car. "You want to fight tanks with plants?"

"In 2020, two massive explosions shook Beirut in Lebanon," Basil explained. "Both were caused by fertilizer. Nearly three thousand tons of the stuff caused damage akin to an earthquake. I'm hoping my product's quality will make up for the lack of quantity."

Zachariel crossed his arms in disapproval. "Sir, I am all for smiting infidels, but you cannot enter Heaven by blowing

yourself up."

"I should have known we were closet terrorists." Plato glanced at Rosemarine, who candidly waved a vine back at him. "The suicide clones were a dead giveaway."

"It's only terrorism if we don't have the governments' backing, Plato," Basil replied with a smile. "Otherwise, it's property damage."

The System showed him a screen of support.

New Quest: Goodbye, Geneva!

Recommended Level: 20.

Objective: Build a weapon of mass destruction... and use it.

Reward: 30,000 Bonus EXP + Alchemy Recipe.

An adventurer's best friends were the bombs he built along the way.

According to the System, thermite bypasses Fire Resistance and inflicts supereffective damage against Artificial creatures, Basil thought. The military radio awaited on his dashboard, silent, unmoving. It should prove useful against the gearsmen. As for the portal, maybe we can blow it up with luck.

Basil had yet to find a problem he couldn't solve with the right application of force. He glanced through his windshield at the reddened night sky. The moon had vanished from sight. The golden circuit binding the stars together had taken complex shapes that reminded Basil of a glyph.

A bright spiral of cosmic light occupied the center of the celestial phenomenon high above Dax's arena. Its shape was that of a vibrant galaxy of many glowing colors; the same Basil witnessed in the Ogre Den.

"Beautiful," Rosemarine whispered.

I take back what I said, Basil thought grimly. The rift—he assumed that the spiral was the portal—floated far above the clouds. *You would need an astronaut to fly that high.*

No watcher stopped the Renault Kangoo's progress. Instead the Unity drones gathered around the arena in a swarm of steel. Their numbers had decreased since Basil's last visit in the city, but they still numbered in the hundreds.

"Basil?" Officer Elissalde called through the radio. "Basil, do you hear me?"

"Roger that, Officer," Basil replied. It amused him a little to use military jargon for once. "We're approaching the stadium. We have the rift in sight."

"Do not engage. I repeat, do not engage until we say so. Stay at a safe distance and watch until we can ascertain the situation. We're crossing the northern bridge soon."

"Alright, we'll wait for your signal." Basil parked his car next to Dax's stadium. Built to cater to all sports, the complex covered seven hectares and included a swimming pool, a soccer stadium, archery stands, rooms for martial arts and fencing, and so many other accommodations. Unattended vegetal growth had started to break through the pavement and the buildings' foundations. In time, moss and weeds would cover everything.

The parking lot was empty for the most part, although the statues of petrified citizens remained frozen in time along the road. The sight reassured Basil a little. He had half-expected the watchers to gather prisoners in the arena for a mass exp farming. So far so good.

"No gearsman nearby, Partner," Shellgirl said as she hopped out of the car, quickly followed by the rest of the party. Buggy clawed out of the trailer and stretched his back. "This place is safe and sound."

"It's the calm before the storm," Basil replied. The spiral sent crimson lightning coursing through the skies. Although dawn wouldn't rise before many hours, the group could see as well as in sunlight. "We'll equip accordingly. Buggy!"

"Boss!" The centimagma searched through the trailer's piles of explosives. "What do you need? Chlorine bombs? Firebombs?"

Basil reviewed his stocks. His white phosphorus was kept in a hermetical sphere of glass and the chlorine in an iron shell. His napalm bombs had taken a shape similar to grenades, and the thermite was stored in a metal container with a fuse to ignite it.

"Rosemarine, we'll strap the white phosphorus to you so you can duplicate it," Basil decided, quickly assigning the weapons to everyone. "Shellgirl, load your cannons with the napalm bombs. Zachariel—"

"Sir, I am not a sword of heaven!" Zachariel protested. "I skipped the witch-burning training!"

"Then you'll take the chlorine bomb and drop it from above." Basil doubted it would help against unbreathing gearsmen and watchers, but as Officer Elissalde pointed out, creatures

more dangerous than robots could cross the rift once it opened. "Bugsy, since you're immune to fire, you'll take the thermite."

"You got it, Boss!"

"What about the fertilizer?" Plato asked. "You'll carry it on your back?"

Basil surveyed the parking lot, his eyes set on a Mercedes Benz in a corner. A second later, he shattered the window with a fist, ignored the alarm as he opened the door, and grabbed the cables under the driving wheel.

"We'll stuff the trunk and backseat with the fertilizer and leftover explosives," Basil decided. He hotwired the car and switched off the alarm with disappointing ease. So much for German products. "If push comes to shove, we'll ram the car against a gearsman."

Basil swore to raid the closest supermarket if he survived the Incursion. He wondered if he could craft a nuke from household products.

"Where did you learn to hotwire a car?" Plato asked with a suspicious frown.

"I'm Bulgarian," Basil replied evasively. "I know these things."

"Of course, of course." The cat's deadpan delivery put British comedians to shame. "Shouldn't we stuff the Renault Kangoo and keep the Mercedes? It looks more luxurious."

"Never." The thought hadn't even occurred to Basil. "It's more than a Renault Kangoo. It's my car. Mine."

It took a few minutes to equip everyone and prepare the Mercedes, at which point the countdown fell under ten. With very little time left to kill and no orders to advance, Basil decided to get a crash course on magic. He took the spellbook Vasi lent him out of his Inventory, a heavy grimoire as dense as a church manuscript.

I would rather have studied magic calmly at home, but better now than never, Basil thought as he skipped through the pages. You're never too prepared for a raid.

The grimoire included many spells, most of them too high-level for him to cast. He stopped at the description of a flame-like symbol in the beginner's chapter.

Spell: Fire Rune.

School: Runic.

Affinity: Fire.

Tier: I.

Cost: 10 SP.

Empowers one of your weapons with the power of flames, inflicting an additional 20% [Fire] damage for 5 minutes. Perfect for barbecues. Multiple applications of [Fire Rune] do not stack and the weapon loses its properties if you no longer wield it.

Chance of learning this spell: 86%.

Learn spell?

The spell had two more variants: Ice Rune, which inflicted Frost damage; and Lightning Rune, to shock troublemakers.

Basil immediately noticed a pretty big gap between the three runes available. His odds of learning the Ice variant were forty-three percent. As for the Lightning Rune, the number was a flat *zero*.

Vasi warned him of how much affinities influenced his options and Basil took these percentage gaps as confirmation of her words. His weak affinity in the Lightning element made it impossible for him to learn electricity-themed spells; a strong affinity in Fire compared to his neutral one with Frost doubled his odds of learning a spell.

Basil tried his luck and was rewarded with instant success.

You learned the [**Fire Rune**] spell!

Warning, your Spellbook can only hold one spell per 5 points in [**Magic**] that you possess (current spell spots available: 3). If you exceed that amount, you will have to forget an old spell and replace it with the new one. You can only exceed that limit with the right Classes and Perks.

Of course the designers would lock the best abilities behind spellcasting classes. As if RPG games didn't show enough favoritism for wizards already!

Holding the spellbook in one hand and summoning his halberd in the other, Basil immediately tested his Technomancer refinement option. A flame symbol appeared on his blade and its edge steamed with a searing hot white glow. The shaft felt warm to the touch.

"Oh look, a fire stick!" Plato mocked his owner. "You're a few centuries late for the stone age, Basil."

"It's never too late for arson," Basil replied as he checked his weapon's stats.

La Ravageuse, Swiss Halberd

Family: Weapon (Axe/Spear).

Quality: C.

Power: +13 STR.

Crit: +5%

Accuracy: 70%

Effect 1: Ignores half of a target's defensive stats during damage calculation.

Effect 2: Fire Rune: inflicts an additional 20% [Fire] damage.

The crispy version of Switzerland's third most popular invention can cut down enemies and burn enemies of the Pope at the stake.

So Technomancer's refining option didn't improve quality or base stats, but it could add more effects to a weapon. Good, good. Basil tried to register a second spell and succeeded in spite of the taller odds.

You learned the **[Ice Rune]** Spell!

Basil cast it on his halberd, but snowflakes fizzled out at the end of his halberd's blade and vanished just as quickly.

Multiple rune effects cannot stack without the necessary Perks.

"What a tease." Basil glanced at Plato's fencing sword.
"What would you prefer? Fire or ice?"

"Since we're surrounded with dangerous explosives, I'll go with ice."

In response, Basil touched the tip of Plato's blade with a finger. He immediately noticed his chances of refining the sword with the Ice Rune were inferior to those of empowering his halberd with the fire variant. He took the bet and ice burst on the fencing sword's tip in response.

"Neat," Plato said. Snowflakes trailed after his blade when he swung it.

"Just to be clear, Partner, we won't have to get any closer right?" Shellgirl asked with an uneasy face. The rift pulsed with brighter bursts of light. "I would love a city all for ourselves, but I've got a bad feeling about this light..."

"I've never seen anything like this," Zachariel added. "So much magic pours through the skies... it must be a true god's work."

"A god?" Basil frowned. "So there's more than one out there?"

The angel nodded. "In my home, we count fourteen of them. But this miracle doesn't look like their handiwork. It's too... orderly."

Basil checked his countdown and witnessed it fall below five. The very air seemed to become tainted with a shade of red.

"Officer Elissalde?" Basil stored his spellbook in his Inventory and called his allies through his Kangoo's radio.

"Officer?"

"We passed the bridge and took cover," the policewoman replied. "No gearsman in sight. Seems like they retreated to the arena."

"What about the petrified civilians?"

"They weren't moved. Try to put away... all you can..." Interferences transformed the officer's words into a gargle. "Safety... now..."

"Officer?" Basil tried to adjust the frequency, but it didn't improve the sound quality. "Officer? Officer?"

"Little manling..."

The voice that came out of the radio was clear, deep, and utterly inhuman. It was the bellowing gargle of an alligator trying to mimic human speech, the threat of a muffled chainsaw revving. Basil's allies gathered around the car in alarm, startled by the noise.

"Who are you?" Basil answered carefully, eyes turned to the distant rift. The creature hijacking the airwaves probably called him from the other side.

"I recognize your voice. Yes, yes, you are the one who destroyed one of my gearsman." Apparently, the Unity's machines came equipped with recording devices. "What's your name, manling?"

"Basil Bohem," Basil replied without fear. He wouldn't cower before an anonymous voice.

"Yes, yes, your name matches the records in the Logs. You're the one who destroyed the Ogre Den dungeon. You

and your minions."

"Minions?" Zachariel asked. He seemed to find the word alarming for some reason.

"H-How do you know that?" Buggy asked, trying and failing to hide the fearfulness in his voice.

"The world's Logs." The voice on the other side let out a hiss. "The dungeon was ours, manling. I was meant to claim it after securing this city. Not only did you dash my hopes once, but you then helped other apes destroy its replacement. When I grace this world with my presence, I shall find no seat worthy of my rank. This crime against me shall not go unpunished."

"So sorry," Basil replied with heavy sarcasm. "And who are you, oh overmighty radio show host?"

"Steamslime, Rook-ranked commander of the Unity." The voice brimmed with pride and arrogance. "You should run while you still can, ape. I am coming down, yes. I'm coming down from the stars to teach you your place."

"As far as threats go, I've heard better," Plato commented.

"Bring it," Basil replied with a snort. "You'll leave this world the same way your gearsmen did: scrapped."

"We'll eat you!" Rosemarine promised, proudly carrying an explosive belt strapped with white phosphorus.

"Your death is on your head," the voice replied angrily. "If you had submitted to us and let us stabilize the barrier, the transition would have been painless. We would have honored your species with our guidance, our wisdom, and protection. In return, you would have paid your tribute in

wealth and minions in quiet gratitude. Now we shall take our due by force, and we will teach you obedience with fire and fury."

As Basil suspected, the Unity petrified people for its own purposes. He had considered the vague possibility that its leaders sought to protect people through extreme methods, but they were no defenders of mankind. They were conquerors trying to oust the competition.

"Why?" Basil asked as the countdown went down to three. That was the question that bothered him for so long. "Why? What's the point of all of this?"

"Why? You dare ask why, foolish ape?" The voice chuckled. "Because we are scaled perfection. We do not die, we rule. We are born as the apex of creation. It is our destiny to unite the stars. This world will join Grandmaster Wyrde's hoard of planets, like so many others before it. We will not allow you or the Maleking to become an Overgod. This divine right belongs to our glorious race alone."

Oh good grief, this whole speech reeked of old-fashioned colonialism and casual racism. As if there wasn't enough of it on Earth.

"Scaled perfection? Hoard of planets?" Zachariel's hands trembled. "Could it be..."

"You think you'll teach me my place?" Basil snorted, utterly unimpressed. "Here's my answer, asshole: come down, and I'll teach you *respect*. With an axe to the face."

"My breath carries rot and decay. My gullet is an abyss from which none escapes." Steamslime let out a growl. "I bring you death, ape."

The voice fell silent and static filled the radiowaves.

"Was that wise?" Plato whined to Basil. "You challenged an angry alien to a fight to the death!"

"Didn't you say we should teach the machines to respect our territory?" Basil replied with a shrug of his shoulders. "After we destroy their leader, the lesson will finally stick."

"I can't make money in a world where a foreign government takes all our gains," Shellgirl said. "I'll defend free enterprise, you'll se—"

"Sir, we must run!" Zachariel interrupted her. The angel's panicked reaction contrasted starkly with everyone else's bravery. "Or fly away!"

"There's no more time," Basil replied angrily. "The countdown is almost over!"

"W-We need to try! I think I know what creature Steamslime is, and if I'm correct... if I'm correct..." The angel joined his hands in prayer. "Oh Dice, random number god, our rolling savior, please prove me wrong."

God smiles on us, Basil thought as the countdown approached its final stage. For the gates of Hell will open now.

The countdown reached zero and the Incursion began with a scream.

The rift let out an eerie, droning noise that shook the ground and the skies. Basil and his allies winced in pain. Plato outright covered his ears with his paws. The screech lasted a few seconds and a flash of red light followed in its wake.

The golden circuit of stars glowed brighter. Energy coursed through it and poured down from the rift in the shape of a beam. The laser fell upon Dax's arena with a cataclysmic impact, bringing down its walls and vaporizing the closest watchers. The swarm of machines danced around the ray like a whirlpool of steel. Basil watched on with amazement as the beam stabilized into a strange pillar of otherworldly, purple particles.

"Basil?" Officer Elissalde called through the radio. "Basil? Can you hear me?"

"Somebody hijacked the airwaves," Basil replied. "They're coming through the portal soon."

Monsters emerged from the pillar by the dozens.

A strange lot filled the city's skies: puffy clouds with a single blue eye; strange beings made of a steel core and wings of lightning; noxious, acidic fumes in the shape of humanoids; and even a bird of prey the size of Basil's Kangoo, its blue feathers sparkling with electricity.

Nimbus

Level 7 [Elemental]

Lightning Elemental

Level 10 [Elemental]

Toxinimbus

Level 13 [Elemental/Artificial]

Thunderbird

Level 16 [Avian/Elemental]

None of them belonged to the Unity, but the watchers didn't open fire on them either. The invaders spread in all directions without rhyme or reason.

Shellgirl pointed her cannons at the skies, ready to open fire on the monsters. She didn't need to. The creatures coming out of the portal flew past Basil's party without a glance. They ignored the city's petrified citizens and their defenders alike.

"They're flying past us." Officer Elissalde's tone grew deeper, less confident. "It looks like they're—"

"Running away," Basil finished for her.

The tide of monsters dried up, leaving the path open for the largest of them.

A reptilian head emerged from the pillar, the light reflecting on glistening green scales and slimy flesh underneath. Its maw was large enough to swallow a bull whole, its golden eyes oozing with pus. Two powerful, clawed hands dragged a colossal body of slime out of the portal. The organic parts stopped at the waist, for the monster's torso stuck out of a colossal cauldron of steel thrumming with burning pipes and steamy chimneys.

The creature vaguely reminded Basil of Shellgirl, a slime monster with half its body encased in a thick shell. But where Shellgirl was no larger than Basil himself, this jelly dinosaur and its technologically-advanced shell reached more than ten meters in height. The ground shook as the monster's clawed hands dragged its steaming apparatus along the ground.

Basil instantly recognized this entity for what it was. A mythical monster enhanced to fit modern times, a paragon

of power and greed. The scaled terror of legend.

A dragon.

Steamslime, Unity Dragonlord

Level 20 Elite [Dragon/Slime]

Faction: Unity.

"I knew it." Zachariel fell to his knees in terror. "We are doomed, doomed!"

The dragon turned in Basil's direction. Although more than two kilometers separated the two sides, the beast seemed to notice the Party without difficulty. Steamslime roared to the heavens and crawled forward with his slimy arms, dragging his metal shell behind him, squashing cars and streetlights. The watcher swarm followed after him like bees shielding their queen.

"He's coming straight for us." Basil raised his halberd. "Guys, do you have my back?"

"Always," Plato replied with a sigh. "Always, Basil."

"You want to fight *that*?" Zachariel asked, dumbfounded.

"We stand with the Boss." Although Buggy looked shaken by the dragon's size, the centimagma remained brave in the face of adversity. "I know we can do it!"

His example inspired the others to stand their ground. Even Zachariel rose to his feet with apprehension. The battle was on.

Basil had hunted many animals in his life.

But never a dragon.

Chapter 25: Man vs Dragon

The dragon was slow but unstoppable.

Steamslime lacked wings or hind legs, and so he had to drag his enormous shell across the city. But what he lacked in speed, he more than made up for in strength. The slime dragon bulldozed his way through houses, tossed cars aside, and crushed the pavement underfoot. He was making a beeline for the city's stadium and woe to anyone crossing his path.

Basil considered fleeing to another battlefield, but chose to stand his ground. The stadium's wide, open space would favor his party against a giant target, and the nearby municipal swimming pool could make for a good fallback site if the fight turned against them.

Basil Bohem wouldn't cower before a giant snail.

"Partner?" Shellgirl asked, her cannons pointed at the oncoming juggernaut. "What's your plan?"

"First we deal with his escort," Basil said. The swarm of Unity watchers surrounded their master like a noxious cloud. "Shellgirl, bombard them from afar. Buggy, Rosemarine, use the same technique we used with the gearsman. Plato, wind slash'em. Zachariel, you coordinate with Officer Elissalde on the radio and help refuel the team."

"Yes, Boss." Buggy nodded with determination. He looked eager to make up for his previous, lackluster displays

against the gearsmen. "I won't let you down again, I swear."

"What about you, sir?" the angel asked. He sounded relieved not to be sent to the front line.

Basil glanced at the stadium. A mound of dirt and grass stood proudly on its northern side, its shadow looming over the sports complex's barriers. His eyes then turned to the Mercedes Benz stuffed to the brim with fertilizer.

"I'm gonna add yet another car crime to my list," Basil replied.

The sound of cannon fire echoed all around him as he switched on the Mercedes. Buggy helped Shellgirl climb on the Renault Kangoo's roof to take up a better artillery position, and the merchant immediately unloaded her napalm projectiles. The bombs exploded on the Unity drones in a deluge of flames and smoke. Massive explosions sent shockwaves spreading through the air, blasting apart Unity watchers by the dozens. Fireclouds swallowed the horizon.

Rosemarine duplicated herself and Buggy hastily threw her clone at Steamslime. A Unity watcher flew in the projectile's way and self-detonated. The duplicate's payload ignited in a shower of searing hot flames. The white phosphorus seeped into the watchers' metal shell and set their crystal eyes alight.

Basil froze in awe at the burning display. Flames covered the world under a crimson sky. The horizon bled fire.

There was something fascinating in the sheer destructive power of modern weapons, a primal urge to revel in the utter annihilation of one's enemy. Plato's blades of sharp winds looked so feeble and forgettable in comparison. If

Officer Elissalde's group wasn't aware of the party's position, they only had to follow the flames.

And yet, the bombardment barely slowed Steamslime down.

The monstrous dragon emerged from the smoke nearly unscathed. The exhaust ports of his steel shell poured torrents of pressured water in all directions. They weren't enough to save the watchers from the napalm and the white phosphorus, but they coated the dragon's body in a layer of water. The liquid exhausted the flames touching his slimy body.

Can this beast truly be level 20? Basil wondered. *I would have given it twice more.*

The System enlightened him.

Elite creatures possess exceptional stats and unique abilities similar to a dungeon's [**Boss**], making them far more powerful than their level would suggest. They also offer greater rewards than common monsters.

Basil guessed he should have expected something like that from a dragon. He took solace in the idea that once his team defeated Steamslime and expelled the Unity from the region, they would finally find peace.

Basil positioned the Mercedes at the base of the mound, oriented it in Steamslime's direction, and smashed the accelerator.

The engine roared. The wheels climbed heaps of dirt and grass. When the car reached the top of the mound, Basil jumped away from the driver's seat. The Mercedes Benz flew into the air at full speed right as Steamslime reached the sports complex.

The dragon raised his head at the improvised projectile. A light shone within his thorax, bright and lethal.

Steamslime opened his mouth and death poured out of his throat.

The dragon spat a stream of sick, greenish ooze. Its surface ignited into a stream of yellow fumes. The smog swallowed the flying Mercedes before it could reach its target. The bodywork rusted, the windshield melted, and the fertilizer rotted years in the space of seconds. The car had been vaporized before it could get anywhere close, let alone explode.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Basil muttered as he ran down the mound for his life. Whatever grass the dragon's breath touched withered and died. Basil avoided a direct hit by outrunning the poison. The mound collapsed behind him with a terrible racket.

"Basil, look up!" Plato shouted a warning. The watchers that survived the bombardment flung themselves at the stadium by the dozen.

"[SELF-DESTRUCT] PROTOCOL ACTIVATED!" The watchers' surfaces heated up until they turned red. "THIS WORLD WILL KNOW PEACE!"

Basil barely had the time to cover his face with his arms to protect himself. Plato slew the closest watchers with his Windslash technique, Shellgirl hit a few with ice pearls, and Buggy breathed fire at them. It destroyed most of the robots before they could hit the ground, but didn't prevent the bombardment.

Watchers rained down from the sky like a meteor shower. One of them exploded close to Basil, throwing him onto his

back. When he rose back up, the stadium looked closer to the Moon's surface than a football field.

"Guys!" he called out to his allies. A dense cloud of dust obscured his vision. "Guys?!"

Bugsy answered his call, although he couldn't see the centimagma. "Run for cover, Boss! I'm coming to the rescue!"

Basil heard the sound of trampled barriers, the rumbling noise of a colossal beast's steps, and a dragon's roar. Steam pushed the dust away and a titanic monster followed in its wake.

Only then did Basil realize just how **big** Steamslime was.

It was one thing to observe a ten-meter tall behemoth from afar, and another to see it up close. The beast's black claws were almost as long as Basil himself. Steamslime's reptilian head and torso overshadowed him the same way a castle's tower would; his metal shell was a roaring factory, a bursting mass of steams, gears, chimneys, and exhaust ports. The monster embodied primeval savagery and industrial brutality packaged in a single force of destruction.

Basil didn't fear anything, but when he looked up to meet Steamslime's golden eyes...

He blinked.

The dragon's jaws snapped at Basil to devour him whole, the same way a chicken would try to eat a worm. Basil rolled to the ground to dodge. He tried to strike the monster with his halberd the moment he recovered, but instead ran to avoid being crushed under Steamslime's palm.

"Run, run, little manling!" Steamslime let out a roar that shook the very earth. "Run and hide!"

Basil gritted his teeth and ran across the football field with the rampaging dragon hot on his tail. He caught sight of Buggy and Plato on his left, both casting buffs on themselves.

"A bug and a cat?" Steamslime glared down on the two with contempt. Buggy and Plato looked no bigger than mice compared to the mighty dragon. "What can you do? Needle me to death?"

"I know you are strong," Buggy said without a hint of fear, embers coming out of his mandibles. Plato sneakily leaped on Steamslime's shell without a word. "But I refuse to be weak! I won't cower again!"

The centimagma fearlessly breathed fire at the much larger dragon, and Basil couldn't be prouder of his friend.

When Buggy burned Steamslime on the flank and the dragon roared in response, Basil remembered Vasi's words: that a strong affinity in an element usually resulted in a weak one in its opposite. Steamslime wielded the power of steam and water, but feared fire in return. The dragon needed to shower himself with liquid to extinguish the flames he feared. Buggy's breath burned a patch of slimy skin until it turned the color of coal.

A lightning ray to the back stopped the centimagma in his tracks.

Buggy rolled on the burning grass, stunned. Basil looked over at the source of the attack: two gearsmen rushing towards the football field from the parking lot. Shellgirl

exchanged volleys of projectiles with them, assisted by Rosemarine.

A pincer attack? Basil cursed under his breath. The gearsmen had sneaked upon the Party from behind while they were focused on fighting their master.

Steamslime raised a claw to squash Buggy. Zachariel interfered by throwing his chlorine bomb at the dragon's face. The device exploded in a burst of gas that briefly distracted the beast. Buggy exploited the brief distraction to crawl away and Steamslime's palm hit dirt.

The chlorine did nothing more than briefly inconvenience the dragon. One of his steam pipes pointed at Buggy and blasted him with a stream of pressurized water. The centimagma was propelled backward into a crater left by the watchers.

Steamslime then turned his furious gaze at Zachariel, the Renault Kangoo, and Shellgirl.

"Uh oh," the angel muttered, wings extended.

Steamslime backhanded the group with a wide swing. Zachariel dodged by flying away, but Basil's Kangoo wasn't so lucky. Steamslime's fist rammed it with a truck's strength. Half the vehicle shattered and the other tumbled to the side. Shellgirl, too distracted by the gearsmen to see the hit coming, went flying with it.

Basil's eyes widened in rage. "My car!"

"Poison? On me? **Me?!"** Steamslime hissed in outrage. The chlorine gas dissipated with the wind. "I am poison! I am the smog! I am—"

"A heap of shit slipping out of an oversized toilet!" Basil snarled back. He swung his halberd at the dragon's left arm. The blade ignited from the movement and cut through the slimy flesh like a knife through butter.

Steamslime hissed, yellowish ooze seeping from his wound. He turned his eyes in Basil's direction, his iris glowing. "Lightning Bolt!"

An arc of electricity surged from the dragon's gaze and hit Basil in the chest. It burned through his clothes and incinerated the ogre pendant he gained from Ogremoché. The lightning coursed through his flesh and nerves. His heart skipped a beat.

Supereffective damage!

Basil gritted his teeth through the pain. He had gone through far worse over the last month. A scar of burned skin formed on his chest, yet Basil Bohen did not back down.

Plato, who had finished climbing Steamslime's shell, rushed across his back and neck. The cat leaped on his head and stabbed his right eye with his fencing sword. Steamslime's shriek was music to Basil's ears, and he hacked at the dragon's side with a smile.

However, the gearsmen were free to act without anyone to provide suppression fire. The first of them leaped over the Kangoo's wrecks and an unconscious Shellgirl. Rosemarine stopped the second by standing in its path.

"Here I go dying again!" said Rosemarine's clone as it showered the gearsman with white phosphorus. The substance burned through the machine's metal shielding, but didn't destroy it. The original Rosemarine raised all of

her guns and opened fire. She matched each lightning ray with bullets.

The other gearsman opened fire on Basil with a lightning beam, forcing him to abandon his assault on Steamslime. As the dragon attempted to swipe Plato off his back, Basil zigzagged along the field to avoid the gearsman's attacks. He charged to close the gap, but the machine wisely kept its distance.

The robot could think tactically. It knew Basil lacked an effective long-range weapon and thus stuck to ranged attacks.

Where was Zachariel? The Major and his group? Where were his reinforcements?!

Warning: Cait Sith Plato has been [**Poisoned**]!

Basil's eyes turned at his cat in panic. Plato had fallen off Steamslime's back and crashed on the ground, his fur green, his sword slipping between his fingers. The poor cat vomited and writhed in agony. His legs and paws were covered in putrid goo.

Steamslime's skin was toxic.

"Plato!" Basil rushed at his pet's help. "Plato!"

"Dragons adapt to all," Steamslime boasted and raised a hand. "The poisoned waters of Electon course through my veins!"

He squashed Plato underfoot and left a bloody smear on the ground.

Basil's vision turned red with rage. The strength of his rage carried his halberd forward. His blade hit the dragon's chest and left a gaping gash in its wake. Wounds and burns covered Steamslime's body, yet he remained the very picture of arrogant strength.

"Lightning Bolt!" Steamslime's last eye blasted Basil with electricity. Somehow this bolt hit even harder than the last. A tree-shaped scar spread over Basil's torso as the electricity burned its way through his flesh. His vision went white for a few seconds and the smell of cooked flesh reached his nose. His shirt turned to ashes and his knees collapsed under him.

Basil barely managed to stand against his halberd's shaft, his fingers trembling. The lightning had numbed all sensations in his limbs.

All except for pain.

Critical health! Critical health!

Basil struggled to breathe as the dragon's shadow loomed over him.

"When I hatched, the Grandmaster took me away from my nest and told me: *'you are a scion of dragonkind. Follow me, and you shall unite the universe.'*" Steamslime opened his mouth wide, his chest bright with light. "This is the order of things. The rule of nature."

"Warp..." Basil whispered through his teeth. He refused to die here. "Spa—"

A rifle's shot echoed and Steamslime's right eye burst into a shower of golden blood. The dragon's breath died with a

screech in his mouth, his hands covering his face. Basil didn't finish his sentence, astonished by this turn of events.

Steamslime has been [**Blinded**]. Steamslime's [**Shelter**] activated! His Vitality has been buffed and his Agility debuffed!

The gearsman attempted to finish off Basil by crushing his head under its metal feet.

A VAB rammed it at full speed first to the tune of a machine gun. The military vehicle tore through the gearsman in half, and the Major atop its roof finished off the machine with a hail of bullets.

Basil heard dogs howl in the distance and felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned his head to see Zachariel land behind him; Maya Elissalde jumped off the angel's back, whip in hand. A green glow banished away the pain from Basil's bones and newfound strength coursed through his veins.

Your wounds are healed.

[**Brave Howl**] buffed your Strength and Magic for five minutes!

"My eyes!" Steamslime snarled. "I can't see anything!"

More bullets hit his throat. Basil glanced at their source, a humanoid figure standing atop a distant building's ruins. Officer Elissalde was sniping Steamslime from afar with a rifle almost as long as Basil's halberd.

"You asked for it, sir," Zachariel said. He carried the military radio in his free hand. "I coordinated with our allies."

It was about time.

"A snail?" The Major asked as his VAB turned around. He opened fire on Steamslime with his machine gun. "I'll eat it for dinner!"

How much more damage can he shrug off? Basil wondered. Steamslime had taken napalm bombs, white phosphorus, a hail of bullets, and the stings of weapons without flinching. Scars marked his body from his blinded eyes to his torso. Yet the dragon continued to fight. *What will it take to kill him, a nuke?*

Basil surveyed the area to check on his allies. Maya's doberman howled from a safe distance as her Basque Shepherd dragged Shellgirl off the Renault Kangoo's wreck. Plato had revived from his lethal wound to Basil's relief, although it cost him another of his lives.

And Buggy had crawled out of the hole Steamslime sent him into, still carrying the thermite with four of his many legs. The water stream had exhausted the flames coursing through his veins, and yet his eyes remained full of resolve.

"Buggy, retreat!" Basil shouted. "Retreat!"

"I refuse, Boss." Buggy stood up with pride. "Not until we've slain this creep and cooked him! With roasted chicken, soda, and potatoes!"

"I got one too, Mister!" Rosemarine stood triumphant atop the burning husk of the last gearsman. Fumes rose from her handguns' barrels. "I got one all by myself!"

They grew up too soon.

"Thank you, Zach," Basil told the angel. "Go heal Shellgirl. We need artillery support."

When Zachariel executed his order, Basil turned to Maya Elissalde. "What can you do?"

"I can buff you," Maya Elissalde proposed.

"Then what are you waiting for?"

Maya Elissalde struck his face with her whip in response.

"Argh!" Basil winced in outrage. "You stupid b—"

"Attack!" The houndmaster spoke to Basil as if he were one of her dogs. "Attack!"

Your chances of inflicting critical hits have increased!

Basil gritted his teeth, suppressed the urge to murder his own ally, and instead unloaded his rage on Steamslime.

"Fuck this dispshit System!" Basil snarled as he hacked into the dragon's chest. "Fuck Dismaker Labs, fuck dragons, fuck you all!"

"Don't complain, Basil!" Plato leaped back to his feet and helped his owner with wind slashes. "I lost a life to a snail! A snail!"

Bugsy joined in with flames and Rosemarine with suicide clones. Bullets and flames and sharp winds rained on Steamslime from above while Basil hacked at him from below. The dragon covered his face with his arms in a desperate attempt to protect himself. His situation was only about to worsen: Zachariel healed Shellgirl, Maya Elissalde buffed Rosemarine, and her hounds did the same with Bugsy.

"Enough!" Steamslime roared. His shell's gears ground louder and louder. "You will die! You will all die!"

Pressurized streams of water erupted from the dragon's pipes and chimneys. One hit Rosemarine and pushed her away. The others forced the group to disperse and retreat, Basil included. This gave Steamslime enough time to gather his breath.

"Take this!" The Major unloaded his machine gun at the dragon's throat. Steamslime leaked yellow blood from a dozen areas. "For France!"

Steamslime unleashed a torrent of poison from his maw straight at the VAB. Perhaps the dragon had a tremorsense of his own, or he simply figured out the vehicle's location from the noise. Whatever the case, he hit the VAB head-on.

The military vehicle proved no better at resisting Steamslime's breath than Basil's Mercedes. The shielding melted alongside its driver. The Major's body armor and flesh were stripped from his bones. Soon those turned to dust as well, and nothing remained of the soldier nor his vehicle.

"Chief!" Maya Elissalde's voice broke in utter despair. "Chief!"

"Get down!" Zachariel shoved her head first onto the ground, narrowly avoiding Steamslime's breath. The dragon fired in all directions, blinded by rage and his lack of eyesight. Basil dropped to the ground to avoid being vaporized too. Steamslime roared and spat and thrashed around with mindless anger.

In spite of the chaos and her superior's death, Officer Elissalde kept sniping the dragon from afar.

Once he ran out of breath, Steamslime retreated inside his shell. His slimy torso and head vanished safely inside the metal device. The exhaust ports and chimneys started to unload noxious green fumes rather than steam.

The dragon was trying to gas the stadium and everyone nearby.

"Partner!" Shellgirl shouted over the melee. Zachariel's treatment must have worked. "He's using Shelter!"

"What about it?!" Basil coughed through the noxious fumes.

"I have the Perk too! It activates when I'm below half-health!"

Then Steamslime was on his last leg. He wasn't trying to kill the group, but to force them to retreat while he licked his wounds. Golden lightning coursed through the star circuits and the crimson skies. The Incursion wasn't over yet, and Steamslime might very well escape back home.

Basil couldn't let him live to fight another day.

He glanced at the dragon's shell, then at Buggy and his thermite canister. An idea crossed his mind.

"Buggy, the exhaust ports!" Basil started climbing Steamslime's shell. "Throw the thermite into the exhaust ports!"

"Yes, Boss!" The centipede fearlessly charged into the toxic fumes. "Agility Up!"

"Basil, get away!" Plato shouted. "The gas—"

"I'll manage!" Basil held his breath as he continued his ascent of the steel slope. "Everyone else retreat!"

He couldn't run when a Frenchman stood his ground! That would be beyond shameful! Neither could Basil dishonor the soldier's memory by coming home defeated. He powered through the fumes even as they burned his skin and made his nose itch.

[**Corrosion**] damage resisted. [**Poison**] ailment resisted.

Basil positioned himself right above the hole in which Steamslime retreated, halberd raised. His allies retreated from the toxic cloud with the exception of Buggy. The centimagma climbed the shell's exhaust port and tossed the thermite into it. The device melted into the steel and ignited the noxious fumes. Flames came out of the shell's chimneys and Steamslime's screech echoed out from the pipes.

The dragon was cooking inside his own fortress. Basil waited for him to emerge from his hole with his weapon raised. The moment came swiftly. Steamslime's head snapped out of the shell in a desperate attempt to avoid burning alive.

A guillotine would have been more appropriate, Basil thought as he brought his halberd down. But it'll do.

"Saint George," he shouted, "witness me!"

Basil's blade sliced Steamslime's neck to the sound of a supereffective hit.

And the dragon fell.

Chapter 26: Man vs Future

Steamslime's severed head fell to the sound of thunder.

Purple lightning coursed through the star circuit in the heavens as a dragon died on earth. Steamslime's hands collapsed under his body's weight. His shell's gears ground to an abrupt halt. The burning, noxious fumes pouring out of its pipes evaporated with the blowing wind.

"You think... you apes have won?"

Even with his neck severed, Steamslime's head still managed to speak on its own. Basil climbed down from the shell to better look down on his target, his halberd feeling light in his hands.

"There are thousands of dragonlords... and I am the least of them! Some are Level 30... Level 60... Level *80!* Our numbers will darken your skies... and our breaths will boil your seas!" Steamslime's head coughed golden blood. "We know your names... there is no escape... we will hunt you to the end of the univ—"

Basil split Steamslime's head in two and silenced him for good.

"Shut up, handbag."

The moment he smashed the dragon's skull, a glowing light erupted between the skull's halves. A steampunk device larger than a car materialized before Basil: a tangle of golden pipes and gears surrounding a large mirror. Colorful cubic gems engraved with runes appeared at his feet too. From their shape, they could fit into a port on the machine's left side.

Steam Holomachine

Category: Tool.

Quality: B.

Effect 1: Can record and project holographic games.

Effect 2: Can serve as crafting tutor.

Effect 3: Can serve as a spell tutor.

This steam-powered console is the best recreational device in the universe! This specific holomachine stored the saves of nineteen games, including: [**My minion can't possibly be this cute!**]; [**Dragon Days:**

Uncensored Edition]; [**Psyshock Infinite**]; [**Call of Cinders: Medal of the Hoard**]; [**Chief of Staff Simulator**]; [**Wyrde's Grimoire**]; [**Crafting Factory X**]; and many more!

The device was larger than a car, but to a dragon? It looked no bigger than a Nintendo Switch. Basil checked the gems. He counted nineteen of them, each recording a game. With the console, it made one item per level for a full inventory.

Steamslime gathered a hoard of video games.

I gotta say, I like it more than a pile of gold, Basil thought. Bugsy climbed down from the metal shell he had sabotaged, and their allies rejoined them once the noxious fumes had cleared. *Although I can't help but feel bitter.*

Two humans died and the party only had video games to show for it. Even a gamer like Basil considered it a terrible trade-off. At least this device might provide some insight into the enemy's culture.

"We... Did we win?" Bugsy asked. Although the dragon's corpse rested at their feet, the centimagma sounded like he couldn't believe in their victory. "Is he dead and... not coming back?"

"Thanks to you, Bugsy," Basil said. "I couldn't have landed the final blow without your help. You were very brave, and I'm proud of you."

Basil didn't think a giant centipede monster could blush, but Bugsy did. He snapped his mandibles in excitement and swooned. "Thank you, Boss."

The rest of the group arrived, with Zachariel applying his healing palm to Basil and Bugsy. The acid burns left by Steamslime's toxic gas vanished, although Basil had lost another shirt and Ogremoché's pendant. At this rate, he would fight his battles naked.

"Can we eat him?" Rosemarine licked her lips at the sight of Steamslime's remains. "He smells like jelly."

Shellgirl, always the opportunist, immediately examined the loot they could harvest from the corpse. "Dragonslime Blood, Dragonslime Claws, Dragonslime Fangs, Dragonslime Bones, Magitech Shell..." A smile formed on her lips. "We'll make a killing selling them off!"

"Payback time," Plato said. "Seven lives are a lucky number, but I would rather have eight of them."

Basil's amusement at seeing his monsters' antics lasted until he noticed Maya Elissalde. The houndmaster and her dogs stood before the dust of Major Grange's VAB, heads heavy in mourning.

"Chief..." Maya bit her lower lip with the military radio in one hand and her whip in the other. Her eyebrows creased into a crestfallen expression. "And Anne too. She was driving. They're gone."

"I... I see," her sister answered through the radio. She sounded tired, so very tired. She had likely seen too many of her comrades fall. "Is there anything to bury?"

"Dust," Maya Elissalde replied. "Nothing else."

No answer came out of the radio. The dogs howled with no one to answer them.

"I'm sorry," Basil apologized to Maya, trying to console her. "They died as heroes."

When she glared at him with her single eye, he immediately regretted his words.

"So what?" Maya snapped at him. "Why couldn't they live as heroes? Why couldn't they come back to life like your stupid, vapid cat?"

Plato hissed at her. "Hey, you think coming back is easy? When I revive, I feel the pain all over again!"

"I'm sure they've earned their place in Heaven," Zachariel reassured Maya. "They had good karma. Good deeds matter more than poor spiritual health."

Basil himself kept his mouth shut. He knew nothing he might say would assuage his allies' sadness. Basil had only met the Major once, but the Elissalde sisters had fought with his squad for days; perhaps even longer. If Steamslime had slain Buggy and Maya offered comfort, her words would have sounded like empty platitudes too.

"Basil?" Officer Elissalde called through the radio. He noticed that she said 'Basil' and not 'Mr. Bohen' for once. "The portal is still open."

Basil's relief turned to worry. Indeed, the star circuit above their heads remained as active as ever. The rift of light continued to let weak monsters enter Earth. The group hadn't received experience either, which meant the event would continue.

"I'm seeing humanoids coming out of the rift, alongside cloud monsters..." Officer Elissalde marked a short pause and the sound of a bullet firing echoed through the radio. "One of them attacked the statues!"

"Why isn't the rift closing?" Maya Elissalde asked in shock. "We beat the boss!"

Defeating a monster has no influence on how long an **[Incursion]** will last. A rift will close on its own time, and not a second before.

Basil checked the Incursion's countdown and cursed. "Everyone, to the portal!"

They had four hours left to kill.

When the Incursion counter hit zero at long last, the portal finally started to close.

Basil watched the rift weaken, surrounded by watcher scraps and improvised barricades. He, Buggy, Plato, and the hounds formed the first line of defense while the rest of the team buffed, healed, and provided suppressive fire at the back.

None of the creatures that came out of the portal proved anywhere near as dangerous as Steamslime. Most were watchers and low-level clouds with eyes. Neither were a match for Basil's party, and he doubted they would receive any experience from them.

But they arrived in waves without giving the team any respite and targeted Dax's petrified citizens on sight. Without Rosemarine and Zachariel to continuously heal them, the party would have collapsed from exhaustion midway through the Incursion; by the end of it, the team's healers had run out of both SP and medical items to replenish them.

Incursions weren't a sprint, but a marathon.

Two gearsmen who escaped the rift in its last hour gave the team quite the fright, but a combination of Officer Elissalde's long-distance anti-material rifle, Shellgirl's artillery, and Rosemarine's bombardment proved sufficient to deal with them. No other dangerous creature crossed the rift afterward.

Basil considered two possibilities: either that Steamslime's defeat convinced the Unity to cut its losses and stop sending powerful soldiers to take a town of limited strategic importance; or that they had troops to spare, but none of them were weak enough to cross the Level Barrier.

The former option was flattering; the latter, terrifying.

Although Basil's team slew all the monsters threatening petrified civilians, some creatures managed to slip through the cracks. The group was so busy fighting the hostile invaders that they couldn't afford to track down those more interested in running away. There was no sign of the humanoid figures Officer Elissalde noticed earlier. They had fled before the party could even approach the rift.

Basil had the feeling that these runaways would cause him many headaches in the months to come.

The golden circuit in the skies above disappeared. The stars' radiance dimmed and the links between them disintegrated. The crimson aura above Basil's head receded and was replaced by the night sky's darkness. The rift's awe-inspiring radiance dimmed over time.

Basil suddenly wondered if the rift worked both ways. Not that he was mad enough to cross it, but he was tempted to leave a parting gift to the Unity.

"Rosemarine," he said. "Send an exploding clone through."

"Yes, Mister!" The plant duplicated herself and her clone leaped into the rift's light. The doppelganger instantly vanished from Basil's sight. He couldn't tell if it disintegrated upon touching the portal or made it to the other side.

When the rest of the star circuit disappeared, the rift of light collapsed into nothingness. Only the ruins of Dax's arena remained, silent and unmoving.

They had won, albeit at a great cost. The city center was a smoking landscape of destroyed buildings and fiery ruins. The party's explosives had caused almost as much damage as the rampaging gearsmen.

As for the petrified citizens, Steamslime had trampled many of them in his rush to the stadium. Other statues broke when the dragon collapsed buildings on their heads and the monsters that came out of the rift also destroyed a few. Basil estimated that the death toll reached the high hundreds.

But thousands more had been spared an early grave. It could have gone better, but most civilians survived the chaos and Basil's team cleaned the city of Unity troops.

The region was finally at peace.

Congratulations, you survived an [**Incursion**!]! Your Party earned 60,000 EXP and 30,000 Bonus EXP (total 18,000 for you)! You earned 7 levels!

"Seven levels?" Basil nearly choked upon seeing the number. That was more than he had ever earned in one attempt. Incursions were incredibly profitable experience-wise. It made sense for the System to incentivize Players to participate in dangerous battles.

"One more," Rosemarine whispered in anticipation. "Just one more... and then... and then... haha..."

She laughed to her heart's content, which Basil found adorable. Aww, she would enjoy a growth spurt soon! Still, he hoped her metamorphosis would be more manageable than Buggy's own.

"Well, it is done," Officer Elissalde said through the military radio. "The battlefield is clear."

"You can come down from your nest, Officer," Basil replied.

"Neria. After all we went through today, Basil, I think we can get past formalities."

"Alright." Although he remained slightly wary of lawmen, Basil was quite fond of the officer. She was friendly and reliable. "Are you up for a drink? I think we all deserve it."

"We have drinks, partner?" Shellgirl asked.

"No, but we have our pick of empty supermarkets to raid from." With the Unity expelled from the city, Basil and his allies could finally loot its pharmacies, shops, and businesses for food and parts.

"That will be a pleasure; after we bury my unit," Neria replied with a heavy heart. "I don't want to leave their remains exposed to scavengers. Some of the monsters escaped and might still lurk in the area."

"What about the humanoids you saw?" Basil asked. "What can you tell us about them?"

"I couldn't see them clearly," Neria admitted. "I can't even tell if they were humans or not. A few of them wore hoods and carried bows."

Bows? Basil wouldn't have expected archers to come out of the same place as a steampunk snail dragon. He wondered what the world beyond the rift looked like.

"I know the land like the back of my hand," Basil said. "We'll find them wherever they hide."

The funeral of Major Matteo Lionel Grange and Caporal Anne Naubin, the VAB's driver, was a quiet and discreet affair. The survivors set up a memorial made from Steamslime's broken skull and granite stone, the Elissalde sisters gave the dead a brief eulogy, and Zachariel prayed for their souls. Basil knew the Major died an atheist, but he hoped that his spirit had found a nice resting place.

Afterward, the team split the spoils. Since nobody else could store Steamslime's shell in their inventory—it counted as a 'house' according to the System—Basil kept it alongside his game console. The Elissalde sisters would keep the dragon's other remains, much to Shellgirl's dismay. Basil knew she would come around after they looted the city's supplies.

"We should hold a funeral for my car too," Basil said as he helped Maya lift a petrified man into a large military truck. "She was a good girl and deserved better."

His joke amused Maya enough to make her crack a smile. "We held one for our combat helicopters too. Shame we couldn't piece it back together."

"HQ has crafters capable of repairing military vehicles," Neria replied as she closed the truck's trailer. The group had filled it to the brim with more than two hundred petrified humans and the Ogre Den's server rested at the front. The Major had been wise enough to drop it off at a safe place before venturing back into the fray. "Maybe I can convince them to pay the city a visit."

"All clear, sir," Zachariel told Basil. He and Buggy had stuffed a second truck with statues. "What about the others?"

Even if the city's population had shrunk compared to what it was pre-apocalypse, it would take multiple trips to evacuate all the statues.

"There's a vast underground parking lot near the bridge," Basil said. "We'll transport the statues underground and booby-trap the access ways."

Neria nodded sharply. "I will present Zachariel to my superiors and convince them to transfer Dax's population to Bordeaux. With a fleet of trucks, we can wrap this up in a single trip."

"And if they deny your request?"

"Then I'll organize the transfer behind their backs." Neria observed Basil in silence for a few seconds before making him a proposal. "You're sure you don't want to come with us to Bordeaux? It will be safer than monster-infested wilderness, and we need people with your talents."

"Thanks, but I'll pass." Basil smirked. "It's my home, and monster-infested wilderness is our natural habitat."

Plato nodded in appreciation. "We didn't suffer so much to establish a territory to abandon it."

"We'll be alright, Miss Elissalde," Buggy said. "We'll keep the place in order, I promise!"

"Then this is goodbye." Neria Elissalde smiled and gave the party a polite bow. "We'll stay in touch through the radio. Thank you for everything."

"It was..." Her sister trailed off and left her sentence hanging. Nice? Terrible? Basil could tell the loss of two friends affected her greatly. "You are good people."

"You are great people!" her basque shepherd barked, echoed by the doberman. No matter how dark a situation, dogs always managed to make friends. "I hope we meet again one day!"

"I don't," Plato replied gruffly. Nobody cared.

"Sir, it was a pleasure," Zachariel said before shaking Basil's hand. "I can't wait to introduce spiritual reforms to this world. Heaven knows humans need a karma shock therapy."

Why did Basil have the feeling a new Vatican would pop up in Bordeaux? Come to think of it, did the Vatican still exist? He wondered what kind of dungeon would spring from the San Pietro Basilica.

"Good luck, Zach." Basil shook the angel's hand. He would miss the healer, but the army needed Zachariel more than a lone human living in the woods. "Careful about antivaxers though. I don't think your coronatheism theory will sit well with them."

"Don't worry, sir. I've been trained to bring the flame of knowledge to the masses, one stake at a time."

Maya climbed on one truck with her dogs. Zachariel and Neria took the other. As she put on her seatbelt and prepared to leave the city, the police officer glanced one last time at the ruins of Dax's arena in the distance. Her expression was one of doubt and uneasiness.

Basil guessed what frightened her. "You're worried about a future Incursion?"

"If that snail spoke the truth, that he was the least of our enemies... what will come out of a portal next time?" Neria sighed. "We barely made it through today's attack. I fear tomorrow's may be too much for us."

Basil would be lying if he said he didn't share her fears. He had survived so far through skill and luck, but so had the Major until a stray shot ended his life. Death called without warning and the world would only grow more dangerous as time went on.

But so would humans grow stronger and more adaptable.

"Our species survived the ice age, global warming, the black plague, and two world wars," Basil said with a shrug. "We'll survive this apocalypse too."

Neria Elissalde answered his resolute determination with a sad smile. "I received more information from HQ," she admitted, "about Paris."

"Oh?" From her crinkled face, Basil shouldn't expect good news. "What happened to the capital?"

"Accordingly to early reports, multiple dungeons appeared in the city. The Louvre turned into a true pyramid, the Eiffel Tower into a fortress... the Seine dried up and sand filled the Champs-Élysées." Neria's jaw clenched. "We think the government was decapitated in the initial strike. The army established control over a few cities, but they're too far apart to link. At this point, General Leblanc is considering an alliance with a group called Metal Olympus to make up for our troops' losses."

Basil could read between the lines. "You don't think we can win the war."

"What war? It's not France vs Germany, it's us humans against robots, monsters, bugs..." Neria glanced at Buggy. "No offense."

"None taken," he replied cheerfully.

"The army can reassert local control in the cities we occupy and establish safe zones, but retaking the country looks more and more unlikely," Neria said. "You've survived so far by hiding on your own, Basil, but it won't last forever. The monsters will grow more numerous, more dangerous, and from what we've seen today, more organized."

"It won't matter if they can't find my home," Basil replied. The argument sounded weak even to him.

"I found you, partner," Shellgirl pointed out. "Your house isn't that hard to find. Anybody who follows the stream will see it."

"We can coexist with monsters." Basil waved a hand at his team. "We're the living proof of it."

"Can you coexist with the Unity?" Neria shook her head. "What I mean to say, Basil, is that your methods let you weather the storm so far. But when it grows too strong, it will blow you away. Joining us in Bordeaux would be safer. Numbers and community are strengths, not weaknesses."

There was some truth to her words, but neither numbers nor soldiers had protected Paris.

"The monsters target large communities as a priority," Basil pointed out. "By your own logic, monsters will escalate beyond our ability to fight back at all. It's damned if I do, damned if I don't."

"I don't have a long-term solution," Neria admitted. "At least until we've found out more about Dismaker Labs, what they want, and what this System even is. It's our only hope for things to return to normal... if that's even possible anymore."

Basil suddenly realized that she was as lost as he was. She had seen her way of life collapsing before her eyes and now braved a dangerous new world.

"I'll study the game console," he tried to reassure her. "Maybe it holds answers about the System."

"I hope so." Neria gave him a final nod. "We'll keep in touch. Take care, Basil."

"Good luck."

And on these words, Neria Elissalde drove away towards the rising dawn. Her sister followed with her own truck, both vehicles leaving the city without turning back. Basil's party waved their hands, legs, and vines at them as they vanished beyond the horizon.

So did his hopes of the army returning peace to the land.

But Basil couldn't show doubt. Not now, not before his friends. They were exhausted after a long battle and deserved a moment of relief. No need to burden them with his doubts.

"My friends, we've won the Second Neighborhood War," Basil declared with pride. "We can finally go back to what truly matters: eating, gardening, and doing nothing all day."

"And making money," Shellgirl chirped in. "Don't forget the money part."

"Good riddance." Plato stretched his back. "The humans were okay, but let's not make it a habit to team up with whiny dogs."

"I thought they were nice," Buggy replied. "Very friendly too."

"Why do you hate dogs so much?" Basil asked Plato. It confused him slightly. "Most of your kind coexists peacefully with them."

"Dogs are insidious!" Plato hissed, his eyes hateful. He clearly had grievances he needed to get off his chest. "They bombard you with love! At first you think they're cute, entertaining maybe, but they are bottomless pits of insecurity! They demand constant affection, and before you know it, your owner spends all their time with a whiny Maltese dog and dumps you in a forest to fend for yourself!"

The sheer bitterness in his cat's voice told his owner that this rant came from the heart. Basil felt his stomach turn with sadness. "That is what happened to you, isn't it?"

Plato glanced at the skies, which was an answer in itself. "Anyway, we've got work to do. A bird escaped from the portal, remember? You let one live, and

next thing you know the dodos come back from extinction to play banjo in your backyard."

"What are dodos?" Rosemarine asked. "They sound tasty."

"I'll pass," Shellgirl said with a sigh. "I'm exhausted."

"Me too," Basil added. They had fought all night long and deserved a rest. "The hunt will wait for another day."

"We could celebrate with a *Major Chicken* marathon," Buggy proposed. "Shellgirl hasn't watched any episodes yet."

"Nice idea." Basil glanced at his pets, his friends, and his new family. "Everyone in favor, say aye!"

"Aye!" all of them answered.

"Then let's go find a new Renault," Basil replied with a grunt. "We're not walking back home."

As the party went on the hunt for a new car, Basil gave the rising dawn a long hard look. The sun had risen in Earth's skies since time immemorial. It had shone on the dinosaurs, the mammoths, men, and now monsters. All the species that failed to adapt to new circumstances vanished.

Basil Bohem aspired to a quiet, peaceful life.

But as he watched the rising sun, he wondered how long he could make it last.

End of Tutorial/Arc 1

Party's Stats

Name Basil Jean-François Bohem

Type Humanoid

Faction The Bohems

EXP 27,795/30,000

Immune	Resist	Weak
N/A	Physical, Corrosion, Metal, Wood, Fire, Water, Ailments.	Manslayer, Soul, Wind, Lightning, Light.
Level	Health Points	Special Points
12+7 (Tamer 5; Berserker 3; Alchemist 1; Runesmith 1; Gardener 1; Technomancer 1; 7 Unassigned)	970	365

Strength	Agility	Vitality	Skill
29	26	24	18

Magic	Intelligence	Charisma	Luck
16	15	24	18

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 II Warp Spasm I

Slaughterer I Jardin Secret I

Alchemy I Spell: Fire Rune

Monster Lair I Spell: Ice Rune

Runic I N/A

- *Passive Perks*

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 II (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.

Slaughterer I (Passive): you gain advanced proficiency with Axes, Maces, Spears, and Unarmed Attacks (x2 damage, +10 percent Crit chances). However, you lose all the benefits of the [Berserker] class if you wield a shield, armor, or accessory reducing the damage that you take. Monster skins and damage resistance provided by spells or perks do not violate this rule.

Monster Lair I (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.

Runic I (Passive): 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.

- *Active Perks*

Warp Spasm I (active): you can apply the [Berserk] ailment to yourself at will for 5 minutes. While [Berserk], you relentlessly attack the closest target in melee with no regard for your safety, friend or foe, and cannot use [Spells]. In return, your damage is greatly enhanced and you feel no pain.

Jardin Secret I (Active): you can determine an area equal to 1 hectare per Gardener level as your [Jardin Secret]. Seeds planted in the area will have their growth period divided by your gardener level multiplied by 2; [Plant] Monsters grown from these seeds will be naturally friendly to you and can be immediately added to your Party. You can change your garden's location once per week, but if you do, the previous area loses all of its [Gardener]-related benefits.

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 flames, 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.

Name Plato (Cait Sith)

Type Beast/Fairy

Faction The Bohens

Experience 27,795/30,000

Immune

Resist

Weak

N/A

Soul, Wind, Wood, Darkness,
Mythic.

Beastslayer, Fairyslayer, Physical,
Corrosion, Water

Level

Health Points

Special Points

12+7

440

435

Strength

Agility

Vitality

Skill

11

34

11

32

(D+20%)

(B+20%)

(D+20%)

(A+20%)

Magic

Intelligence

Charisma

Luck

22

17

17

31

(C+20%)

(D+20%)

(C+20%)

(A+20%)

Physical Mind

Soul

Corrosion Metal

Wood

Life

Support

Ailment

Weak

-

Strong

Weak

-

Strong

-

-

-

Fire

Water Earth

Wind

Frost

Lightning

Light

Darkness

Mythic

- Weak - Strong - - - Strong Strong

Passive Perks Active Perks

Sharp Claws Luck Up

Heavy Napper Wind Slash

Birdbane N/A

Nine Lives N/A

Swordsmanship I N/A

Personal Perks:

- **Sharp Claws:** your claws inflict SKI-based damage. You gain advanced proficiency with unarmed attacks, fangs and claws (x2 damage, +10 Crit).
- **Heavy Napper:** while under a [Sleep] effect, you recover HP as if you benefited from the [Regen] positive ailment.
- **Birdbane:** your attacks with natural weapons inflict [Birdslayer] damage.
- **Nine Lives:** when you would die, you instead benefit from an [Auto-Revive] effect bringing you back to life at critical health; this also purges you of your ailments. You can be revived eight times before the Perk becomes inactive. 7/9
- **Swordsmanship I:** medium proficiency with swords (x1,5 damage)

Active Perks:

- **Luck Up:** 10 SP, buffs Luck for five minutes.
- **Wind Slash:** 60 SP, Wind, sword technique unleashing a blade of wind.

Name Buggy Alphonse Venture (Centimagma)

Type Bug/Elemental

Faction The Bohens

Experience 27,795/30,000

Immune	Resist	Weak
Fire	Physical, Corrosion, Ailments, Wood, Earth	Bugslayer, Elementslayer, Mind, Frost, Water, Wind

Level	Health Points	Special Points
12+7	1080	250

Strength	Agility	Vitality	Skill
34	22	34	18
(B+20%)	(C+20%)	(B+20%)	(C+20%)

Magic	Intelligence	Charisma	Luck
5	12	14	21
(E+20%)	(D+20%)	(D+20%)	(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.
- **Agility Up:** 10 SP, Support. Buff your agility for five minutes.
- **Firebreath:** 40 SP, Fire. Unleashes a fiery breath.

Name Rosemarine Eglantine de la Barthe (Killaplant)

Type Plant

Faction The Bohens

Experience 27,795/30,000

Immune	Resist	Weak
N/A	Wood, Life, Water, Earth, Light.	Plantslayer, Corrosion, Metal, Fire, Wind, Frost, Lightning, Darkness.

Level	Health Points	Special Points
12+7	335	415

Strength	Agility	Vitality	Skill
13	20	12	22
(D+20%)	(C+20%)	(D+20%)	(C+20%)

Magic	Intelligence	Charisma	Luck
29	7	22	25
(B+20%)	(E+20%)	(C+20%)	(B+20%)

Physical	Mind	Soul	Corrosion	Metal	Wood	Life	Support	Ailment
-	-	-	Weak	Weak	Strong	Strong	Strong	-
Fire	Water	Earth	Wind	Frost	Lightning	Light	Darkness	Mythic

Weak Strong Strong Weak Weak Weak Strong Weak -

Passive Perks Active Perks

Paralyzing Bite Sweet Pollen

Bugcatcher Seed Decoy

Personal Perks:

- **Paralyzing Bite:** you treat fangs and jaw-enhancing weapons as if you had medium proficiency with them (x1.5 damage). Additionally, your bite attacks may inflict the [Paralysis] ailment on contact.
- **Sweet Pollen:** 10 SP. Regenerates a little HP to the target (MAG + 1d20). This is a Life effect.
- **Bugcatcher:** natural attacks have the [Bugslayer] effect.
- **Seed Decoy:** 60 SP, Life/Wood. You create a copy of yourself with 1 max HP and 60 max SP in reserve. The decoy lasts for one hour before dying, but otherwise possesses all your Perks. A decoy cannot create another decoy.

Name Shellgirl (Clam Mimic)

Type Aquatic/Slime

Faction The Bohens

Experience 27,795/30,000

Immune

Resist

Weak

N/A Physical, Water, Frost, Darkness. Aquaslayer, Slimeslayer, Corrosion, Metal, Wood, Fire, Lightning.

Level	Health Points	Special Points
12+7	800	390

Strength	Agility	Vitality	Skill
22	6	36	16
(C+20%)	(E+20%)	(A+20%)	(D+20%)

Magic	Intelligence	Charisma	Luck
22	22	21	23
(C+20%)	(C+20%)	(C+20%)	(C+20%)

Physical	Mind	Soul	Corrosion	Metal	Wood	Life	Support	Ailment
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Strong	-	-	Weak	Weak	Weak	-	-	-
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Fire	Water	Earth	Wind	Frost	Lightning	Light	Darkness	Mythic
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Weak	Strong	-	-	Strong	Weak	-	Strong	-
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Passive Perks Active Perks

Shelter Ice Pearl

Shell Inventory Water Jet

Moneymaker

Passive Perk:

- **Moneymaker:** increases chances of drops if a monster is killed within twenty meters.
- **Shelter:** buffs Vitality, but debuffs Agility at half health.
- **Shell Inventory:** can stock up to one item per level inside the shell.

Active Perks:

- **Water Jet:** 10 SP. Buffs agility, but only in water.
- **Ice Pearl:** 10 SP. Throws a pearl made of ice at a target with cannon; inflicts Frost damage (base power 30).

Chapter 27: Interlude: The Guards in Buckingham

London, the night when the world ended.

As far as Karim Williams remembered, he always dreamed of becoming a guard.

Some children wanted to become astronauts, or scientists, or prime ministers. But not Karim. Not terribly bright even from a young age, he knew he would never amount to much. He still remembered what his father told him in his childhood, when Karim showed him his terrible school grades: *‘Mediocrity is a quality all of its own, Karim. Mules are mediocre, but they work hard and make the world go round. Great men stand on the backs of mediocre masses. I know that someday, you’ll lift up someone destined to do great things.’*

Karim always knew who he wanted to carry on his back: *God saves the Queen of England.*

So he worked very hard to serve his country. He enlisted in the British army, passed his exams by the skin of his teeth, and asked to join the Grenadier Guards of the Household Division. Until one day, after countless drills and push-ups, the officers gave him his uniform of the Queen’s Guard. Him! The dirt-poor grandson of a Pakistani immigrant!

The royal family would never know Karim’s name, and neither would the public. He would forever remain one of the faceless guards keeping up the gates of Buckingham

Palace, fending off would-be assassins and Chinese tourists alike. But Karim was happy. His life had purpose.

Nights were cold in London. Karim's uniform warmed him up somewhat, as did his black fur hat; although it was a tad too heavy for him and always threatened to fall over his eyes. His rifle felt heavy in his hands, but not as much as the weight of duty. Mist came out of his mouth when he breathed.

Karim's first shift ever took place in the early morning. Big Ben would strike four o'clock soon. The sky was pitch black, but London never slept. There were always drunkards beyond the fences of Buckingham Palace, shouting and rambling in the shadow of the Victoria Memorial.

The night was quiet all the same. Karim had been granted the ultimate honor of guarding the gates of Buckingham Palace on his first shift, to act as the Royal Family's first line of defense against their sworn enemies: the tourists, the paparazzi, and the stalkers. His only company on his lone vigil was a fellow guard. The two guards stood alone before the palace's main entrance, separated from the city by steel fences.

Karim knew the higher-ups put his shift at this hour to test his resolve. He struggled against the urge to close his eyes and fall asleep from the monotony. Even the customary fifteen-paces march every ten minutes became terribly monotonous after a while.

But Karim resisted the temptation. His first shift was all the more important for who he shared it with.

Bill McMalone. The Legend. The Rock of Buckingham.

Karim dared to peek at his teammate. Bill was an older man in his sixties, with a tough Irish face, beardless jawline, icy blue eyes, and a bodybuilder's abs. He looked like the bear whose fur his black hat had been made from.

Some said that Bill was too old for service and should retire, but the higher-ups kept renewing his contract year after year. Maybe out of gratitude. Maybe out of respect. For if half the stories Karim had heard about Bill McMalone were true, then he was more than a man. No human could be as still and silent as him.

Karim hadn't seen Bill blink once in the last hour and a half they spent together. He wondered if the man even *breathed*. Bill McMalone only moved from his spot for the customary walking routine and then returned to his post without a word.

Karim hadn't dared to speak to the man for the length of his shift. Too intimidating. But as his two hours of service would soon reach their end, he mustered the courage to break the ice.

"Is it true what they say? In the regiment?" Karim cleared his throat. "You spent six shifts back-to-back to cover for sick colleagues?"

If Bill McMalone had heard, he didn't show it. Karim gulped as the tense silence stretched on. Did he mess up somehow?

"No," Bill finally replied with a deep voice. "I lasted twelve shifts."

Karim's eyes widened in shock. "Twenty-four hours?"

"Without eating. Without drinking. Without sleeping." Bill McMalone marked a short pause, as if particularly proud of the last part. "Without peeing."

Impossible. No man could hold that long. Yet the unshakable certainty in the man's voice convinced Karim of his honesty. "How did you do it, sir?"

"It's..." Bill grunted. "Authoritah."

"Authority?" Karim asked naïvely.

"Authoritah," Bill replied. "It's authority beyond composure. Authority over yourself and the world."

"And... how do you obtain..." Karim coughed. "Authoritah?"

"Give it time." Bill's tone reminded Karim of his father handing out wisdom to his young son. "You do not learn authoritah. Authoritah comes to you when you need it most."

Karim listened to the lesson in silence. He would have time to meditate on it in his bed. Their replacements should arrive sometime soon.

Big Ben struck four o'clock, signaling the end of Karim's shift and the end of the world.

First came the frost. A strange chill spread through the air like a wave, cold and biting. A pulse of invisible energy followed. Karim felt the wave going through his body without understanding its nature. He briefly wondered if the wind had suddenly changed course, until the skies changed colors.

A bright blue aurora borealis spread from the distant Big Ben, so bright Karim squinted at the sudden change in luminosity. The northern lights expanded to cover all of London in the blink of an eye. As for Big Ben itself, the tower grew taller and taller. Karim watched on, mesmerized, as the monument's infamous clock pierced the clouds. Giant gears and pipes materialized on Big Ben's surface until it took on a strange, steampunk appearance.

"What the *hell*?" Karim muttered, unable to believe what his eyes showed him. Had sleeplessness dulled his senses? Was he dreaming? "What's happening?"

Big Ben wasn't the only monument to transform. The Tower of London, which normally could hardly be seen from the guards' position, shot up to the skies. Its walls took on a sinister black tone and a ring of fire surrounded the castle's top. The Tower didn't grow as tall as Big Ben, but it now more than rivaled the Eiffel Tower in size. A flock of winged, shadowy forms flew away from the building and under the auroras' light.

When Karim thought they had reached the height of strangeness, a message appeared before his eyes as if he were reading from a computer screen.

Whoever reaches level 100 first will become Earth's new Overgod.

"Overwhat?" Karim made a quick prayer to Allah, just in case.

As the only class available to you, you automatically took a level in [**Watchman**]: a mediocre class focused on policing cities and enforcing order. Growths: Strength (C); Agility (C); Vitality (C); Skill (C); Magic (C); Intelligence (C); Charisma (C); Luck (C).

Level 1 Stat Gains: +1 STR, +1 VIT, +1 AGI, +1 CHA, +1 LCK. Your Health Points were raised by 30 and your Special Points by 10.

New Perk: Esprit de Corps I (Passive): You are but a faceless drone in a big machine. You can telepathically communicate with other members of your Party, Guild, or Faction, no matter the distance.

You automatically formed a party with: Bill McMalone.

A rush of pleasure traveled down Karim's spine, though it did little to alleviate his nervousness. A white fog started to fall upon the city at an alarming rate, clouding London's buildings and skyscrapers in a dense layer of mist.

"What's happening?" Karim asked his teammate. "Did you see that message too? What does it mean? What's happening?"

Bill glanced at Big Ben with indifferent eyes. "Ugh."

"Ugh?" Karim repeated.

"Ugh," Bill grunted back.

He didn't look concerned in the slightest.

Karim waited a few seconds before his nervousness got the better of him. He activated the earpiece hidden beneath his hat and attempted to contact the rest of his regiment.

"Chief? Chief? Gate to officers, what's happening?"

Only a static noise answered his questions.

"What do we do?" Karim asked his senior partner. "Do we check up on the royal family?"

"We wait for the next shift to arrive." Bill shrugged his shoulders. "I assume they will be a bit late."

Somehow, Karim had the feeling that this would prove to be an understatement.

Screams came out of the mist, and to Karim's horror, they didn't sound human at all. Although he couldn't see much past the fog, he glimpsed flashes of light in the distance followed by the sound of explosions.

"What if somebody needs help?" Karim asked weakly. He had a terrible feeling about... whatever was happening. Was it a holographic show of some kind? Why hadn't he been informed?

"Until new guards come, you'll stand your ground." Bill stared at the incoming fog with the utter indifference of an unimpressed veteran. "The job of the Queen's Guard is like making love to a woman, young man."

Karim looked at his fellow guard with confused eyes. He had nothing but respect for McMalone, but that comparison was almost scandalous. "I... I don't follow, sir."

"You struggle against the urge to unload your essence," Bill explained. "But to maximize your partner's pleasure, you must wait for the right moment. Even if you feel like the pipe will burst out, that the pressure is too much, you have to hold on to it until you are in the perfect position. Like how you must wait for your next shift before climax."

Karim listened in silence, but the metaphor was too much for him. "Sir, I'm sorry, but that makes no sense—"

"You don't want to pleasure your wife, Karim?" Bill snarled at his teammate without moving an inch. Karim tensed up like

an iron pole. "You think she's too good for you? You think you can blow your load when she isn't ready, or cheat on her? Is that what you think?"

"I-I don't have a wife, Sir!"

"Not with that attitude! How can you hope to hold a woman if you can't hold your position?! You will respect the Queen's Guard the same way you would respect your future wife! You don't cheat on the Duchess of Windsor, Karim! You don't cheat on Kate and William!"

Karim trembled in place, overwhelmed by his fellow guard's vehemence. He stared into the distance, ignoring the screams, ignoring the noise of explosions, ignoring the small '+' symbol at the edge of his vision.

It... it had to be alright. Bill was much older than Karim, an experienced watchman with decades of service to the Crown. He knew better. If he felt all of this was nothing to be worried about, then Karim's worries were misplaced. He breathed in and out, telling himself everything was fine.

Yes, yes, the skies were falling apart, but it didn't matter. Everything would turn out well. Nothing to worry about.

"Are you married, Sir?" Karim asked.

"No." Bill McMalone's face remained an unblinking mask. "I'm divorced."

Karim wondered why, but wisely did not push the subject further.

Nobody came to relieve them for the next hour.

Karim vaguely heard shouts and movement behind the palace's doors, but nobody came to give him and Bill directions. The fog made it nigh-impossible to see beyond the palace's fence, except for the Victoria Memorial. The golden, winged statue atop the monument shone brightly under the faint light of the aurora. The mists swirled under it like a raging sea unable to topple a lighthouse.

I need to pee, Karim thought. His bladder was a dam holding back a flood. Worse, his hat was starting to slide onto his forehead, making it harder for him to see. *So much*.

Think of Bojo, Karim.

It was the voice of Bill McMalone, but it echoed in Karim's head rather than in Buckingham's courtyard. The younger guard glanced at his elder, who hadn't moved from his post.

You gained this... Esprit de Corps too? Karim thought. *By Bojo, you mean...*

Boris Johnson, the older guard repeated through telepathy. *Think of Bojo, Karim. Think of the prime minister. It will help you hold back the tide.*

Karim would rather think of Meghan Markle right now, but his fear of Bill eavesdropping on his fantasies cowed him. He imagined the face of Boris Johnson looking down on him, much like his father scolding him for speaking out of turn. Karim's bladder stopped distracting him immediately.

"They're coming," Bill said out of the blue.

"What?" Karim asked. "Who?"

"The plebeians are at the gates," the older guard replied evasively.

Karim didn't have to ponder long. The fenced steel gates collapsed in a terrible bang and a shadowy shape emerged from the mist.

Karim screamed.

A festering horror lumbered out of the mist. Thrice the size of the average man, the creature was made of body parts crudely stitched together in a humanoid shape. Skin spots of different colors, from green to gray, formed a nightmarish patchwork that made Karim's stomach turn. Bolts struck out of the creature's head, sparks of lightning bursting from them. And the eyes... two white lights glowed from within black, empty sockets.

A notification appeared above the creature's head.

Stitched Mark I

Level 10 [Artificial/Undead]

Karim thought, prayed, that it was only a very convincing costume. But as the creature came closer in unnerving silence, its hands so large they could probably seize a horse, he realized that the... the *thing* was all too inhuman.

"B-Back off!" Karim raised his rifle at the lumbering brute.
"Back off!"

The creature rushed at him, its steps making the ground shake beneath his feet. Karim opened fire as training demanded, only for his bullets to bounce off the monster's skin. It closed the gap between the metal fence and the guards in an instant.

Karim prepared to join his maker... but the lethal blow never came.

Instead, the Frankenstein creature froze one meter away from the guards. Its body was tense, its eyes were wide open, but they ignored Karim entirely.

Bill McMalone had engaged in a staring contest with the monster.

The older guard did not move an inch. He hadn't even lowered his rifle to threaten the monster. No, he simply gazed at the monster with his cold, soulless blue eyes. Somehow, that was enough to stop it dead in its tracks.

The scene reminded Karim of two gorillas threatening one another. Neither made a move to attack the other, yet the pressure grew between them. Karim held his breath, anticipating the deadly fight he knew would come.

He was mistaken.

After a tense standoff, the stitched monster took a few steps back away from the guards. It moved closer to the fence, its grim expression one of wariness. At no point did it break eye contact with Bill McMalone, and the guard did not move an inch.

The creature turned around without warning and fled in the mist. Bill watched it vanish with a look of utter contempt.

"Wimp," was all he said.

It took Karim a full five minutes of breathing, in and out, to recover his composure. "What was that?" he asked, his lungs cold within his chest. "What happened?"

"Authoritah," Bill replied calmly. "That was authoritah at work, Karim."

"No, I mean..." Karim pointed his rifle at the destroyed metal fence. "That thing! What was that?!"

"Probably a Welsh tourist. I think." Bill let out a shrug. "They're the worst."

"Tourists don't grow that big!" His partner's utter nonchalance both shocked and infuriated Karim. "W-Why aren't you more concerned?"

Bill McMalone turned his eyes and met his junior's gaze.

"After two years in the Queen's Guard, Karim," he said, very calmly, "nothing on the job will surprise you anymore."

He looked back at the gates and Karim knew the matter was closed.

Karim calmly returned to his post, rifle pointed at the skies. Somehow, his partner's sheer serenity in the face of strangeness calmed him.

"Did it happen before?" he asked Bill.

"Not since they tried to raise Lady Di from the dead," the older guard replied with a shrug. "Now *that* was a shitshow."

Karim stared at his colleague in uncomfortable silence, searching for any hint that that was a joke. He didn't find any.

"London Bridge is falling down..." A sinister voice echoed out of the mist. "Falling down, falling down, London Bridge is falling down..."

Karim glanced at the metal fence, half expecting the monstrous creature to return for a new round. Instead, a

new dark figure stepped out of the fog.

"My fair lady built it up with iron bars, iron bars, iron bars..."
A gaunt man in a dark trench coat walked into view, his fingers playing with knives. His face was hidden behind a gas mask and his hair under a black hat. "Built it up with iron bars..."

Only when the figure came closer did Karim realize that the mysterious man wasn't playing with knives.

His fingers *were* knives.

Ripper

Level 6 [Humanoid]

"My fair lady, iron bars will bend and break..." The dark man stared at Bill McMahon with empty glass eyes. Since the older guard wouldn't even look at the intruder, he instead turned his gaze at Karim. "Bend and break, bend and break..."

Was that Jack the Ripper? Karim did his best not to show fear and unease, but his body betrayed him. His fingers clenched around his rifle, which the monster noticed. The creature sharpened his knives against each other.

"Bend and break..." he sang to himself, ready to disembowel Karim. "Like corpses..."

Use it, Karim, McMahon's voice echoed in his colleague's skull. He sounded calm, but firm.

Use what?! Karim thought back.

Your authoritah. Use your authoritah. Look at him. Look straight at him.

Karim held his breath and faced the knife monster. Their gazes locked in a silent contest of will. Slitted reptilian eyes behind the gas mask's glass lenses staring back at Karim. He knew that if he ever faltered, that if he even blinked, the monster would strike him dead. It was pure agony to keep his eyes open. They felt as dry as a desert.

So Karim raised his eyebrows to break the deadlock.

The monster was taken aback. It lifted his chin a little bit, trying to keep up, but it couldn't match Karim's speed.

To the stratosphere, Karim!

Karim's eyebrows reached as high as the human body—and his fur hat—would allow it. He felt the blood flow into his pupils, the pressure growing, the sweat falling down his forehead.

Something snapped in the Ripper's heart like a bowstring. The monster flinched. He looked between Karim and Bill, his posture was that of a scared animal, and he fled without a word into the night.

When the creature was gone, Karim gasped for air and blinked to hydrate his eyes. Bill McMalone simply gave him a sharp nod of approval.

Big Ben struck six and the Buckingham Palace's doors opened at long last. Two members of the Queen's Guard came out in uniform, fresh and confident.

"Hi guys," the oldest of them said. "Sorry for the delay, we had a few corpses to bury in the garden. How was your

shift?"

"Eventful," Bill replied with a sigh. "Class-X disaster scenario."

"I know, right?" The youngest of the new guards—Karim thought his name was Mickey or something—looked at the skies. "We still don't understand what caused the phenomenon."

"Well, we trained for emergencies like this one." Bill frowned at his colleagues. "Which of you dumbasses let Jack the Ripper out of his cell again?"

"We didn't," Mickey protested. "He's in the basement."

Bill McMalone did a thing Karim had yet to see him do: blink. The old guard looked at the shadow of Big Ben and the auroras in the skies. "Wait, this has nothing to do with the celebrity sacrifices?"

"No, they're right on schedule and Queen Elizabeth is still immortal."

Karim opened his mouth, words dying on the tip of his tongue, and then closed it. Instead, he listened in silence.

"This mess," Bill McMalone pointed at the aurora, "has nothing to do with us?"

"Nope," Mickey replied. He looked calm, but concerned. "And from what we can tell, it's worldwide. It's chaos out there. Apparently life is a video game now, there's monsters running around, riots in the streets... We even lost contact with Agent Markle, so the plan to take back the USA for England is dead in the waters."

"It's worse than the night when Prince Charles came out as a vampire," Bill said with an angry frown. "Is he still in his coffin, at least?"

"Yes, although the Duchess of Cornwall is starting to suspect the body double." The new guards glanced at Karim with a conspiratorial look. "Wait, is he... *in the know?*"

"It's okay, he's ready for the initiation. I'll vouch for him." Bill locked eyes with his colleague. "Karim."

Karim straightened up.

"What you see and hear as a Queen's Guard, stays in the Guard," Bill said. "Do you understand?"

By now, Karim had stopped asking himself questions and just went with the flow. "Yes, Sir."

"There are things about the Royal Family—very dark stuff, borderline Satanic—that the public is never allowed to know. Part of your job as a member of the Household Division will be to keep it that way. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Good." Bill McMalone patted Karim on the shoulder. "Happy first day on the job."

Chapter 28: Man vs Rooster

It was early October. The night was cold and Basil slept soundly in his warm, comfortable bed. No nightmare could trouble his mind and no one would dare to wake him up.

"Cooohoo!"

Or so he thought.

The scream echoed through his window with the vocal strength only a rooster could muster. The earplugs in Basil's ears failed to hold back the song. His fists clenched under the pillows.

"Coooohooooo!"

Basil's eyes snapped open in annoyance and silent fury. He grit his teeth and tried to go back to sleep. If he ignored the scream, perhaps it would go away...

"COOOHOOO!"

[**Berserk**] Ailment Resisted.

"Is he going to SHUT THE HELL UP?!" Basil shouted and slammed the bedroom wall with enough strength to shake up the whole house. "SHUT UP!"

But the rooster on his roof wouldn't deprive the world of his singing talent, and dared to defy his owner's wishes for silence.

"COOHOO—" The scream started off as strong as the others but came to an abrupt halt. The rooster's voice became a muffled sound, barely audible. "Coo... coohoo..."

After a few seconds of pleasurable silence, Basil heard someone knock on his window. Plato's tired voice came through.

"It's okay, Basil," he said. "Problem solved."

"Thank you." Basil buried his face into the pillow and fell back into sleep.

By the time Basil woke up and went to make some breakfast, the event had slipped through his mind. To his astonishment, he found Vasi the witch preparing herself a cup of coffee in the kitchen in a black dressing gown. Plato curled on a pillow near the counter, snoring lightly next to a cloth bag.

"Hello, handsome," Vasi greeted Basil, kindly ignoring his disheveled morning look. From her happy face and well-groomed hair, the witch had slept a lot better than he did. "Want a cup?"

"Vasi?" Basil blinked. "How... why are you here?"

"You don't remember?" She put a hand on her waist. "Last time we met, you offered to let me use your alchemy lab."

"I didn't mean the kitchen." Basil pointed at the ground. "The lab is downstairs."

"I know silly, Shellgirl told me. But I don't like coming uninvited, so..." Vasi spilled her bag's contents on the kitchen's counter. A horde of croissants, cakes, and chocolate sweets flooded out of it. "I baked pastries!"

So well-bribed, Basil immediately forgave Vasi for the impromptu home intrusion. He poured himself a coffee cup and they toasted to good cuisine.

"They're good," Basil said while chomping a croissant.
"Mmm... hazelnut?"

"It goes well with the butter."

It did. Basil registered the tip for later use. "Did you craft them?"

Vasi chuckled, her mouth half-full of chocolate cakes. "No, of course not. My Perk lets me craft potions, talismans, and witch stuff. Not pastries."

"That makes me think, you would benefit from my Lair's Crafter Workshop if you joined my party." With the experience gained from the Incursion, Basil could recruit the witch. "I can add you now that I've earned more levels. Plus you would gain a new Perk."

"You are very kind, Basil, but I refuse." Vasi petted Plato behind the ears, which the sleepy cat liked very much. "It's a question of principle. I'm no monster to add to your stable."

"Suit yourself," Basil replied. "I only propose it to help you."

"I know." She winked at him. "That's why I haven't poisoned the pastries yet."

Basil smiled and turned to look at the world beyond his kitchen's windows. The sunlight slowly pierced through a faint cloud of mist. Buggy mowed the lawn near the shore by cutting grass with his mandibles. The centimagma waved his antennae at Basil upon sensing his presence.

It had been three days since the Incursion ended and the team spent them scavenging for supplies. The Unity's defeat turned Dax into a ghost town full of supplies. Unfortunately, although Basil's team found their fill of hardware, computer parts, medicine, and other amenities, food was scarce. Either dishes had started rotting due to lack of preservation or wandering monsters looted supermarkets first. As for firearms, the French's tight regulations on them made armories few and far between; and when the team had finally located one, they found it already ransacked.

Basil had stockpiled reserves to last for over a year, but there was no such thing as too much stored food. This year's winter would be a tough one. He could feel the creeping cold in the air.

Basil had refined his backup generator with his Fire Rune to improve the output by twenty percent, but he would rather diversify his energy production.

I need to drag Steamslime's shell back to the house, he thought. The colossal device could produce steam in large quantities and provide heating. Studying it would also provide insight into the Unity's alien technology. But it's too heavy for a small group like our own.

Basil would figure something out. Eventually.

"Do you have any seeds?" he asked Vasi while finishing his croissant. So good. "I'm going to try one last harvest before the snow comes."

"I have seeds for many herbs, but few vegetables," the witch replied. "If I were you, I would cultivate pumpkins and turnips. Samhain will soon be upon us."

"Samhain? You mean Halloween?" Basil shrugged. "I already have pumpkins in storage for it, and I'm not counting the talking one."

"You misunderstood." Vasi shook her head. "In my world, Samhain is the time of the year when dark magic is at its strongest. Cruel fairies play tricks on the unwary, undead rise from their graves, and demons come out to dance with wicked souls. And pumpkins and turnips..."

"Grow at an accelerated rate?" Basil guessed.

Vasi smiled wickedly. "You catch on quickly."

"There's no magic of Halloween on Earth," Basil replied with skepticism. "Unless you count the power of marketing and children's sweet tooth."

"Correction, there *was* no magic on your planet." Vasi elegantly bit into her croissant. "I can feel it in the air. I would prepare for that night if I were you. Not everyone lives through it."

How very reassuring. Yet Basil didn't have any reason to doubt Vasi's warnings. The witch had been trustworthy so far and a magical Halloween would fit right at home in a post-System world.

"There are other advantages to Samhain, especially if you're a spellcaster," Vasi said. "Powerful rituals that only work during special times like the convergence of planets or the rise of comets can be accomplished on that day."

"You have one in mind?"

"Perhaps." Vasi grinned ear to ear. "I'm debating between calling the moon to Earth and sacrificing babies to a

powerful demon."

Basil shrugged. "So long as you don't do it in my backyard."

"You're no fun." She laughed. "I'm kidding of course. Truthfully, I'm researching a ritual that would improve my spellcasting tier access. It's why I haven't visited before. Lots of prep work."

"Well, if you need assistance, just tell me. I still owe you a favor for the spellbook you lent me."

"Don't be like that, Basil, nobody's counting points," Vasi rolled her eyes. "But thanks for your offer, I'll think about it."

Basil had the acute feeling he would eat his own words in the near future. But until then, he would check if he had pumpkin and turnip seeds left to plant. With Gardener, they should grow quicker. Basil lacked a turkey to cook for Halloween, but surely a local bird monster would make for a nice replacement.

Speaking of birds... "Plato?"

"Mmm?" the cat grunted. He sounded half-asleep. "What, Basil?"

"What did you do with Jeremy?"

Vasi raised an eyebrow. "Who?"

"The rooster," Basil explained. He knew all his animals' names by heart.

"Oh, him?" Plato shrugged. "He went away."

Basil squinted at his cat. "He went away?"

"He fled into the woods, never to be seen again," Plato lied through his teeth. "I tried to catch up to him, but he ran too fast on his tiny chicken legs."

Basil didn't believe the story, so his cat looked up at him with a cute, adorable kitten stare. His owner immediately froze in horror. Plato used that stare when he wanted something... or when he had fucked up.

"Plato." Basil cleared his throat. "Plato, what did you do?"

Realizing he wouldn't get away with it, his cat looked down in shame.

"He's in the freezer," Plato whispered.

Basil blinked a few times as he processed his cat's words, before rising from his seat and checking the freezer. The remains of a murdered rooster starred back at him between a mermaid's severed tail and congealed fries. From his blue face and the marks around his neck, Plato had strangled the bird to death. Even Vasi looked vaguely disturbed at the sight.

"You killed our last rooster?!" Basil asked in shock.

"It was an accident, I swear!" Plato's shame seemed real enough. "I just wanted him to stop cawing, Basil! Three nights he wouldn't shut up! Three nights I couldn't sleep! I put my paws on his throat, but he wouldn't stop! And my hands... It's been less than a month... I didn't know..."

Plato raised his hands at Basil.

"I didn't know thumbs were so powerful!" he said with tears in his eyes.

Basil sighed in frustration. His hand found its way to his forehead. "Plato, Jeremy was our last rooster. We only have hens left and no way to replenish their numbers."

"I know..." Plato's shoulders crumpled. The cat had already realized his terrible blunder. "No more chicks."

"I'm afraid so," Basil replied. This mistake called for drastic measures. "Until we find new roosters to breed with the hens, we'll have to slow down on the fried chicken nights. In fact, we'll probably have to skip them for the winter."

"It's a tragedy." Plato covered his face in despair. "These thumbs have killed..."

"My poor prince of cats." Vasi tried to reassure the cat by scratching him on the back. "It's not too bad."

"It is," Basil replied grumpily. "I don't know where we can find a new chicken. I don't think they'll survive monsters in the wild and all the nearby farms have been devastated."

"You don't necessarily need a male chicken," Vasi pointed out. "Any male Avian monster type should do. Find a nice thunderbird or cockatrice to settle in your coop, and you're set."

"I don't think genetics work that way," Basil replied with a deadpan tone.

"In my world, they do; and sometimes type is no barrier to reproduction. There's a man, the Whore King of Murmurin, who could breed with anyone and anything. He was the stuff of legends." Vasi set her empty cup aside. "What do you have to lose by looking for a replacement bird?"

"What bird?" Plato asked with tears in his eyes. "I killed them all! No birds dare to approach the forest anymore!"

"They did not," Vasi agreed with a warm smile. "But that was before the Incursion. Shellgirl reported new monsters running around in the region. Some of them had feathers."

Basil considered his options and quickly realized he didn't have any better solution to the rooster problem. Besides, Taming monsters for livestock would reduce his party's dependency on chickens and rabbits.

After reassuring the devastated Plato that they would figure something out, Basil finished his breakfast and moved to the basement. He found Shellgirl reviewing the items she intended to sell—mostly soap and toilet paper. Orcs loved those products for a reason that Basil couldn't fathom.

"Yo, partner!" Shellgirl waved a hand at Basil. "Finally ready to meet my fellow merchants?"

"Sure." Shellgirl had pestered Basil for a long time about meeting other friendly monsters living in the Barthes to trade supplies. Since dealing with Vasi had proved fruitful, he was ready to test the waters with his neighbors on neutral ground. They couldn't be worse than goblins. "When is the open market planned?"

"Tomorrow evening at the confluence of streams. I can't wait to introduce you to my customers. They'll be so shocked to speak with a native human for the first time!" Shellgirl put her hands behind her head. "Anyway, what can I do for you today? Looks like you've got a brilliant idea! Come on, share!"

"Vasi told me you reported new monsters in the area?"

"Besides the nimbus creatures?" The cloud monsters had entered the region with the Incursion and showed up whenever it rained. They didn't look aggressive so far, but Basil wouldn't take any chances if one wandered near the house. "Yeah, lots of new faces are moving in the marshes lately. Thunderbirds, cockatrices, basilisks, giant toads..."

"They didn't all come out from our portal," Basil noted.

"Nah, the birds come from the north. I think they're stopping by the region as they migrate south. Others though, they're predators looking for new territory. Most are above level ten too."

Basil crossed his arms. "They must have come through other portals."

Incursions were worldwide events. Basil's party repelled the creatures that stepped through the rift in Dax, but how many portals remained open in the south of France without anyone to hold back the tide? The Incursion displaced hundreds, if not thousands of monsters, who now looked for territory or an ecological niche to fill.

"Also, 'member the humanoids who slipped through the cracks last Incursion?" Shellgirl asked. "I've heard rumors saying that they were elves."

"Elves?" Basil frowned. "With pointy ears?"

"Yeah, that's how my orc contacts called them. The pointy-ears. You know them?"

"Yes and no. Every fantasy game I have makes use of them, but they can't agree on common threads besides the ears." Basil didn't particularly play as elves. He found dwarves

funnier to play and more interesting. "What else did you learn?"

"Not much, but you can ask my customers tomorrow. I'm sure Orcdad'll give you the juicy details." Shellgirl laughed. "An elf archer shot him in the ass."

"Orcdad? That's your customer's name?" When Shellgirl nodded with an amused look, Basil realized originality was among the apocalypse's many victims. "Yeah, I'll interrogate him."

These elves also crossed the portal around the same time as Steamslime, meaning they might be related to the Unity. Basil couldn't overlook the risk they posed to his own little community.

"Since we're going to meet with people, don't you think it's time to assign your levels, partner?" Shellgirl asked. "Can't assign mine until you do, and I desperately need more Charisma points to land interesting deals. I've found an incredible opportunity for foreign development that we can't pass up."

"Good point," Basil conceded. He hadn't yet assigned the seven new levels he had earned from the Incursion because he wanted to make an inventory of his party's needs first. The new priorities were recruiting more livestock, growing their food stocks for winter, and investigating the steampunk technology that Steamslime left behind.

Tamer would help with recruiting livestock; Fisherman and Gardener would make gathering food easier; and Technomancer might prove useful with Unity technology. To make sure he would get a new Perk each time, Basil assigned two levels to Tamer, two levels to Gardener, two

levels to Technomancer, and the last one to the new Fisherman class.

He immediately felt a surge of energy coursing his nerves. It was as if a bolt of lightning had hit him straight in the spine before spreading to all of his limbs. His vision went white and the world became silent. There was no pain, no numbness, no suffering; only the overwhelming rush of power and indescribable pleasure.

Assigned Levels Stat Gains: +5 STR; +7 AGI; +4 VIT; +6 SKI; +4 MAG; +5 INT; +5 CHA; +3 LCK. You gained 220 Health Points and 85 Special Points, and you can register a new spell in your Spellbook (max 4).

New Tamer Perk: Monster Charmer III (Passive): 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.

New Technomancer Perk: Fuel Technology (Active): You can spend Special Points to power machinery instead of normal fuel. The Special Points consumption rate depends on the device used.

New Gardener Perk: Greenhand I (Active): 10 SP. You can automatically identify the properties of plants, such as the stats of [Plant] monsters or the status information of fruits, with no chance of failure.

New Fisherman Perk: Fishing I (Passive): You gain medium proficiency with bows, spears, fishing lines, and nets (x1.5 damage); any attack you make with these weapons counts as [Aquaslayer] and inflicts supereffective damage against the [Aquatic] Type (x3

damage). You can also craft fishing [Traps] with or without a recipe and create your own formulas.

Seven levels at once was a unique experience. Basil had never taken hard drugs, but he suspected that he had just gone through a high. He gasped for air when the feeling of absolute power receded and nearly collapsed to his feet.

Basil breathed in and out, his lungs stronger than before. He looked at his shirt and noticed that his biceps had expanded in size, nearly to the point of ripping his sleeves apart.

"Wow!" Shellgirl clapped. Her voice was clearer than before, the intonations on her words more varied. "You're jacked!"

My hearing improved, Basil realized. He also noted subtle shades of green coloration on Shellgirl's face that he had never noticed before. *My sight too. Must be the new increase in Skill.*

He couldn't deny it anymore; the System changed humans the same way it had transformed Plato into a puss-in-boots. Stat increases modified Basil's body. He usually leveled up too gradually for the changes to become obvious.

Basil would never say no to more muscles, yet he couldn't help but wonder what he might look like thirty levels from now; and how it would change him mentally.

You unlocked the criteria for the [**Druid**] Spellcaster Class and the [**Dragonknight**] Fighter class.

Neat.

"Agh, I haven't evolved yet!" Shellgirl complained. "Does your new Tamer Perk tell you when I'll transform?"

"No," Basil replied, "but it'll give you multiple choices."

"Ohoh, really?" Shellgirl rubbed her hands. "I wonder what they'll be... the path of the wealthy or the path of the strong? I wouldn't mind better defenses against thieves and monster bandits."

Basil's Perk wouldn't show him the choices available. He probably needed to wait until his monsters reached the threshold. Overall, he was pleased with his new abilities. Greenhand I would help him harvest edible plants and Fuel Technology could power house amenities without stressing the generator or solar panels. As for Fishing...

"My halberd counts as both a spear and axe," Basil noted. "System, does it mean I get two proficiency modifiers from Fishing and Slaughterer?"

Weapon proficiencies do not stack together; only the highest of them applies.

"What about supereffective damage? If I use my fire-infused halberd against a fish weak to Fire and to Aquaslayer, would they take nine times the damage?"

Multiple supereffective multipliers do not stack together. An attack is supereffective or it is not. However, the supereffective multiplier does stack with a critical hit or a weapon proficiency.

More and more questions came to Basil's head. Come to think of it, he had been so busy surviving day-to-day attacks that he could never study the System's basics in-depth. "What about accuracy? Does my halberd's accuracy stat mean I have roughly three chances out of four of hitting a target no matter what I do? That can't be right."

Your chances of hitting a target depend on many factors, from your Skill to the terrain and the enemy's Agility. The number shown in a weapon's stats is a modifier among many.

"And why are you telling me this now? You were never so straightforward in the past."

Intelligence is the stat determining your understanding of the System. Your Intelligence stat was simply too low.

Basil angrily punched the screen, his fist going harmlessly through it.

"You should give up, you know?" Shellgirl said. "One day you might hit one of us by accident."

"I have a better idea." Basil tightened his fist. "I'll delay my gratification. I'll hold my hand back, and the day I find a Dismaker Labs employee, I'll strike them once for every time I've shown restraint."

Shellgirl rolled her eyes. "Anyway, with our combined Charisma points, we can finally redeem that voucher and make the sale of the century."

Basil raised an eyebrow. "Voucher?"

"Funny you should ask!" Shellgirl snapped her fingers and a tiny scroll appeared in her hand. "I got it from a wandering merchant a while back. He's returning to the marshes in time for the open market meet-up. I'm sure we can negotiate a good deal."

She unfurled the paper before Basil's eyes. The document was an ad for a magical item shop. It would have looked respectable and professional if not for the sinister logo: an

ouroboros symbol floating over a grinning skull and alchemical flasks.

"'Tye's Boiling Cauldron,'" Basil read out loud. "'10% off from the best magical item shop in the multiverse. Open to the living and the dead.'" The last part is oddly specific."

"Sounds like a respectable company if you ask me."

Basil doubted it, but it wasn't like he could shop magical scrolls at Carrefour either.

But it wasn't the dead part that stood out the most. One word on the voucher made Basil incredibly curious.

"Multiverse," he whispered.

Chapter 29: Man vs Market

The flute song echoed across the river like a slow lullaby.

The group heard the campsite long before they actually saw it. First Buggy noticed notes playing in the air as they walked up the stream, and Basil's newly enhanced senses soon picked them up afterwards. The cold wind carried the song through the autumn leaves under the evening sun. The music was relaxing, almost soothing.

"Reminds me of that time I tried yoga," Basil said as he walked along the river, a bag on his back and his halberd in hand. Shellgirl swam beneath the surface by snapping open her carapace back and forth.

"How did it end?" Vasi asked, following him with Buggy. Basil had left the rest of the team at the house to protect it from attacks.

"In great frustration."

"I expected as much."

"What's yoga, Boss?" Buggy asked.

"A waste of time." Basil couldn't sit still for more than five minutes without going mad. "What's that smell?"

There was a foul stench in the air, similar to a pig's pen. Even the sweet scent of autumn flowers carried by the wind couldn't cover it up.

"Oh, that's the orcs!" Shellgirl said before jumping out of the water and onto the shore. "We're close, Partner."

As she predicted, the group reached a small camp at the spot where the marsh's streams merged with the greater river of L'Adour. A tarp of clothes stretched across many large trees and cast a large shadow over a clearing. Piles of stones were set up around the site and a warm campfire.

Basil readied his halberd to strike. Shellgirl had vouched for her fellow monsters' peacefulness, but it didn't cost anything to stay on his guard.

A musician was sitting on a fallen tree and playing a flute song to a small audience of monsters; and to Basil's surprise, he looked very much human. The man was of Indian descent and quite handsome, with light brown skin and curled raven hair falling on his shoulders. He wore exotic Indian golden pants and some kind of shirt leaving most of his chest exposed. More importantly, he went barefoot and looked no older than twenty.

Basil immediately recognized the man for what he was.

"Oh, God." Basil shuddered in fear. "A hippie."

If the musician greeted Basil with namaste, the jokes would flow.

Whoever the man was, he had gathered a strange audience. The monsters closest to him were a white-feathered bird the size of a horse that combined the body of a hawk with a lion's crimson mane, and a magnificent, three-headed golden cobra. The rest were a trio of gray-skinned humanoids who Basil assumed were orcs, a walking skeleton in tattered clothes... and goblins.

Basil immediately saw red when he noticed two of them in the small crowd. The first was normal-sized, with pallid white skin and pitch-black eyes. A blue scrub-covered his

mouth and a hooded robe the rest of its tiny body. He kept scalpels and a bonesaw attached to a belt, and a bag full of ice within arm's reach. The other goblin was almost as tall as Basil himself, with boar tusks and hooves for feet. War paint covered his brownish skin.

Cafaimal (Autopsy Gremlin)

Level 10 [Humanoid/Fairy]

Party: Cut & Deep

Benoit (Hobgoblin)

Level 10 [Giant/Humanoid]

Party: Cut & Deep

Wild goblins could undergo metamorphosis? If so, Basil was glad to have slaughtered every member of Ogremoché's band. One of them might have come back for vengeance later as a far more powerful entity.

Wait, could these two be survivors from the water station dungeon?

The two evolved goblins tensed up upon sensing his suspicious gaze on their back and froze like rabbits finding themselves cornered by a fox. The autopsy gremlin, Cafaimal, raised a trembling hand at Basil's face.

"T-that's him, Benoit!" he shouted at his terrified teammate. "The Ogre of the Barthes! Goblin-Eater!"

Basil's jaw clenched. "Shellgirl, didn't you correct them about my species?"

"Correct them about what?" she replied in confusion. "You tried to feed me goblins the night we met."

"And they tasted good too, Boss!" Buggy said with enthusiasm.

His response only terrified the two walking dishes further. What, Basil ate goblins a few dozen times and that was all people remembered about him? Couldn't they tell tales of his epic dragonslaying deed instead?

The musician sensed the tension in the air and ended his song. He lowered his silver flute and opened his deep black eyes at Basil. They felt both full of wisdom and innocence all at once, as if the man was older than his outside appearance would suggest.

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear you coming." The musician offered Basil's group a sharp nod. His attitude contrasted with the snake and bird close to him, who observed the newcomers with wariness. "It has been many moons since I last saw a fellow human. Namaste, friends."

He dared, Basil thought. "Sorry, namaste home tonight."

"Namastawhat, Boss?" Buggy asked.

"It means hello in the ancient New Age Yoga society," Basil joked. "If you want to sound spiritual, Buggy, say namaste."

The musician laughed heartily; a sound so pure Basil almost felt ashamed for his terrible answer. "Well-played," the stranger said with a polite bow. "My name is Kalki. A pleasure to meet a fellow Tamer."

A Tamer? Well, that explained his comfort with monsters. It felt so odd to Basil to meet another one like him.

"Goblin-Eater?" one of the orcs, a teenage girl from her facial features, whistled at Basil. "He's almost as brawny as you are, Ma!"

The System-summoned orcs both matched and differed from the fantasy stereotypes of their species. They were muscular humanoids taller than a human with wolfish ears, pelts for clothes, and ashen-gray skin. Their broad shoulders, brawny hips, pale red eyes, and protruding canines made them look like barbarian savages.

The group of three present at the gathering was almost certainly a family unit. The adults were both two heads taller than Basil. The male was bald and wielded a stone tower shield nearly two meters in length; the female orc's long white hair flowed out of a horned metal helmet, and she wielded a hammer. Both were covered in scars, although the woman was the most muscular of the two by far.

The girl that whistled at Basil was clearly the couple's daughter and nearly as tall as he was. She looked around sixteen, an oversized hat threatening to fall off her long white hair. Her weapon was a rusty iron mace, and unlike the rest of her family, she favored tattered black jeans, a shirt, and leather boots over pelts. If not for her appearance, Basil could have mistaken her for a human delinquent.

As for their smell... The stench coming from the orcs was almost unbearable. Vasi took steps back to stay away from the orcs in disgust, and even Basil, who wasn't the cleanest person in the world, thought a garbage fill smelled nicer than these three. No wonder they were so fond of soap.

Orcdad

Level 16 [Giant/Humanoid]

Faction: Clan Orclan.

Orcmom

Level 18 [Giant/Humanoid]

Faction: Clan Orclan.

Orcine

Level 13 [Humanoid]

Faction: Clan Orclan.

Basil wondered if they hid an Orcgrandpa and Orcgrandma in their genealogical tree. From their party's name, they took the laziest approach possible for names. Orcdaddy would have sounded far better too.

A pity they didn't join my party, Basil thought. I would have given inspired names. Like Raphaël Andreas Corpus, or Danielle Francine von Levinksi. Names with history and power!

"Another human?" Vasi whispered to Shellgirl, her gaze set on Kalki. "I didn't know you brought one to this gathering."

"I didn't. I've no idea who this is." The merchant pouted with crossed arms. "I wanted to show off my human partner for bragging rights, but that stranger stole my thunder!"

"My apologies," Kalki replied with a sheepish smile. "I walked upon your camp by chance. I didn't mean to intrude."

"No harm done," Vasi reassured him with a bright, flirty smile. "Your song was lovely, by the way."

"It was crap," said the youngest orc, Orcine, before spitting on the grass. "War drums rule!"

"Orcine!" Her mother slapped her on the back of head with enough force to knock her daughter face-first on the ground. "Learn respect, or I'll teach it to you!"

"Ma!" The young orc protested. "Not in public!"

Her mother's face might as well have been made of stone. "You shame a stranger in public, you get shamed in public."

"It's alright," Kalki said, clearly embarrassed by the strong reaction. "Everyone is entitled to their own musical tastes."

"Personally, I prefer Japanese rock," Basil said.

"My daughter's right though, good drums would make it better," the male orc, Orcdad, added with a grunt. "You should teach your bird to sing too."

"Birds can't sing," Orcine mumbled under her breath as she rose up.

"Can't agree more," Basil replied, half-praying that his next rooster would know better than to scream in the morning. He noticed that the goblins still looked at him with terrified eyes. "What?"

"Y-You're going to eat us?" asked the smallest of the two, Cafaimal.

"That depends." Basil licked his lips. "Do you self-identify as edible?"

The evolved goblins looked back at him with mortified eyes.

"Relax, I'm kidding, I'm kidding!" Basil waved a hand at them. "I'm not going to eat you on sight *just* because you're goblins. That would be racist."

The duo let out sighs of relief.

"But just to be sure, I've sworn a blood oath to drive goblins out of the Barthes after Ogremoché's band hung a man right in front of my garden." Basil squinted suspiciously at the evolved goblins, watching sweat falling down their forehead. "You were not part of that group, right? I hate loose ends."

"No, we didn't come from that dungeon!" Benoit protested. "We spawned from another beyond the southern mountains!"

"A-and we aren't goblins anymore anyway!" Cafaimal pointed out with two thumbs up. "So we count outside your oath, right?"

"Mmm... good point." Basil made a mental note to add monsters' evolutionary transformations to his next blood oath to close future loopholes. "Don't attack us, be good neighbors, and I won't have you over for dinner. You leave me alone, I leave you alone."

His grudge against goblins started and ended with Ogremoché's group. If the rest of their kind proved accommodating and friendly, they wouldn't fear anything from Basil. Since Shellgirl vouched for these two, he would give them the benefit of the doubt.

"Don't worry guys, my partner accepts bribes." Shellgirl clapped heartily. "Anyway, thanks for coming to the first Marshmarket! Let the merchandise flow! We've got soap, toilet paper, meat..."

"If you've got a spare liver like last time, I can trade it for a gargoyle's heart or a wyvern's lung." Realizing he wouldn't end up as Basil's dinner, Cafaimal opened his bag of ice to reveal the two organs. The lung was purple and thorny, the heart gray and stony... and it somehow kept beating on its own. "I'll implant them for free."

"You can have more than one heart?" Bugsy asked with interest. "Awesome! Do you have wings too? Can you give me wings to fly with? That would be amazing!"

"Know what? I don't have the goods tonight, but I'll perform the surgery next time for your pancreas and one of your kidneys!"

"I wouldn't try, Bugsy," Vasi said mirthfully. "I've heard rumors that the last person he implanted an organ in died from it."

"Of course not, he died from disease!" the gremlin protested. "And I have a witness who can prove it!"

"I saw it all!" His hobgoblin colleague raised a hand. "The heart-transplant customer died from a blood infection! It was completely unrelated!"

Basil glanced at the gremlin's scalpel and bonesaw. Brown spots marked the improperly cleaned blades. Unrelated his ass! Zachariel would have had an apoplexy at the sight of their shoddy work!

"Bugsy, we don't accept comfort surgery under my roof," Basil warned his centimagma. "Also, your blood is made of lava and would probably burn the wings anyway."

"Aww..." Bugsy lowered his antennae in disappointment. "But they would look so good on me..."

As Shellgirl argued with the back-alley doctors over organs and Vasi haggled over the price of potions with the orcs, Basil relaxed somewhat. The paranoid hermit in him had half-expected an ambush of some kind, but it appeared all the monsters present were the traders they advertised themselves as. He might actually get along with his neighbors.

It was the other human among them that intrigued Basil the most. Kalki's level remained hidden from his sight, alongside those of the hawk and serpent that followed him around. Basil assumed that the three of them formed a party.

"Where do you come from?" Basil asked Kalki. "First time I've seen an Indian outside of Paris."

"Indian?" Kalki scratched his cheek with a thoughtful look. "The word sounds familiar to me..."

"You don't know what an Indian is?" His fellow human's confusion left Basil somewhat concerned for his health. "Unless... unless you suffer from amnesia?"

"Amnesiac?" Bugsy asked. "Like the Amnesia Ailment?"

"Is it one now?" Basil wondered if the System considered cancer and Alzheimer's ailments too. "Yes, it means a loss of memory. Usually due to trauma or substance abuse."

"I remember precious little of my former life," Kalki confirmed Basil's worry. "My name, the shadow of my home and family, my songs..."

"How did it happen?" Basil asked. A shame. He would have loved to question him about Hindu deities and potentially elucidate the Trimurti System's mysteries.

"I do not remember." Kalki smiled sheepishly. "I woke up in the southern mountains with my companions' eggs, the vague feeling that I was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and a terrible headache."

"We didn't stay in the eggs for long," the hawk monster said with a bellowing voice as powerful as the wind. The many-headed serpent hissed shyly in support. "The name's Garud by the way. The quiet snake lady is Shesha. We form quite the music band, don't you think?"

Basil examined Kalki closely. Amnesia usually resulted from assault, though a spell or System-related effect might also cause memory loss.

Maybe he took LSD or drugs. Kalki reminded Basil of New Age self-help hacks he had the misfortune of encountering in his university days. Or... could the three of them have come from another world? Vasi confirmed humans exist on her own, so that man could have teleported to Earth through an Incursion and lost his memory along the way. It would explain his foreign clothes.

Basil understood too little about Incursions to confirm this theory. He promised to dig further into it.

"Garud and Shesha have been my trusted companions since I woke up," Kalki said, his eyes full of concern. "But my girlfriend Padma is missing. I'm looking for her."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Basil replied, and he meant it from the bottom of his heart. The faces of the Elissalde sisters after the death of Major Grange still weighed on his mind. Basil himself often wondered how his estranged mother fared in his native Bulgaria. "Maybe I can help find her. What does she look like?"

Kalki blushed slightly. "I don't know."

Basil frowned. "You don't know?"

"I remember that I have forgotten her and I know I will recognize her when I meet her. If that makes sense."

"It doesn't," Basil replied bluntly. The man's tale felt sketchy to him, but Kalki sounded so innocent that he was probably telling the truth... or what he believed to be the truth. "You should go to Bordeaux. It's the last human stronghold in the region and the army evacuated survivors to it."

"Bordeaux?" A map of France appeared in Kalki's hands. He must have stored it in his inventory. "This city in the northwest?"

Basil checked the map and confirmed. "Yes, that spot up the Garonne river. It's a two-hours drive if nothing dangerous attacks you on the road. If you're willing to wait, the army should send a squad to recover petrified people in nearby Dax. They can escort you to safety."

"Why drive when you can soar through the skies?" Garud scoffed and showed his mighty wings. "No foe can reach us above the clouds!"

"We will fly away at dawn," Kalki said before offering Basil a thankful nod. "Thank you, my friend. I will stop in this city next."

"If you need food or drink, I've got some extra meat and water," Basil proposed. "I know of an empty water station nearby or a full city if you need a roof and heating."

Basil neglected to mention his home for several reasons. Although Kalki sounded somewhat friendly, he remained a

stranger. The System wouldn't reveal his classes either, which put Basil on edge. Even if Kalki didn't cause trouble, revealing the house's location might backfire on him later.

"Boss, didn't you say we needed food for the winter?" Buggy asked. "Why are you giving it away?"

"Because I believe in hospitality." Basil simply couldn't close his door to a fellow human in need when they crossed his path. He had learned that from the Old Man. "One day, we might rely on the kindness of strangers."

That, and Kalki appeared trustworthy for a reason Basil couldn't put his finger on. The Indian radiated candidness and earnest friendliness. Basil considered himself a pretty good judge of character and nothing in Kalki's behavior seemed fake. If anything, he reminded Basil of an innocent child lost in the world.

The kind who would play a concert for monsters he encountered along the road. Yet another reason not to invite him in the house; he might reveal its location to others out of naïveté.

"My troupe has food, but I would gladly rest in a dwelling." Kalki joined his hands and gave Basil a deep bow. "I will return your kindness."

"You could start by telling me which Tamer Perks you unlocked," Basil said, half as a test and half to feed his curiosity. He would give Kalki the wide berth if he lied about his abilities. "Not knowing what Perks levels will bring causes me many headaches. I can never tell what's the best class to invest in."

"I face the same problem," Kalki replied with a grin. "I will not pretend I know everything about the class, but I will

gladly share what I learned."

As it turned out, Kalki had taken thirteen levels in Tamer. He did not lie about the Perks that they shared, which reassured Basil. According to Kalki, level 9 unlocked a unique technique healing all monsters in the Tamer's party; level 13 strengthened it further by granting them temporary immunity to Ailments. But it was level 11 that interested Basil the most.

"You can teleport back to your Lair at will?" Basil asked, his eyes wide open.

"I could if I kept one," Kalki replied with a warm grin. "We stay on the road all the time. I mostly use the Perk's secondary feature, which lets me summon my friends to my position."

His bird chuckled. "Like that time with the bugs. Almost got him before Shesha and I arrived."

"Yes, well..." Kalki coughed. "I do seem to attract trouble."

The level 11 Tamer Perk wasn't all that useful for a nomad, but for a sedentary man like Basil? It was potentially invaluable. He never dared to forage beyond the marsh for fear of leaving his house abandoned for days. With that power, Basil could potentially drive away to a distant region at dawn, scavenge supplies all day long, and teleport back home for the night.

"Honestly, I was half-expecting a Perk forcing two Tamers into a monster battle for money," Basil mused. "Like Pokemon."

"A battle?" The joke proposal horrified Kalki. "Why? Friends don't fight each other, and certainly not for money. Gold

brings neither happiness nor peace."

Basil heard Shellgirl choke at his words, but they made him appreciate Kalki more. *Now I remember why I was so interested in New Age stuff once. Though he looks like the real deal rather than a closet marketer. His Charisma must be through the roof too.*

"Hey, Dragonslayer." The orc family approached Basil, with the matriarch taking the lead. "Shellgirl says you're looking to buy food for the winter?"

Dragonslayer. It sounded better than Goblin-Eater.

"Got some to trade?" Basil asked.

"We've got extra fireboar ham, thunderbird legs, and unicorn steak." From Orcmom's offer, Basil could reasonably assess that her family were dedicated carnivores. "We'll exchange them for healing potions and brawny powder."

"Brawny powder?" Basil asked. *Shellgirl, what did you tell them?* "You mean protein powder?"

"Yeah, brawny powder," Orcmom pointed at her daughter. "The runt is too scrawny to hunt well."

"I'm not," her daughter mumbled. "I wanna go home and regain my classes!"

"Do you have access to classes?" Basil asked with a frown. Their behavior and family dynamics made more sense now. The orc family had crossed over into Earth the same way Megabug and Vasi did. But as far as he knew, monsters couldn't take Player classes.

"We did!" Orcine gritted her teeth. "When we crossed over, we lost 'em all! All my busted Mercenary Perks vanished! This place is junk!"

"No swearing in public!" Orcmom slapped her daughter in the back of the head, although not hard enough to throw her to the ground again. Kalki winced at the sight, though Basil shrugged. He'd seen worse parental discipline. "Our class levels transformed into monster ones. Lost some Perks, and gained new ones. It was a trade-off."

"Robbery," her daughter mumbled. "For me, it was robbery."

"Yeah, and the pointy-ear that attacked me used an Archer-only Perk," her husband grumbled. "Damn double standards."

"Does it mean I could gain classes like the Boss if I crossed into another world?" Buggy asked. "I want to cast spells too!"

The System immediately tried to limit a wizard centipede's limitless potential.

Compatible Systems may have small but important differences. Conversions happen on a case to case basis, but it is unlikely for a giant centipede to become a Player species.

"Bug racist," Basil said.

Dismaker Labs wishes you a happy (**humanocentrist**) apocalypse!

Humanocentrist? Wait, did Dismaker Labs intentionally exclude all non-humans from becoming Players? How could that fit with the orc's tale of elves with classes?

"Can you tell me more about these elves?" Basil asked the orcs. "I might hunt them down myself."

"To eat them?" Orcdad asked. "You should. Elves eat so much grass and fruits, their flesh is full of vitamins."

"Iron too," Orcmom added. "They kinda taste like spinach too."

Basil almost asked for elf-cooking tips, before realizing it leaned in a bit too close to cannibalism. He had to draw a line *somewhere*.

Bugsy, who didn't share his moral quandaries, salivated at the thought of eating elves. "Great, we could cook them with the rooster Mr. Plato strangled. It would cheer him up."

"By the way, gotta ask." Orcmom leaned in to whisper in Basil's ear. "How do they taste? Goblins?"

"Good, but better with potatoes and pepper sauce," Basil replied with a conspiratorial tone. "I suggest stuffing them with apples before sending them to the oven."

"Nice tip. Never dared to eat a goblin, but I don't wanna die without trying. Not that I would eat a neighbor..." The orc matriarch glanced at Cafaimal and Benoit with barely restrained hunger. "Such a shame..."

In the end, no goblin was sacrificed on the altar of culinary curiosity. Basil traded the unicorn steaks for a few healing potions, exchanged non-questionable cooking tips with the orcs, and refused an expensive offer for his kidney from the autopsy gremlin.

According to Orcdad, the elves attacked him while he was hunting thunderbirds in the west. From his description, he

had walked a good four hours west, all the way to the marshes of Orx and beyond. The area where the ambush took place sounded a lot like an old reptilium Basil once visited.

He wondered what happened to its scaled inhabitants after the apocalypse. Did they escape, die, or mutate into monsters? Whatever the case, Orcdad indicated many bird monsters nested in the Orx marshes. Basil could both investigate his new neighbors and potentially tame an Avian monster to breed with the hens all at once.

As the meeting came to an end, only a small matter remained to settle.

"Basil, this is Le Vendu," Shellgirl introduced Basil to the skeleton merchant. "Le Vendu, this is Basil. He was super-duper interested in your Boss' multiversal business."

"Our master below created us with the unique ability to travel between our assigned universe and his shop," the skeleton explained. Ghostly candle lights appeared in his empty eye-sockets. Basil wondered if he could snuff them out with his breath. "We're low-level enough that few level barriers trouble us."

Which implied most worlds had one. "I'm looking for information about Incursions and how worlds fit together," Basil explained. "Perhaps I could exchange letters with your superior?"

"You could do better than that," the skeleton replied. "Anyone with a voucher also counts as a 'possession' when I use my Perk."

"So he can transport us directly to his Boss," Shellgirl summed up. "Neat, huh? That way you can ask your

questions directly at the top!"

"With potentially no way to come back," Basil pointed out. He wasn't enthusiastic about the proposal at all. "No offense to your patron, but he could welcome us with an ambush for all I know."

"Understandable," the skeleton replied, taking it in stride.

"I'll take him up on his offer of a temporary world transfer," Vasi said. "I need specific grimoires for Samhain and this 'Walter Tye' apparently has them in stock. I'll test the waters for you, handsome. If I return, it's a safe proposal."

"And if you don't?" Basil asked with a smile. "I'll avenge your death?"

"Nothing so dramatic, though you're welcome to try," she replied with a smile. "I would be thankful if you could burn the books under my bed though. Some pages would make a priest go blind."

"Deal."

Chapter 30: Man vs Main Quest

Vasi didn't come back the next morning. Instead, the day's visitors were zombies.

It had become a ritual lately. Shambling corpses walked out of the woods in the morning, with flesh rotting off their bones and eyes falling out of their heads. They came by the dozen, cried out for brains, and tried to break into the garden.

Zombie

Level 2 Undead.

The first to climb over the fence took a fireball to the face for his trouble.

"Burn them all!" Rosemarine fired a handgun round in the air to rally the troops. The garden's vegetables rose to welcome the invaders with fire and fury. "Kill them again!"

"For the queen!" The vegetables roared as they charged into battle. Onion Spider trapped zombies with webs and allowed Demon Tomato to blast them with fireballs. Strawboogie Berry danced to buff Bean Ninja as he beheaded undead with his trusty cleaver knife. Ghostie Pumpkin, their leader, coordinated their attacks; and Rosemarine healed the wounded with pollen.

Basil watched the epic garden battle from the safety of his lawnchair, with Buggy and Plato sleeping at his side. They

wouldn't gain any experience from killing the weak undead and the vegetables had the situation well in hand.

Besides, House Garden was responsible for the zombie incursion.

To strengthen the vegetables with an extra Tamer Perk, Basil had temporarily added them to his party. Unfortunately, Ghostie Pumpkin's hidden ability turned out to be the aptly named *Ghost Magnet*. Weak undead flocked to the vegetables' location like moths to a flame. Even the house's camouflage couldn't prevent zombies from finding their way into it.

Basil had strongly considered cooking the pumpkin to avoid a security breach, but Rosemarine had begged for the vegetable's life; she had grown maternally fond of her garden charges. Basil couldn't refuse anything to his sweet carnivorous plant and decided to make the best out of the situation.

His new levels had given him extra Lair Points to spend on reinforcing the house. By purchasing Exp Boost I and Loot Boost I, Basil increased the rate at which his allies gained experience and treasures within one hectare of the house. By the time the vegetables cleared the garden, they had gained enough experience to reach level 7 and gathered a treasure trove of golden teeth.

Basil didn't have the heart to join in the battle anyway. He worried for Vasi. The witch had vanished alongside the skeletal merchant to meet his superior and hadn't returned yet. No matter Shellgirl's promises that everything would be fine, Basil was starting to regret not joining Vasi on her trip. He hoped his caution wouldn't cost her her life.

What can I do about it anyway? The skeleton merchant took Vasi away to another world entirely and Basil had no way of tracking them down. *I'll have to wait.*

Basil would hunt for roosters and investigate the elves today. That would keep his mind busy.

"I wonder where they come from," Buggy said. "The zombies. There can't be so many dead humans buried in the marsh."

"You would be wrong," Basil replied. "René told me he saw criminals dumping a corpse in the Barthes once. I assume others took a dirt nap in muddy waters."

Basil did wonder whether the zombies rose from their graves *because* of Ghostie Pumpkin's Perk or if it simply gave them the motivation to move around. He needed to check.

"Hypothetically." A devious idea crossed Basil's mind. "Do you think we would gain experience from raising our dead enemies from the dead and then killing them all over again?"

"Wouldn't that be cruel, Boss?" Buggy asked.

"I'm willing to try it with birds." Plato squirmed on the ground like an addict in despairing need of his fix. "Rah, I need to hunt feathered game! I've tried lizards, toads, even moths, but none of them give me as much satisfaction as mice and birds!"

"You should join birdaholic anonymous," Basil quipped. Rosemarine approached him with her vegetable troupe and displayed their spoils.

"Mister, Mister, we brought fertilizer!" Rosemarine proudly presented Basil with a zombie's head. "We can grow seeds in the brain!"

Aww, she was mindful of the environment!

"We'll compost them first and then plant new turnips," Basil promised. With his new Gardener levels, his Jardin Secret should divide the growth period by four. Thus it should take ten to thirteen days to make a new harvest before Halloween. "I'm proud of you."

He petted Rosemarine on the head, making her wriggle in pleasure. The vegetables sang their glory. "All hail King Basil and Queen Rosemarine, lords of the garden!"

"Since when did they learn to speak?" Plato asked.

"Rosemarine and I taught them," Buggy explained with pride. Basil noticed he hadn't shown jealousy at his owner showing affection to Rosemarine. The battle with Steamslime had made the centimagma more confident, more secure in his place as an esteemed member of the household. "One day, I will teach the rabbits to speak back too!"

Basil suddenly wondered how many cows begged for life before ending up on supermarket shelves. Plato had shown that animals were self-aware from the start, even if humans couldn't understand them. Basil had no qualms about eating sentient species, but it made him feel slightly guilty.

Do you want to expel Ghostie Pumpkin, Demon Tomato, Bean Ninja, Onion Spider, and Strawboogie Berry from your party?

The problem with Lair benefits was that they only applied to Basil's party members. He had to register House Garden's members into his own party for the battle's duration, then kick them out and add his old allies back again. It was such a chore.

You can create interlocked parties by forming a Guild. To do that, you must conquer a dungeon.

"I'll pass," Basil replied. He expelled House Garden's members and then proceeded to add his former party members back into his group. "Alright people, pack your things. After I compost the corpses and plant the turnips, we'll travel east to hunt for elves."

"Finally!" Plato bolted to his feet. "Some action!"

"Can I come, Mister?" Rosemarine pleaded. "I'm one level away from metamorphosis! When I evolve, I will eat everyone except my friends and steal all the world's cakes!"

"Sure, sweetie," Basil replied. "I wonder what choice for metamorphosis will present to you."

Plato squinted at his owner. "You can choose between metamorphoses?"

"With my new Tamer Perk, yes you can."

"Huh." The cat sat on the grass with a curious look on his face. "What choices would have been available to me?"

"Does it matter, Mister Plato?" Buggy asked. "You are awesome as a Cait Sith."

"I know, thank you," Plato replied with arrogance. "But don't you wonder what you might have become instead of a

centimagma?"

Bugsy shrugged. "I don't want to dwell on what could have been. I would rather move on."

"System, I know you can't show me the paths my monsters can take until they've reached the right level," Basil said. "But what about discarded paths? Can you tell me what Plato could have become instead of a Cait Sith?"

According to his stats, Housecat Plato could have metamorphosed into:

- Bakeneko (Beast/Fairy)
- Envoy of Bastet (Beast/Angel)
- Smilocub (Beast)

Basil paused upon seeing the last one. Uh oh.

"Basil, why aren't you saying anything?" Plato tensed up. "Basil?"

"Can metamorphosis paths eventually reconverge?" Basil asked, trying to keep a straight face.

No. Once a metamorphosis path is selected, it varies wildly from alternate options. A Cait Sith cannot jump back into the Smilocub's line.

"Basil, why are you giving me a sad look?" Plato wagged his tail, his eyes full of concern. "Basil..."

"Plato." Basil gathered his breath. "Promise me you won't take it badly."

His cat's eyes widened in horror. He had guessed the truth.

"I will never become a smilodon," Plato whispered. "I blew my chance."

Basil briefly considered lying to spare his friend's feelings, but Plato knew him too well. He would know. "I'm sorry, Plato," he apologized. "If I'd known, I would have assigned more levels to Tamer earlier."

Plato didn't answer. He didn't admonish Basil for his poor foresight or reassure his owner that he would get over it. He simply sat on the grass with a soulless gaze.

"Mr. Plato, are you alright?" Buggy asked with concern.

"Healing Pollen!" Rosemarine showered Plato with healing powder, but she couldn't cure emotional damage.

"Plato, it's okay," Basil tried to cheer him up. "You will always be my dwarf panther."

His cat rose up and walked away without a word.

"Plato, where are you going?" Basil asked, suddenly worried. "Plato!"

"To hang myself in the garage!" his cat shouted back. "To make you feel guilty!"

"What?" Basil jumped out of his lawnchair. "You wouldn't dare!"

Plato looked over his shoulder with a sad kitten look; the kind that would make even a sociopath cry. "W-won't you feel sorry for poor me?"

Basil hesitated. "Yes, but—"

"Good!" When Plato smirked deviously, Basil knew he had fallen into his trap. "Then imma do it!"

"Plato, you dick!" Basil ran after him. Plato attempted to leap away, but his owner caught him by the back of the neck and lifted him above the ground. The cat struggled fruitlessly against the iron grip. "You have seven lives left anyway! Hanging yourself won't be enough!"

"Then I will cut open my veins and my ghost will haunt the bathroom! My wandering soul shall torment you for centuries!" Crocodile tears formed in Plato's eyes. "Seven lives aren't worth living without a pair of saberteeth!"

What a drama queen. Basil squinted at his cat, who did his best to look like a suicidal teenager. *It's all about making me feel sorry for not picking up Tamer levels earlier.*

"Don't cry," Rosemarine whispered in concern. "You will grow big too one day! Big enough to cast down the stars!"

"Y-yes, she's right!" Bugsy nodded many times in quick succession. "Look at me, Mr. Plato! I'm sure you will evolve into something even greater than a smilodon with more levels! Like a, a... centicat!"

"You can't possibly believe in his little play," Basil protested. "If he wanted to kill himself, he would have sliced his own neck with his claws!"

"See? See?" Plato waved his tail in his owner's direction. "I'm already dead in his mind!"

"Don't make me throw you into the river," Basil warned Plato. "And what's wrong with being a fairy cat? You might evolve into something stronger than a smilodon!"

The cat's gaze lit up with a flame in it. "Basil, do you think... Do you think I can transform into a lion at least? A giant lion, with fire for a mane?"

Basil sincerely doubted it, but he knew better than to say it to his cat's face. *If we end up losing the house, we should start a circus. He would make us good money.*

"I dunno," Basil replied, which was the truth. He had no way to tell what a Cait Sith might transform into. "Maybe?"

His lackluster answer calmed Plato. The cat wiped away his fake tears. "Alright... I'll endure. For the mane."

God save us if he does transform into a lion, Basil thought as he lightly dropped his cat on the grass. *He would never shut up about it.*

Wind blew over the house and a giant shadow flew above the group's head.

Basil immediately summoned his halberd in alarm and his monsters prepared for battle. A giant white bird landed on the grass in front of them, holding a golden snake in his talons and carrying a man on his back.

"Namaste, friends." Kalki gracefully leaped from Garuda's back and politely bowed before Basil's group. "I hope I did not interrupt anything."

"Who is this guy?" Plato asked. The vegetables, Rosemarie included, hissed threateningly at the newcomers. Shesha imitated them with her three heads, ready to defend her Tamer at the first sign of trouble.

"How did... How did you find my house?" Basil asked, his teeth clenching in annoyance. "It's camouflaged!"

"Dude, you have a field full of crops surrounded by woods and marshes," Garud said. "Pretty easy to see from above."

Stealthy feature, my ass! Basil had spent three Lair Points for a useless protection. *I want a refund!*

You cannot regain Lair Points that you have already spent.

"Even if they don't perform as advertised?" Basil snarled. "Did you forget to include consumer protection in your System package? I'll sue you!"

Dismaker Labs wishes you a happy apocalypse!

"I swear, I'll strangle the customer service if I ever find them." Basil sighed. "It's fine, guys, he's a friend."

"Did I do something wrong?" Kalki looked at Basil with concern. "I can leave right now if you prefer. I wanted to say goodbye before leaving for Bordeaux, but I did not want to intrude."

"No, no, it's alright. I'm just annoyed with the System." Basil stored his halberd back in his inventory. "You didn't interrupt anything. Do you want a cup of coffee or tea?"

"You are very kind, but I must refuse. We have a long road ahead of us." Kalki noticed Plato glaring at his bird and smiled. "Is something the matter?"

"Nothing," the cat lied.

"He wants to challenge me," Garud guessed. The mighty bird expanded his wings in defiance and overshadowed the much smaller cat. "Try and regret it!"

"Don't tempt me, you big chicken!" Plato showed his fangs. "I can take you!"

Garud opened his beak to strike, but his Tamer didn't let the situation escalate into a fight. Kalki walked between the two would-be combatants and locked eyes with Plato.

"What?" The cat asked and shifted on his legs. The man's gaze clearly made him uncomfortable.

"You are a hurt soul," Kalki said. "I can see it in your eyes. You don't have to fight and kill other people to prove your worth to your friends. They already love you."

Plato stared at Kalki with a dumbfounded expression. He didn't react as the stranger kindly patted him on the head. "You have gathered many true friends, Basil," Kalki said. "I pray you treasure them as they do you."

What is wrong with this man? Basil couldn't put his finger on it. Something about Kalki felt... unnatural. Almost otherworldly. *Maybe he is. I can check right now.*

"Can you follow me for a minute?" Basil asked Kalki. "I would like to show you something."

"Certainly," Kalki replied. Basil led him into the garage. The car-sized holomachine taken from Steamslime rested in the back alongside supplies. "What a peculiar device. How does it work?"

"Like this." Basil inserted a cubic gem into the holomachine's slot and recharged it with his Fuel Technology Perk. Steam poured out of its pipes and the central mirror lit up. The pictures of over eighty symbols of various complexity appeared on the latter's surface. "From what I

gathered, each symbol is associated with a key from the board."

Alas, Steamslime continued to mess with Basil from beyond the grave. The snail-dragon had sealed the holomachine with the most powerful defense of all.

A password lock.

"A puzzle?" Kalki asked with an innocent grin. "How interesting."

"How annoying you mean," Basil replied. "Do you recognize the symbols?"

"I do not." Kalki shook his head. "They mean nothing to me."

"Well, it was worth a shot." If anything, Basil was relieved to hear that Kalki had seemingly nothing to do with the Unity. "I hoped that this machine could jog your memory."

"Thank you for trying." Kalki smiled sadly. "Between us, you already did make me remember things."

Basil raised an eyebrow. "I did?"

"My companions and I slept in the water station that you recommended to us," Kalki explained. "The place felt familiar to me. You were in my dreams too."

"Your dreams?" Basil frowned. "I'm certain we've never met before."

"I don't think so either, yet I dreamed of you all the same. I saw you fight a monstrous bug in a cave of stone before facing a tower of steel that breathed light and magic." Kalki nodded to himself, a thoughtful expression on his face. "A

device more complex than your machine and that felt familiar to me."

Basil observed Kalki in silence as his mind processed the man's words. How did he... a possible explanation quickly came to mind.

"Are you a psychic?" Basil asked. "A telepath?"

"I cannot read your mind if that's what you're asking," Kalki replied with a chuckle. "From your answer, I assume my dreams mean something to you."

"They do." How could this man dream about events he hadn't witnessed himself? And if he found the dungeon's server familiar... "Do the words 'Dismaker Labs' and 'neurotower' mean anything to you?"

Kalki's eyes lit up with surprise and hope. "Yes, they do. I've heard them before, I'm sure of it."

"Where?" Basil probed for information. "Where did you hear these words? Did the System tell them to you?"

"No, no, I..." Kalki put a hand on his forehead. "I can't remember. These words echo in my mind, but they lack meaning. What are they?"

"The people who destroyed the world, and the tools they used to do the deed." If Kalki was related to them... "Do you think seeing that tower would help you remember?"

"Maybe... yes, I think so." Kalki bowed before Basil. "Please, my friend, can you bring me to it?"

"I damaged the tower of your dreams beyond repair," Basil explained, raising a hand before Kalki lost hope. "A friend

called Neria Elissalde took the parts to Bordeaux. I can ask her to show them to you."

"That would be great." The thought of finding answers about his past seemed to fill Kalki with energy. "Thank you, my friend. I will go visit this Neria at once."

"You're welcome," Basil replied. He wondered if that meeting would yield interesting results. "I'll write down her barrack's address."

Kalki nodded in gratitude and snapped his fingers. A blue conch shell materialized in his hand, its surface covered in symbols and scriptures Basil did not recognize.

"Here," Kalki said as he handed it over to Basil. "A gift for you."

"A conch shell?" Basil asked. It felt strangely light in his hand. "What is it for?"

"I engraved it myself. It has no particular properties, but it makes for a nice instrument." Kalki smiled kindly. "I wanted to give it to you as a token of friendship and gratitude. A souvenir that our paths once crossed."

"That's... that's very kind of you." Basil blushed in embarrassment. He never knew how to respond with gifts. "I don't know what to say."

"Then say nothing," Kalki replied with a chuckle. "I feel much anger and distrust coming from you. I hope music will help soothe your pain."

"Pain?" Basil snorted. "I don't feel pain."

"You helped me find a roof, but I cannot help but notice that you did not invite me under yours. You were afraid of me."

He was perceptive.

"It's a tough world," Basil said. He stood by his decision, though he felt a little ashamed now. "I couldn't risk my party's safety if you turned out to be a thief and a crook."

"I understand. We live in an age of distrust. Yet I feel this is not the only reason why you remained wary of me." When Kalki locked eyes with Basil, it felt like the man was peering into his soul. "You've been disappointed by others in the past and it marked you like hot iron. Trust is not a gift to you, but a sword without a hilt. You don't remember how to wield it without hurting yourself."

"You don't know what you're speaking of," Basil lied, both to Kalki and to himself. The man's words rattled him on a deep, personal level.

"Perhaps," Kalki agreed. He had understood that he was walking in a minefield. "At least, this is how it feels to me. What I mean to say is... honesty is sometimes betrayed, but distrust is poison to the soul."

He glanced at the conch shell gift. "I want this gift to remind you that kindness is always rewarded, whether in this life or the next. What comes around goes around."

Basil couldn't help but smirk. "You really are a hippie."

Kalki laughed. "A good day to you, Basil."

Five minutes later, Basil watched his guest fly away on his mount's back. His team stood with him outside in the

garden as they watched Kalki's party disappear through the clouds in Bordeaux's direction.

"He's a strange one," Buggy noted.

Plato nodded warily. "He smells like a flower. First time I met a human like that."

"Like me?" Rosemarine asked.

"Not like you. He smells like that flower..." Plato glanced at Basil. "Yo dog, remember the plant René tried to eat when he was in his Chinese medicine phase? The time he almost choked to death?"

"The lotus?" Basil asked. He remembered that day clearly. René had become so desperate to fend off cancer he started to buy into miracle cures.

"A lotus, yes." Plato looked at the skies. "That guy stinks of lotus."

A System notification appeared in front of Basil.

New Main Quest: The Lotus of Remembrance.

Recommended Level: 50+.

Figure out Kalki's true identity and help him remember his past.

Reward: 1,150,000 Bonus EXP + Lotus of Wisdom.

Basil almost choked at the sight. Level 50? A very high level for a seemingly trivial task. That settled it for Basil.

There was more to Kalki than met the eyes.

Chapter 31: Man vs Breeding

"A level 50 quest?" Neria Elissalde's shocked voice came out of the military radio. A bump on the road almost threw it off the dashboard. "Are you sure?"

"I would send you a screenshot of my System Logs if I could," Basil replied from behind his vehicle's steering wheel. Plato looked at the forested road through the passenger seat's window. "Never seen a level that high."

"Me neither," Neria replied. Basil heard her write down notes on the other end of the line. "First time I've heard of a 'main' quest as well. When will your friend arrive in Bordeaux?"

"In the afternoon if he flies straight without encountering monsters." The army cleared the road between Dax and Bordeaux for evacuation efforts, but no route was entirely safe nowadays. "I suspect he's connected to Dismaker Labs somehow. He visualized a dungeon's past destruction with perfect accuracy."

"I will show him the server's remains if my superiors allow it. He could be the lead we are looking for." Neria sighed. "The investigation stalled, Basil."

"You couldn't find any Dismaker Labs employees?"

"None that could enlighten us. The company's top brass kept their true intentions secret from lower management."

So Anton Maxwell and the Board remained unaccounted for. Basil would have expected one of them to appear by now.

"The military intelligence department is pushing for an expedition to UNESCO's headquarters in Paris," Neria said. "It's one of the two places we could find answers, alongside Dismaker Labs' European offices in Malta."

"Oh right, good call." Dismaker Labs partnered with UNESCO as part of their virtual reality project. It would make sense for the organization's HQ to contain either incriminating documents or potential leads. "What are your superiors saying about it?"

Neria's heavy sigh told Basil everything he needed to know. "We don't have the means to send troops to Limoges or Toulouse, let alone Paris. The Incursion made monsters deadlier than ever, so it takes all our efforts to secure the Bordeaux safe zone."

"Which is a victory in itself," Basil reassured her. "You're giving tens of thousands a home where they can live without fear of attacks. It will make more of a difference than hunting ghosts in Paris."

"I try to see it that way. The situation is tough, but we're making progress." Neria chuckled. "Zachariel says hello by the way. We've finished evacuating the last of Dax's citizens and he is being overworked curing them."

"Did he get into any fights with atheists?" Basil mused.

"No, but now that you mention it... I've got interesting news on the faith front." Neria marked a short pause. "Bordeaux has many religious communities and most of their leaders gained access to the Priest class. It took a lot of coercion on

the army's part, but we found volunteers willing to participate in... System-related experiments."

Basil's grip on the driving wheel tightened. "Go on."

"Priests from Abrahamic religions can learn and cast the same Prayer spells," Neria explained. "An Imam and a rabbi can cast the Mass spell in a Christian church, and an orthodox cleric can use the Salah spell to gain buffs. Their spellbooks are compatible. And then there's the truly interesting part. Bordeaux has a small community of Buddhists. A few among them gained access to the Priest class too."

"Can Buddhist Priests run the Mass?" Basil guessed with a chuckle. It amused him to imagine a Zen monk holding a church ritual.

"That's the thing, they can't."

Basil smashed the brake pedal. His vehicle stopped in the middle of the road, bordered by trees on both sides.

"Hey Partner, why are we stopping?" Shellgirl called out at the back. "Enemies ahead?"

"I don't sense anything," Buggy added.

"It's nothing," Basil reassured them. He started the car again after digesting this new information. "They can't?"

"They can't," Neria confirmed through the radio. "Neither can Abrahamic Priests cast Buddhist Prayer spells. We're currently searching for smaller sects to confirm the trend. The Metal Olympus Faction which General Leblanc is negotiating with is an alliance that worships Hellenistic deities."

"Like Zeus?" Basil couldn't help but laugh. "Seriously?"

"I know," Neria replied with a chuckle of her own. "Their representatives say that their leaders are the gods of Olympus reborn through modern means."

"Are they? It sounds crazy, but after fighting a dragon-snail from outer space nothing will surprise me."

"So far I've only seen men and women coming from their faction." Neria let out a sigh full of skepticism. "If they cannot cast Abrahamic-aligned spells, then it would suggest that Priests of different religions draw their magic from..."

Neria hesitated about what the correct words should be.

"Different sources."

Basil read between the lines. Neria suggested that Priests potentially channeled the powers of different *gods* entirely.

"It could be a trick of the System," Basil pointed out. "Restricting spells based on the caster's personal beliefs and nothing more."

"Mayhaps," she conceded, "but normal prayers, well, they shouldn't work by themselves. They're petitions to a higher power asking them to grant a wish."

"Yes, the System," Basil insisted. "It's the System that generates Prayer spells."

"Could be, but you'll admit the results are... interesting."

"They are." Though concerning might have been a better word. "What other experiments did you run?"

As it turned out, the French army also tested Basil's hypothesis about Health Points: namely, if inflicting nonlethal damage repeatedly on a limb would eventually exhaust the target's HP and kill them.

"After a point, the subject stopped taking damage," Neria explained. Basil didn't dare ask who or what they ran tests on. "His HP lowered again after we started targeting another body part. Our researchers believe that Health Points are either a rough representation of your general health or the aggregation of your body parts' individual Health Points. Studies of amputees tend to accredit the second hypothesis. Soldiers who lost limbs in battle took a penalty to their *maximum* HP."

Plato, who had barely listened to the conversation, suddenly glanced at his tail with concern.

"Plato, you won't lose your tail if your Health Points drop too low," Basil said with an annoyed sigh.

"Can you prove it beyond a doubt?" his cat asked with a terrified expression.

"You died two times already." Basil snorted. "This System is a mess."

"It's scary when you think about it," Neria replied with a heavy voice. "It bends the laws of nature, of physics themselves, with mathematics. Real world logic is being replaced with video game rules."

"I know." Sensing Officer Elissalde's distress, Basil attempted to cheer her up. "But look at the bright side. Video games follow rules and math formulas. If we figure them out, we can exploit them and take back the Earth."

"I would rather trade exploitable rules for familiar ones." Clearly, his words failed to affect her. "Basil?"

"Yes?" From her tone, she was about to ask Basil a favor.

"If the opportunity presented itself," she said, "would you join an expedition to Paris? To investigate the UNESCO headquarters?"

Basil took a long pause before answering.

"Isn't anybody else volunteering?" he asked. "And I mean *anybody*?"

It wasn't Basil's job to investigate Dismaker Labs or Kalki's missing memories, no matter what the System told him. He intended to weather the apocalypse and protect his home, end of the story.

Basil was no hero, no trained soldier, no exceptional investigator. He was a man who lived alone in the woods with his pets. There were better people around to become Overgods and uncover Dismaker Labs' mysteries.

He hoped. If the world had no other savior than Basil, then mankind was *fucked*.

"I wouldn't ask if we could send someone else," Neria admitted. "Our resources are stretched thin protecting the population. Strange as it sounds, your team thrives in the new world. Call me naïve, but... if anybody can make the journey to Paris and return alive, it would be you."

Basil could tell from her voice that Neria Elissalde said it from the bottom of her heart. Watching him slay a dragon must have left a powerful impression on her. Her faith in him

touched Basil, although he considered it somewhat misplaced.

He considered her proposal for a long, agonizing minute, before giving his answer.

"Maybe," Basil replied half-heartedly.

"Maybe?" an astonished Bugsy choked in the car's back.

"**Maybe?**" Plato almost jumped from his seat. "Basil, are you alright? Did the zombies scramble your brains?"

"Maybe?" Neria sounded as shocked as Basil's own cat. They knew him too well. "Do you mean it?"

"I've thought about what Steamslime told us," Basil confessed. "About how other dragonlords wait for their chance to invade us. I want to live a quiet, peaceful existence away from this shit—"

"But you don't think they'll let you," Neria guessed.

"No." Steamslime's allies learned Basil's name from the System's Logs somehow and would come for his head. The Apocalypse Force's shadow also loomed over the region. Basil doubted that they would stop at conquering Lourdes. "Shitheads will keep barking at my doorstep, itching for a fight. The only way I see to prevent it is to make sure they can't break into Earth at all."

"We think the same then," Neria said. "Unless stopped, Incursions will grow beyond our ability to manage."

"If Paris potentially holds a solution to that problem, I'm willing to take my chances." Basil raised a finger. He had a

condition. "But it'll be after winter. Too much shit to sort out beforehand."

Basil needed to check on Vasi, gather intel from this 'Tye,' train House Garden so they could protect the house in his absence... a road trip to Paris would be long and fraught with danger. He couldn't consider it without significant preparations.

"I expected as much," Neria said; although her tone made it clear that she would have preferred a different answer. She would rather see Basil leave as soon as possible. "How are things on your end anyway?"

"No progress on the holomachine front, but we're good otherwise. Storing food for the winter and preparing for Halloween."

"You're welcome if you want to celebrate it in Bordeaux," Neria replied lightly. "I'll dress as a vampire and you as a werewolf."

"Wouldn't children mistake us for the genuine article?" Basil mused. "I'll think about it."

"No rush. Take care, Basil. I'll welcome your friend when he arrives."

"Thanks, and take care too." Basil switched off the military radio and focused back on the road. His car passed by a signboard indicating the path to the village of Orx.

"He's done calling his girlfriend," Plato informed the other monsters. "You can blabber nonsense again."

"You can be friends with a girl without wanting to date them," Basil replied. He was fond of Officer Elissalde. She

was a kind woman, serious and reliable. But he wasn't interested in dating her, or anyone for that matter. Celibacy fit him just right.

Basil peeked over his shoulder at the back of his vehicle. "Are you holding up, guys?"

After Basil's Kangoo heroically perished in battle, the team scoured Dax for a replacement vehicle and eventually found an acceptable replacement: a Chausson 640 Titanium Premium. This seven-meter long white campervan was large enough to host the entire party, Buggy included. The centimagma could slip inside after Basil removed shelf compartments from the camper and the doors separating it from the living area, much to his delight. The vehicle pulled an empty, hermetic trailer at the back to carry loot around.

Basil hadn't managed to remove the smell of cannabis infesting the vehicle though. He suspected the previous owner of using his vehicle to ferry cheap drugs from Spain.

"I'm good, Boss," Buggy said as he squeezed in the back. The campervan included a shower, toilets, a kitchenette, and two window-facing benches. Rosemarine and Shellgirl occupied one each. "I sense many vibrations in the ground."

"I blame the poor state of the road," Basil replied. Grass and flowers he didn't recognize had broken through the tar in many spots. "But be extra vigilant, Buggy. We're approaching the area where the elves ambushed Orctad."

"Mister, Mister, I see lights!" Rosemarine raised a vine through the open window. "Over there!"

Basil groaned when he saw red and green Aurora Borealis shine brightly under a blue, cloudless autumn sky. That could only mean one thing.

"Not again!" Plato complained. "Another dungeon?"

"Looks like it's located in the village of Seignosse nearby," Basil guessed from the auroras' position. "Probably at the Black Pond wildlife reserve.

"Black Pond?" Shellgirl immediately grinned in excitement. "We've found oil?"

Basil crushed her hopes of getting rich quickly. "It's called the Black Pond because it's full of silt."

"Shucks," she complained.

"Why would we need an oil field anyway?" Plato pointed at abandoned vehicles on the side of the road. "Car dealerships are the new candy stores."

"Gasoline degrades within months, kitty," Shellgirl replied. "We can't make long-term money out of scavenging."

"How do you know that?" Basil asked, slightly curious. "The gasoline part?"

"I've read it in your library," the mimic merchant replied with a smirk. "What, are you surprised? I invest in myself, Partner. A sharp mind in a healthy body, that's my motto."

"Good for you." Basil had caught Shellgirl reading alone late at night after returning from her trading trips. The clam mimic was by far the party's most studious member.

"When are we hitting the city's library by the way?" Shellgirl pestered him. "I still don't know how the Afghanistan War ended! Who won?"

Oh right, Basil's school manuals stopped in 2018 at the latest. "I'm not sure you want to know the answer."

Basil's thoughts wandered to Neria's revelations and his previous research on the Trimurti; the Hindu triad of Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Shiva the Destroyer. He suspected these three gods were somehow involved in the System's creation, but he lacked books with the pertaining knowledge. He was planning to visit Dax's library to find information about them before the battle with the Unity delayed his plans.

Different sources. Neria's words echoed in Basil's mind and shook his faith. *Different gods.* *Vasi and Zachariel confirmed multiple gods existed in other worlds, but what about ours? What does it mean about God and... the rest?*

"We'll make a stop at the library on our way back," Basil decided. He needed to investigate further, to understand what the hell was going on. "Any book you wanna take with you?"

"Travel and tourism books," Shellgirl replied.

"Really?" Basil had expected business books. "Why?"

"I understand you want us to develop locally, Partner, but the world... it's so big!" Shellgirl glanced at the skies beyond her window. "Do you know that on the other side of the planet, there are mountains that rise high enough to pierce the clouds? That coral gathered in a great barrier in the eastern land of Australia?"

"I know," Basil replied. "Our world is full of wonders."

She gave him a sharp look. "Did you see them? The real wonders, not the photos?"

That was the killer question, wasn't it? Basil sighed. "No, I did not. I never had the money to travel."

"Then it's another reason to grind it out, Partner." Shellgirl put her hands behind her head. "I wanna see the Atlantic Ocean, and the Pacific too!"

"What's an ocean?" Bugsy asked. The centimagma was only born months ago in the marsh and had never seen a body of water bigger than a river.

"It's a lake that spans the whole horizon!" Ever the merchant, Shellgirl hyped up the sea as if it were the best product in the world. "You can regenerate your Health Points and raise castles on a sandy shore called the beach, climb water walls called waves, and fight fish monsters called sharks for easy levels!"

"Raise a castle? Like a dungeon?" The more Bugsy heard, the more enthusiastic he became. "Awesome! Can we try?"

"Mister, can we go to the ocean?" Rosemarine joined in. "I will drink it all and dry up the land!"

"We could," Plato said. "The beach is ten minutes away from Orx. It's been a while since we last visited it."

Since René, Basil thought. "You hate water, Plato."

"But I love giant litter boxes." Plato gave his owner the kitten stare. "Come on, Basil... for me. Do it for me."

"Please, Boss!" Bugsy whined at the back, echoed by the rest of the party. "Can we go to the beach?"

Basil glanced in his rearview mirror. Bugsy and Shellgirl had taken a page out of Plato's book and pulled the heartstrings.

The former didn't quite manage to look cute with his big serpentine eyes, but the latter reminded him of an anime loli about to cry. Rosemarine, who had no eyes, simply cocked a handgun with her vines.

Basil saw the writing on the wall and surrendered to the call of democracy.

"Alright, children, alright," he said while rolling his eyes. "We'll go to the beach once we find a replacement rooster."

His party welcomed the announcement with shouts, laughs, and Shellgirl's joy at receiving a free holiday.

After minutes of travel, the campervan finally reached Orx... or what remained of it. A few hundred souls once dwelled in the village, but Basil saw no humans in its empty streets. Vines, moss, and alien flowers covered the houses from the smallest walls to the tallest roof. Overturned, rusting cars blocked most of the streets. A scant few months had passed since the apocalypse and nature already recovered its rights.

With a little help from the System, Basil thought as he observed the landscape. Glowing flowers he did not recognize grew on vines; the moss covering most walls glowed bright green; mushrooms larger than dogs infested the village's streetlights. The dungeon's influence mutated plant life into a new, unnatural ecosystem; one that spread at an alarming rate. Thank God I destroyed the Barthes' server before we reached this point.

Basil drove through the village without stopping. Buggy didn't detect any large threat or animal in Orx's ruins and the party saw no petrified citizens in the street. The Unity hadn't targeted this settlement.

"Where is everyone?" Rosemarine asked.

"Dead or fled," Shellgirl replied grimly. "Monsters likely ate 'em all and moved on."

Unlike Dax, Orx didn't have a police department or army base to defend the population. The Apocalypse spared no one. In Basil's mind, the village's fate was yet another warning to avoid large settlements like the plague.

Orx led straight into the natural reserve next door. Steep banks of mud and reeds surrounded an enormous lake covered in water lilies. Red alien algae had started to colonize the waters and tainted them with a crimson tint. A single artificial bridge of rock and dirt crossed the lake in its center.

"Alright guys, we're in enemy territory now," Basil warned. "We'll catch anything with feathers."

"And if a monster has fur?" Rosemarine asked. "Can we eat it?"

Basil dispensed a piece of French-Bulgarian wisdom. "If it walks, it's edible."

"I can't wait for the next fried chicken night," Buggy said with enthusiasm. "Last episode teased a new badass villain!"

"Yeah, *Major Chicken & The Meat Brigade* takes a darker turn with the introduction of Emperor Vegan's right-hand man, Lord Quinoa," Basil replied. That was the moment when named characters started to die. "It leads to one of the series' most shocking episodes—"

"No spoilers," Shellgirl interrupted him.

Plato's ears rose and he suddenly unsheathed his sword.
"Basil—"

"I sense vibrations in the lake, Boss," Bugsy warned at the same time.

Basil abruptly stopped his car in the middle of the road. The party stepped out of the campervan in good order, although Bugsy struggled to squeeze through the backdoor, and established a defensive position around the vehicle. Basil didn't need to say anything. After surviving so many fights, the group now acted on pure instinct.

"There." Bugsy pointed at the left side of the lake with his antennae. Basil summoned his halberd to his hand, Shellgirl readied her cannons, and Rosemarine her handguns. Plato watched their rear for fear of a pincer attack. "It's coming."

A form traveled towards the group, hidden under the surface. The water rippled at its approach. The party waited in silence for Basil's signal to strike, yet he did not move an inch. He instead waited patiently for the challenger to show up.

A reptilian monster with bright blue scales and an elongated neck emerged from the lake to glare at him. Basil briefly mistook it for a snake before noticing a body with four fins underwater. It was neither a fish nor a reptile and roughly three meters long.

Plesiosaurus

Level 18 [Aquatic/Reptile]

Basil found the name familiar, though he didn't remember why. The monster snapped its jaws at the team

threateningly, its blue eyes oozing malice. Basil didn't find it particularly scary.

In fact, the beast looked rather... appetizing.

Basil licked his lips and took a step forward to behead his new meal. The plesiosaur's bravado immediately faltered and it dived back underwater, never to return.

"Basil, the dinner is swimming away!" Plato complained.

"It won't get far." Basil scanned the lake's shore in search of his missing food. New forms walked among the reeds. "I see movement."

"The elves?" Shellgirl asked.

"Look, Mister!" Rosemarine pointed at a small beach of bud northeast of their position. "Birds!"

"Where?!" Plato glanced in the right direction and froze at what he saw. "What the—"

Basil choked at the sight. Two monsters had stopped at the lake to drink. The first was a cross between a red reptile and a bat, with large translucent skin wings, a threatening beak, and a strange crest on the back of its head. The other was a bipedal lizard with green feathers on the arms and neck, protruding claws, and a fanged mouth. Basil suddenly remembered where he had seen the word 'plesiosaur' and what it meant to him.

Pteranodon

Level 15 [Avian/Reptile]

Velociraptor

Level 12 [Avian/Reptile]

Dinosaurs. The marsh was infested with dinosaur monsters.

"The reptilium," Basil realized. The fearsome hunter in him had left, replaced with the naive child obsessed with the first *Jurassic Park* movie—the others did not exist as far as he was concerned. "The dungeon mutated the reptiles into dinosaur monsters."

"These chickens are very big," Buggy noted upon noticing the velociraptor. Basil's head snapped in the centimagma's direction, startling him. "B-Boss? Did I say something wrong?"

"Something wrong?" Basil grabbed Buggy's head and locked eyes with this bright, formidable visionary mind. "Buggy, you are a genius!"

"I-I am?"

"Don't you see?" Basil released Buggy and enlightened him. "Birds descend from dinosaurs! The soul of a tyrannosaurus rex dwells within the heart of every hen!"

"I don't like your tone," Plato said ominously. "I don't like it at all."

Basil ignored him and thoughtfully watched the velociraptors with his hands behind his back. He cared not if he looked like a supervillain right now. The world would soon understand his bold vision.

"I was thinking too small," Basil declared. "Vasi suggested that we breed birds with birds. Now I see a bright future beyond time. A future where we shall feast on the eggs of velociraptors and roast young t-rexes on the grill!"

"No!" Plato complained. "Don't say it! Don't do it!"

His protests fell on deaf ears, for Basil had already made his choice. The only choice.

"That's right, Plato."

Basil grinned at the dinosaurs on the other shore. As they met his gaze, their reptilian eyes suddenly widened in dread and terror.

"We're going to breed *dinosaurs* with *chickens*."

Chapter 32: Man vs Dinosaur

Hidden among the reeds, Basil observed his target with anticipation as it approached the marsh's muddy shore.

The beast was the most magnificent velociraptor Basil had seen yet: a young feathered stallion the size of a German shepherd. His brilliant red tail marked him as a virile specimen worthy of Basil's stables. His powerful claws could disembowel a man and his yellow eyes breathed childlike innocence. This velociraptor was a young teen, malleable, healthy... fertile.

Jurassic Park had taught Basil that velociraptors were human-sized killing machines, but the System didn't get the memo. Most of the velociraptors inhabiting the marshes barely reached the size of large dogs with a temperament to match. They fought with ferocious desperation when cornered, but otherwise ran for their lives rather than stand their ground.

Wait, which of them is the most accurate about dinosaurs? The Hollywood franchise of my childhood or the reality-warping video game? These were inane questions, but Basil couldn't get them out of his head.

In any case, the hunt had come to an end. Basil's target was as cautious as he was beautiful. The velociraptor slowly approached the lake's shore to drink, looked over his reptilian shoulder for any sign of danger, and finally sipped the lake's water.

Slowly, Basil grabbed his rope lasso and approached the beast from behind. He didn't make a sound and walked against the wind, yet the velociraptor suddenly raised his head in alarm. The magnificent feathered stallion noticed Basil in the grass and froze in surprise.

For a moment, they locked eyes with neither of them daring to make the first move. Realizing that the velociraptor was subtly pivoting on his feet to flee, Basil broke the deadlock with a bright smile and well-chosen words.

"Do you want to be my friend?" Basil asked softly.

"Kui?" The velociraptor squealed in confusion.

"Do you want to live in my house in the middle of the woods? With my chickens?"

The velociraptor was too floored by the generous proposal to react. Basil gathered his breath, and tightened his rope...

And a plesiosaurus' head emerged from the water to lunge at the velociraptor. Its jaws snapped and closed on its prey's flank.

"Kui!" The velociraptor squealed for help as the much bigger plesiosaurus dragged him screaming towards the water. He opened his mouth and fired a lightning bolt at his attacker, but missed. "Kui!"

"Fuck off, you scaled hyena!" Basil hastily rose up from the reeds in rage. "I saw him first!"

Basil threw his lasso, caught the plesiosaurus by the neck, and pulled. A vicious tug-of-war followed between man and dinosaur. The plesiosaurus was inhumanly strong, but so was Basil.

"Bugsy, Shellgirl!" Basil snarled. "Drag this thief out of the water! Rosemarine, suppressive fire!"

The centimagma emerged from under the shore's mud, bit the plesiosaurus in the neck, and forced it to drop its velociraptor prey. Basil's future replacement rooster immediately fled among the reeds.

"Damn it!" Basil cursed as his lasso was still stuck around the plesiosaurus' neck. "Plato, catch him alive! Alive!"

Plato bolted from behind some tall grass and tackled the larger velociraptor. The future rooster retaliated with another lightning bolt, but Plato dodged and pinned his prey to the ground with his paws.

Basil couldn't afford to watch his pet's battle; he had his own foe to deal with. The plesiosaurus, angry at losing his meal, opened his mouth and fired a stream of water at him in retaliation.

Basil dodged by rolling on the reeds and then tugged the lasso again; Bugsy helped him in pulling the plesiosaurus onto dry land. The dinosaur opened its jaw to cut the rope, but Shellgirl emerged from the water to hit it from behind with her ice pearls. The blowback tossed the roaring plesiosaurus onto the muddy shore.

The sound of gunshots echoed behind Basil. The plesiosaurus roared in rage and pain as one of his eyes exploded in a shower of blood.

"I nailed it, Mister!" Rosemarine emerged from among the reeds. She held two smoking handguns in her vines. "Right in the squishy parts!"

Bugsy immediately exploited the moment to coil around the dinosaur, squeezing its neck and body. The plesiosaurus struggled to throw the centimagma off its back as Basil moved in for the kill.

Basil tossed his lasso aside and summoned his halberd from his inventory. The plesiosaurus snapped its jaws in fury, but Basil's swing split its skull in half and spilled brain matter all over the reeds. He then sliced through the beast's body with the dexterity and focus of a Japanese Sushi chef.

Since Basil's halberd counted as a spear as well as an axe, it inflicted supereffective damage to Aquatic Type creatures thanks to his Fishing Perk. Combined with his advanced proficiency from Slaughterer I, he hit the plesiosaurus six times as hard as normal. His blade cut through the scales like butter. Rosemarine joined in by unloading her guns at the plesiosaurus' body, and Buggy choked the dinosaur to death by strengthening his grip. The ruckus caused pteranodons hiding in the marsh to fly away for their lives.

By the time Buggy uncoiled from the dinosaur, Basil had sliced him into fine sashimi and Rosemarine had emptied her magazines. It would be a nightmare to remove all the lead stuck in the plesiosaurus' flesh, but the party would dine well tonight.

Your party earned 23000 experience points (4140 for you). You earned a level!

"I love fishing," Basil declared proudly, his shirt drenched in warm dinosaur blood and his pants stained with pieces of its gray matter. "It rewards patience and calm."

Basil turned away from the dead plesiosaurus to check on his target. Plato dutifully kept the captive velociraptor pinned to the ground, his fangs around the dinosaur's neck and his paws on the back.

"Kui..." The velociraptor trembled in fear. "Kui..."

"Shush." Basil stored his halberd back in his inventory. "Plato, release him."

The velociraptor attempted to flee the moment Plato weakened his grasp, but Basil grabbed him first.

"Shush..." Basil held the velociraptor close to his chest and patted him on the head. The beautiful beast froze in terror rather than resist his captor. "Shush... it's alright. Everything will be alright. We won't hurt you."

"We won't?" Rosemarine asked as she reloaded her handguns. She sounded very disappointed. "Aww..."

"I'll let you kneecap another dinosaur, sweetie, but not this one," Basil replied as the velociraptor trembled in fear. The dinosaur's heart beat louder than war drums. "I promise it."

"Okay!" Rosemarine lowered her gun with enthusiasm. Plato gazed at her with disquiet.

"The evil plesiosaurus is dead," Basil reassured his future dino-rooster. "He will never try to eat you again."

"Kui?" The velociraptor asked with skepticism.

Basil glanced at Buggy. The centimagma seized a sliced piece of plesiosaurus and gave it to the velociraptor. After a moment of hesitation, the dinosaur chewed and swallowed the meat.

"Do you like the food?" Basil asked.

"Kui..." the velociraptor replied with a nod. He appeared smart enough to understand human words, but too dim to utter them.

Now that he had established trust, Basil explained his purpose to the velociraptor.

"I'm a breeder," he said with a straight, serious face. "It's like being a pimp, but for hens and rabbits."

"Kui?"

"I need you." Basil looked into his velociraptor stallion's big, beautiful eyes. "I need you to breed for me. To take care of a chicken harem so I will never grow hungry again."

"Harem?" the velociraptor asked with a low, guttural tone. He recognized the word somehow. "Kui harem?"

"Yes, you will reproduce with many healthy birds and father a whole generation of dino-chickens. I will also feed you and let you sleep in a warm place." Somewhere between the oven and the chimney. "All I ask in return are your eggs for omelets, and your future children's lives to make crispy nuggets. I know it's a lot, and that you probably want to negotiate better terms—"

"Kui consent!" The velociraptor nodded so fast that Basil worried he would snap his neck. "Kui consent!"

"What, so fast?" Buggy blinked in surprise. "You would feed your brood to us so easily?"

"Kui harem!" The velociraptor might not be smart enough to form sentences, but he was intelligent enough to understand where his interests lay. "Kui mate! Kui breed! Kui humpy!"

"What a caring lad," Plato said with heavy sarcasm. "He's offering his own children to us so that we won't starve. You can tell it's tearing his bird heart apart."

"So selfless," Buggy replied naïvely.

"Yes, you will hump and dump..." Basil trailed on as he tried to figure out a right name for his new scaled rooster. He was too crass for a bourgeois name, but too unique for a common one...

"Kuikui." Basil snapped his fingers. "Kuikui the Dinosaur."

"Kui!"

And so, a deal was struck. Kuikui the Dinosaur accepted to become Basil's new rooster and sacrifice his firstborn children on the kitchen's oven altar.

Kuikui the Dinosaur (Reptile/Avian) joined your party! Kuikui learned the **[Rain Dance]** active Perk!

"Welcome aboard, Kuikui!" Buggy greeted the new recruit and immediately took the dinosaur under his wing. "I'm Buggy, your senior!"

"Mister, Mister!" Rosemarine jumped in place with enthusiasm. Kuikui took a step back away from her; her eagerness at testing her guns on him had scared him straight. "The moment has come! I can transform!"

You need to assign your extra level before Rosemarine Eglantine de la Barthe can undergo metamorphosis.

"I am so proud of you, my dear," Basil petted her on the head. "Just give me a minute to choose where I put my new level."

"Yo dog, are you sure about him?" Plato asked Basil. He didn't look impressed with Kuikui. "He looks... dim. Bird-dim."

"It's not the head on his shoulders that counts," Basil replied with a chuckle. He was proud of his own dirty joke and would tell it again. "Is he a good or bad bird to you?"

"So long as he won't sing in the morning, I'll tolerate his existence." Plato glanced at his flank, which showed a claw mark. He must have received the wound in the struggle. "At least he hits hard for his size."

"That's because he has the same claw Perk as you," Basil said as he studied the raptor's stats. They were rather poor by his standards, but he noticed a few interesting tidbits.

Name Kuikui the Dinosaur (Velociraptor)

Type Reptile/Avian

Faction The Bohens

Experience 9000/10000

Immune

Resist

Weak

N/A

Physical, Earth, Wind,
Lightning, Mythic.

Scaleslayer, Birdslayer, Soul,
Corrosion, Metal, Frost.

Level

Health Points

Special Points

12

455

180/260

Strength

Agility

Vitality

Skill

16

31

15

29

(D+20%)

(A+20%)

(D+20%)

(B+20%)

Magic

Intelligence

Charisma

Luck

16

3

15

18

(D+20%)

(E+20%)

(D+20%)

(C+20%)

Physical Mind Soul Corrosion Metal Wood Life Support Ailment

Strong - Weak Weak Weak - - Strong -

Fire Water Earth Wind Frost Lightning Light Darkness Mythic

- - Strong Strong Weak Strong - - Strong

Passive Perks Active Perks

Sharp Claws Lightning Bolt

Rain Dance

Brave Howl

- **Sharp Claws:** Kuikui's claws inflict SKI-based damage. Kuikui gains advanced proficiency with unarmed attacks, fangs, and claws (x2 damage, +10 Crit).
- **Lightning Bolt:** 40 SP. Unleashes a powerful bolt of deadly lightning (base power 90, [Lightning] damage).
- **Rain Dance:** 50 SP, [Water], [Support]. Changes the current weather to [Rain] for 10 minutes (empowers [Water] & [Lightning], weakens [Fire]).
- **Brave Howl:** 30 SP, [Support]. Buffs an ally's Strength and Magic for 5 minutes.

Kuikui could change the weather with a dance? Awesome! Basil immediately thought of half a dozen applications of this ability, although he wouldn't test it now; not when it would ruin the sunny beach day ahead of them. Kuikui's buffs would come in handy, and finally someone in Basil's party could now resist that pesky lightning.

"Hey, Partner, an idea crossed my mind," Shellgirl asked as she leaped out of the lake's water and checked the plesiosaurus' remains for leftover treasures.

"You hit Aquatic monsters for supereffective damage, right? And the kitty can do the same to Avians."

"Yes?" Basil replied as Rosemarine sprayed Plato with healing pollen. "What about it?"

"Well, I can't help but notice that we're in an area with high-level monsters that we can kill in a few blows. We should fish and grind, baby!"

"I'm all for hunting birds." Plato stretched his back. "I've missed it so much."

Basil glanced at the dead plesiosaurus and then at Kuikui. The velociraptor was far weaker than his level suggested. Considering the monsters running around after the Incursion, he would benefit from a power boost to meaningfully contribute to the team's battles. Besides experience, dinosaurs made for a good source of meat, scales, and crafting material. Basil was tempted to hunt.

"Boss." Buggy glanced at a hedgerow of tall grass bordering the lake. "I sense something approaching us."

Basil summoned his halberd and Plato unsheathed his rapier. Shellgirl retreated inside her carapace, her cannons ready to fire. As for Kuikui, the dino-rooster courageously hid behind the bigger Buggy and Rosemarine.

"I don't see anything," Basil warned. Nothing stood of the vegetation

"But I smell him!" Plato pointed the tip of his rapier at a specific spot among the grass. "There!"

An arrow of fire materialized out of nowhere and aimed straight at Plato's face.

Moving at lightning speed, Basil deflected the projectile with a swing of his halberd. Plato unleashed a blade of air from his rapier. The projectile cut through grass in the blink of an eye and splattered blood on the marsh's grass.

A thin and gaunt bowman materialized among the vegetation, bleeding from his left flank. He wore a blue ninja garb and a black mask covering the lower half of his face. His eyes were a bright shade of blue, his hair dressed in a sapphire-colored bun. Basil could have mistaken him for a human cosplayer, if not for his pointy ears.

An elf.

Leif Winterbow

Level 13 [Humanoid] (Archer 7/Ninja 6).

Guild: Star Court.

"Invisibility?" Basil snorted. "You picked the wrong crowd to ambush with that trick."

"Away, stranger!" The bowman raised his bow at Basil's face, heedless of the monsters now moving to encircle him. His weapon was made of rusty metal covered in runes rather than wood. "T'was a warning sho—"

Basil lunged at him without warning and swung his weapon. The surprised elf took a step back, but the halberd cut his bow in half. The disarmed archer immediately brought out two daggers and adopted a defensive stance, only to be flanked by Plato and Rosemarine.

"*That* was a warning shot." Basil threatened the ninja with the spiked point of his halberd. "There won't be a second."

Shellgirl pointed her barrels at the stranger's face. "Drop your weapons or I'll shoot!"

"Boss, the woods!" Buggy warned. "I sense other enemies approaching from the woods!"

Here comes the ambush, Basil thought grimly. Six more elves walked into sight to confront the party, all of them fair-skinned and armed to the teeth. Three archers, two spearsmen, and a swordswoman. They carried weapons made of steel covered in runes, yet wore rags and scavenged beast skins. *Just try, Legolas.*

It was the swordswoman that stood out the most among them. The way she walked, the aura that surrounded her, marked her as a leader of some sort. That elf was taller than Basil, with a beautiful heart-shaped face and long wild red hair. A cloak made of red dinosaur scales and feathers covered most of her body, except for a glowing crystal longsword attached to her belt. She looked no older than Basil, yet her golden eyes seemed far, far older.

Estrid Firekiss

Level 17 [Humanoid] (Oracle 9/Bard 5/Pyromancer 3).

Guild: Star Court

She slowly raised a hand and Basil's party prepared to fight for their lives.

"Leif, throw down your arms," the red woman said with a deep, imperious voice. "I recognize them. They're the warriors who defeated Steamslime."

The elf ninja's eyes widened in shock. "Truly?"

The red woman nodded slowly and her soldiers lowered their weapons. Basil observed her warily, half-expecting a trick. But no surprise attack ever came.

"I am sorry for threatening you, Lord Bohem." The red-haired woman joined her hands together and respectfully bowed before Basil, much to his surprise. "I am Estrid Firekiss, Starsinger of our elf caravan. I am very glad to meet you at last."

"I take it you're not members of the Unity?" Basil guessed. Or else they would have tried to avenge Steamslime. The fact she could read his stats enough to guess his name meant he couldn't underestimate her.

"Those creeps?" The bowman, Leif, sneered with contempt. He sheathed his daggers and put a hand on his wound to slow down the blood loss. "Their empire enslaved and forced us to work in their factories."

"Steamslime's death sowed enough confusion among his soldiers to let us escape through the rift," Estrid said. "We owe you our freedom, Lord Bohem."

She sounded truthful. Since all her soldiers had lowered their weapons, Basil did the same and allowed Estrid to provide their wounded archer with medical help. The elves watched his monsters with caution, but made no move to attack them.

"If I may ask, how did you find us?" Estrid asked. "We have tried to stay... discreet. Yet clearly you expected our presence."

"You shot an orc acquaintance of mine," Basil replied bluntly.

"That stinking brute?" Leif scoffed as one of the spearsmen applied a hand to his wound. A flash of light later and little more than a scar remained. "I didn't know he was with you. I thought he was a wandering monster, or a spy."

"We apologize for attacking him," Estrid said. "He wandered too close to our camp... as you did right now. I would gladly invite you, but now that you've slain a dragonlord, the Unity will hunt you down until you draw your last breath. We can't risk discovery."

"Understandable." Basil shrugged. "I prefer to keep my home hidden as well."

"What?" Shellgirl's carapace snapped open and the slime girl inside crossed her arms in frustration. "They owe us! You should pester them for a reward!"

"Why?" Basil asked. "We killed Steamslime because he threatened us, not because he kept slaves on the other side of the portal. They don't owe us anything."

Estrid smiled at him. "Ungratefulness is not part of our culture, Lord Bohem. You may not have intended to help us, but you still did us a great service in killing Steamslime. If there is anything we can do to repay you, you only have to ask."

"Then answer my questions." Basil wouldn't miss the opportunity to finally receive answers. "Who are you? Where do you come from? Electon?"

"Electon was not our home," Leif said with anger. "It was our prison."

"We entered your world through the Electon Cluster, but we do not originate from it," Estrid replied more calmly. "Our homeworld was once called Elysium."

"Was?" Plato asked, noticing the past tense.

"Was, fair creature." Estrid's voice brimmed with sorrow, and many of her soldiers looked away. "It was destroyed many years ago. Blown to smithereens."

Is she serious? To his horror, Basil didn't see any hint of a lie or joke in Estrid's face. *My God, she is serious.*

"By blown up, you mean it figuratively, right?" Plato asked. The elf's words didn't convince him, or maybe he simply couldn't grasp the severity of the situation. "Like firebombed?"

"Maybe nuked?" Basil proposed. "Your world's surface was nuked? That's what you meant to say?"

Estrid glanced at the shore, picked up a pebble, showcased it to the group... and then crushed it between her fingers. She ground the stone into dust, the bits falling off onto the shore.

"I do not know the word 'nuked'," Estrid said grimly. "But if it means reducing a world like the one beneath our feet to cosmic dust blown away by solar winds... then yes. Elysium was nuked to oblivion."

A tense silence stretched on as the party exchanged worried glances.

"I'm sorry Basil, I can't visualize it," Plato admitted. "I was a housecat a month ago. It's just too much for me."

"Fuck me," Basil replied as he scanned the elven group. He saw the gloom in their gaze, the hunched shoulders, the fear that tomorrow may never come from them. These were broken people without a home to call their own.

Basil felt enough sympathy for them to forgive the surprise attack.

"Tell me more," Basil all but ordered. A question wormed its way in his mind, but he dared not say it out loud: *Can it happen to Earth too?*

"Our world, Elysium, was once a peaceful place," Estrid explained. Her gaze was heavy with longing for something she had long lost. "A prosperous land of forests and water. We Elyseans traveled it in free caravans, guided by wise Starsingers and ancient totems. We were happy for a time... until the Trimurti System came to our world."

"How did it happen?" Basil asked.

"To this day, we do not know," Estrid replied. "We woke up one morning to find the shrines where we honored our totem spirits transformed into dungeons and animals driven mad with foreign magic."

"We fought back," Leif said with pride. "But then the barbarians came."

"A fiendish horde from another world invaded our own," Estrid explained. "They burned our forests, drenched our rivers in blood, and corrupted our heroes with promises of power. Elysium was not the first land they ravaged, nor the last."

Estrid took a long deep breath.

"These people," she said, "call themselves the Apocalypse Force."

Basil exchanged a brief glance with his monster allies. Plato massaged the spot where Megabug once stabbed him, and Shellgirl looked away.

"We've had the displeasure of meeting them," Basil told the elves.

"I feared as much," Estrid replied with a grim face. "The Apocalypse Force and the Unity have fought for many, many years. Where one goes, the other shortly follows after."

"Then we have to go, Lady Estrid," Leif whispered with a low voice. "If the Apocalypse Force's vanguard already crossed over..."

"I know, Leif." Estrid sighed. "The Apocalypse Force serves four beings called the Horsemen, who themselves answer to a demon lord of limitless ambition."

"The Maleking?" Basil guessed. The elves' expressions darkened further, as if he had uttered a curse.

"Yes, the *Maleking*," Estrid answered, stretching the demon's name as if it hurt to say it. "He is a chaotic being who respects strength alone. When he crossed into Elysium, our civilization was already on the brink of collapse. Neither the

totems nor our greatest warriors could stop him. It was only a matter of time before he ascended to the rank of Overgod."

"But he didn't," Basil said. The mermaid he confronted at René's tombstone said that the Maleking would become an Overgod, not that he was already one.

Estrid's gaze turned to the dungeon aurora above their heads. "In the final Incursion, when our last heroes failed to defeat the Maleking and all hope was lost... our mages summoned the Destroyer as a last resort."

"The Destroyer?" Plato snorted dryly. His words were without amusement, without joy. "What an original name, I hope it's trademarked."

Estrid ignored the cat's sarcasm. "The Destroyer is one of the three great beings who oversee the Trimurti System. His avatar descended from the heavens and shattered our world. The competition for Overgod was interrupted, the Maleking was denied his victory, and we fled through the rifts into Electon as the land crumbled beneath our feet."

"Why Electon?" Basil asked. "What was the planet like?"

"The planet?" Estrid shook her head. "The Electon Cluster is no realm like your Earth or our Elysium. It is... an archipelago of steel islands in a sea of lightning, each of them the size of a moon. The Unity controls them all, among many more worlds."

Basil grit his teeth. Earth was being invaded by an empire that spanned dozens of planets the size of Earth at the minimum, and probably more. He wondered if the Apocalypse Force could match their numbers.

Whatever the case, mankind's forces couldn't possibly hope to defeat either in a straight conflict. The dungeons' arrival alone had stretched conventional armed forces thin.

"The Unity opposes the Maleking, so we thought they would shelter us," Leif said. "But when we refused to integrate into their empire, they enslaved us."

"The Unity's Grandmaster and the Maleking each strive to become the new Overgod first," Estrid added with sadness. "Many of our kindred perished in the dragonlords' factories, but we did not lose hope. We hid our strength, bided our time until the rifts opened again, and fled into a new world. Yours, Lord Bohem."

Basil remained silent as he considered this new information. It was a lot to take in. The elves' tale confirmed some of his deepest fears and inspired new ones. He had thought that civilization's collapse was the worst-case scenario; that Incursions would grow too lethal for mankind to handle and force it back

to the stone age, or that a nutjob would unload the world's nuclear arsenal in a last-ditch attempt to turn the tide. Apocalypse scenarios that were even more serious than the current disaster, but that humans could potentially survive.

Yet in at least one world, the conflict spiraled enough to destroy the entire planet. How could mankind hope to survive *that*?

Basil had to make sure things would never escalate to this terrible scenario, but... Plato was right. It was too big for him. He struggled to even imagine such a disaster unfolding.

Three great lords that oversee the Trimurti System... could it be?

"The so-called Destroyer that your mages summoned," Basil asked, "his name wouldn't happen to be *Shiva*, would it?"

"It may be the name by which he is known to your kind," Estrid answered evasively. "I cannot tell."

"Boss, if I may... I don't understand one part." Buggy cleared his throat. "You said your world was destroyed? Then shouldn't the Maleking be dead? He was on your planet when it happened, right?"

Estrid shook her head. "The Maleking escaped Elysium's destruction, but from what we understand, he is now trapped between worlds. His immense strength is now a burden. He is too high-level to cross Level Barriers into a new universe and complete his ascension. So his forces slaughter the weak in an attempt to pave the way for his arrival."

"Basil, what was the name the big bug used in the dungeon?" Plato asked his owner. "Aposomething."

"Apollyon," Basil said. Estrid immediately recognized it. "Who is he?"

"The Horseman of Famine, the weakest of the four," she explained. "I do not know his current level, but he leads the Apocalypse Force's vanguards. He tests the defenses of new worlds and sends his spawn to weaken Level Barriers."

That information fits with Megabug's words, Basil thought. The bug-in-chief threw his soldiers into the meat grinder until a world became strong enough for him to cross over. But how long does the process take? Months? Years? Could the process be halted, stopped, or reversed?

And how did Kalki fit into all of this?

"What do you intend to do now?" Basil asked the elves.

"Hide and run," Estrid replied. "Sad as it sounds, your Earth was doomed from the moment the Apocalypse Force and the Unity found their way inside it. We will wait for the rifts to open again and travel into a distant world beyond their reach. I suggest you do the same."

"No way in hell!" Basil replied with a snarl of rage. The situation might be way beyond his capabilities, but he refused to cower and hide. "I ain't leaving my home without fighting back! All I hear is that we only have to stop Incursions and lock Earth's door!"

"You can't," Estrid replied calmly. She seemed to sincerely believe it too. "Once the Unity and the Apocalypse Force sink their claws into a world, they do not let it go. They'll keep poking holes at the barrier and one day, they will succeed in shattering it."

"They'll try." Basil shrugged. "They'll find it very hard to break in with us standing in the way."

"Yeah, that's right!" Buggy said with enthusiasm. "Cowering won't change anything. If we fight back, then we have a chance to win. If we run, we're already defeated."

"Kuikui!" Kuikui said with a nod, although Basil wondered if he ever understood the conversation.

Rosemarine, as usual, saw only the positive side of things. "More people mean more food for us."

"You guys sound like a self-help booklet ad," Plato said morosely. "This is way above our paygrade, but I agree. If somebody tries to get into our turf, we'll shank them, end of the story."

Estrid sighed. "You will regret your decision."

"It's ours to make," Basil replied. They needed to find Dismaker Labs' leaders. The company put mankind in this mess, it could get humans out of it too. "Are you familiar with Unity technology? We looted a holomachine from Steamslime but couldn't activate it."

"We could try to unlock it for you," Estrid agreed with a nod. "We owe you that much."

Perfect. Hopefully, that would give Basil insight into the Unity's inner workings. The fact that they could make neurotowers implied that the faction understood the Trimurti System's inner workings. If Basil could steal that knowledge, then he could potentially figure out a solution to the Incursion problem.

But, just in case his plans didn't pan out...

Basil glanced at his troupe. "Shellgirl?"

"Yes?" she asked.

"You win." Basil's hand tightened on his halberd's shaft. "We'll start grinding."

Chapter 33: Man vs Beach

Grinding high-level monsters turned out to be a *little* harder than expected.

"Shellgirl, shoot the bird down!" Basil shouted from behind a tree, his voice booming over the sound of falling rain. He peeked out from his hiding spot and immediately ducked to avoid a lightning bolt to the face. The electricity hit a bush near him, setting it ablaze. "Goddammit Shellgirl, shoot the fucking thunderbird! I can't move otherwise!"

"I'm trying!" Shellgirl frantically bombarded the skies above the marsh. "Doing my best!"

"Mister, I'm losing him!" Rosemarine frantically healed an unconscious Plato among the reeds. The cat's guts had spilled out of his stomach, but curative pollen stabilized him enough to prevent another death. "I need a greenie!"

The black triceratops that gutted Plato was still engaged in battle with Buggy alongside a spiky ankylosaurus. Fallen trees and burning grass surrounded the fighters. Kuikui shrieked from atop Buggy's head, strengthening the centimagma with his Brave Howl whenever his buffs ran out.

Buggy truly needed the help. He was holding his own, dodging a charge from the triceratops with Agility Up and keeping the ankylosaurus at bay with his fiery breath, but he was clearly out of breath. The rain didn't improve matters. Droplets turned to steam when they touched Buggy's heated body and slowly whittled at his HP due to his water vulnerability.

"Boss, I'm almost out of SP!" Buggy shouted in panic. "I can't hold out much longer!"

"I'm coming!" Basil shouted, only for the sound of thunder to drown out his words. A mighty lightning bolt fell from the heavens to strike Shellgirl. The clam mimic screamed in pain before retreating inside her carapace.

The perpetrator, a mighty blue falcon the size of a horse with burning yellow eyes, expanded its wings and roared in victory. Its feathers absorbed electricity from the rain clouds it had summoned and illuminated the skies.

Thunderbird

Level 18 [Avian/Elemental]

Why lightning? Why do they all use lightning?! Basil cursed. And the whole thing started so well!

The corpses of five raptors, one beheaded stegosaurus, and another thunderbird littering the ground near his position attested to the party's early successes. The latter avian hadn't caused the team much trouble; Plato sliced its throat while it was swooping in to eat a velociraptor carcass Basil purposefully laid out in the open as bait.

Unfortunately, the first thunderbird was apparently in a committed relationship with a second one. Upon finding Basil's party dismembering its mate for crafting material, the beast swore vengeance and half the dino neighborhood answered its call!

How was Basil supposed to know birds had friends and families?

Worse, the thunderbird had identified Basil as the party's leader *and* noticed his vulnerability to lightning. Now that Shellgirl was down, it snapped the trunk behind which Basil was hiding in half with another thunderbolt.

Deprived of cover, Basil raised his halberd like a javelin. It was a risky move, but he sorely lacked long-range options. If he survived today's fight, he swore to get his hands on an AK-47.

Basil threw the halberd at the thunderbird's heart with all his might. His enhanced strength allowed him to launch the heavy weapon at an arrow's speed, even though the rain reduced his visibility. The thunderbird dodged the lethal strike, but the halberd's axe blade cut through its left wing. The beast shrieked in pain and lost altitude as Basil's weapon fell into the marsh.

"Yes!" Basil rushed after the thunderbird, searched his pockets, and brought out two small knives he kept as emergency weapons. "Fire Rune, Ice Rune!"

Flames swirled around his left knife and snowflakes around the right. Basil closed the gap with the thunderbird, weapons raised for the kill. The ferocious monster did not try to run. Instead, it lunged at Basil the moment it landed. Lightning coursed through its body.

Basil grit his teeth as the thunderbird's talons slashed his chest deep enough to reach the bones. Yet his anger was stronger than the electricity coursing through his veins. He stabbed the thunderbird through the neck and gutted it.

"You're going extinct the way of the dodo!" Basil hissed as he pinned the thunderbird to the ground and kept applying pressure. "Through the oven!"

The two knives' blades reached each other deep inside the thunderbird's neck. Basil beheaded the creature with a swift motion practiced over many botched rooster executions. He was already on his way to help Buggy by the time the bird's head hit the ground.

Basil made his presence known by flanking the triceratops threatening his friend. He threw his fiery knife at the dinosaur's left eye and pierced it. The beast roared in pain and abandoned Buggy to face its new foe, leaving the centimagma to the ankylosaurus.

The triceratops charged at Basil, its three horns sharp and deadly. Basil didn't slow down. He instead leaped in the air right before the collision. He jumped over the triceratops' head and landed on the back of its neck.

"Let's see how cold-blooded you are!" Basil stabbed the creature in the spine with his ice-infused knife. The blade cut through the dinosaur's scales and spread a frigid cold in its blood.

The reptilian equivalent to a rodeo followed. The triceratops desperately attempted to throw Basil off his back while he grabbed the beast's neck. Basil would have found it funny if not for the blood flowing out of his wounded chest. He briefly glanced at Buggy, who was coiling around the ankylosaurus and breathing fire at the dinosaur's exposed eyes. He seemed to have the situation well in hand, and Kuikui occasionally helped him with a stray thunderbolt.

"The bird is going to the oven..." Basil removed his knife and stabbed the triceratops again, this time in the neck. "And you to the freezer!"

Basil struck the triceratops in the back of the skull once, then twice, then more times than he could count. He kept stabbing the dinosaur until it collapsed under its own weight, its half-frozen blood spilling all over the grass.

The rain summoned by the thunderbird above their heads dissipated, letting sunlight pierce through the clouds. Covering his chest wound with a hand, Basil stored his ice knife in his inventory and traded it for his last green medicine.

"Rosemarine!" Basil tossed the healing potion at his plant, who immediately administered it to Plato. He then checked on Buggy, who was incinerating the strangled ankylosaurus to death.

After confirming no other dinosaur would come to finish them off, Basil allowed himself to fall on the ground and *breathe*.

Your party received 155,000 experience (15483 for you). You earned 3 levels (total 23).

The level penalties were starting to show their ugly noses again.

Buggy sighed in exhaustion as he crawled away from the ankylosaurus' burning corpse. "Is everyone alive?" he asked. "Everyone?"

"I'm alright..." Shellgirl emerged from her carapace, her gooey body threatening to spill out of it. "We got the exp... at least..."

"Why?" Basil clenched his jaw in rage. "Why do they all pack Lightning Bolt? Birds and dinosaurs shouldn't shoot electricity from their asses!"

Was that Musk's master plan? Lightning-powered birds to fuel the Tesla energy grid?

"It's why... you shouldn't let a bird live to adulthood," Plato said as he emerged from unconsciousness, a paw on his healed stomach. Rosemarine helped him get up with her vines. "They *learn*."

Basil glanced at the mated thunderbirds' remains. Their feathers still surged with electricity and would make for excellent crafting material. So would the dead dinosaurs' body parts. With his party exhausted and no more healing supplies, Basil decided to call it a day.

"Enough grinding, we're going to the beach." Basil rose to his feet and let Rosemarine close his wounds with healing pollen. "Did somebody see where my halberd landed?"

"I think it dropped into the lake, Boss," Buggy said. Kuikui nodded in confirmation.

"Did we kill all the plesiosaurus infesting it?" Shellgirl asked with a tired voice.

Basil sighed and prayed to God that no dinosaur had absconded with his weapon. He had had his fill of reptiles for today.

Basil hadn't visited the ocean in many months, but he could never forget its song.

The noise of waves crashing on a shore; the whistling wind blowing across the sand dunes; the distant cries of seagulls. All these sounds formed a slow, peaceful symphony that could soothe any man's soul.

The elves had agreed to help Basil carry Steamslime's shell close to the house and unlock the holomachine on his behalf, but they politely asked not to stay in contact afterward. "Please understand, Lord Bohem," Estrid had apologized. "Our camp is close and your presence will bring dangerous attention to us. I would rather keep our interactions to a minimum."

Basil had taken it in good grace, stored the remains of today's prey in the trailer—what they could carry at least—and drove to the Atlantic's shore. It took the party a few minutes to climb the dunes on foot and watch what lay beyond it.

"My..." Shellgirl put her hands on her mouth, astonished. "Is that..."

"The sea," Basil replied with a smile. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

The Atlantic Ocean stretched out before them as far as the eye could see, pure waves of blue water crashing against beaches of luminous white sand. The auroras from the dungeon nearby reflected on the clear surface and illuminated it like the night's sky. Towering dunes cast a dark shadow on countless shells lost along the shore. The concrete ruins of a German blockhaus laid half-buried in the water, a bygone age's remains.

Basil removed his shoes and basked in the sensation of warm sand slipping between his toes, of the wind blowing on his skin, of the salty air of the sea on the tip of his tongue. After everything he had learned over the last couple hours, it just felt good.

"I've never seen so much water..." Buggy glanced from one side of the horizon to the other. "I thought the lake was big but this... how far does it stretch on?"

"It's hard to represent the Atlantic's size mentally," Basil replied. "Our home, the Barthes, they're but a droplet compared to this sea."

"No way!" Buggy snapped his mandibles. "You're kidding, Boss? It can't be that big!"

"I heard of the lands beyond," Shellgirl said with a low whisper. "The great kingdom of America, where all humans grow rich by eating junk for food. I thought we could see it from the shore."

"We can't even see England," Plato replied with a shrug. "I expected bird monsters around, but it seems the beach is all ours."

Basil nodded. He didn't detect any threat nearby and neither did Buggy's Tremorsense. Fish monsters might inhabit the sea, but the party should be safe so long as they stayed close to the shore. And if any aquatic creature tried to hunt them down, they would earn a one-way ticket to the freezer.

"Mister, can I drink the ocean?" Rosemarine asked naïvely. "I will grow big enough to eat the stars!"

"Saltwater is bad for your health, sweetie." Basil patted her on the head. "But you can swim."

"Kui first!" Kuikui rushed down the dune with excitement. "Kui first!"

"Wait for me!" Rosemarine ran after him, followed by Plato and the rest of the gang. Basil participated in the race for victory, tossing his clothes aside as he climbed down the dune. By the time he only had his boxers on, Kuikui had beaten Rosemarine to the water by an inch.

Basil dived into the warm sea with relish. He didn't care that his boxers weren't meant for swimming. As saltwater washed over his skin and hair, Basil felt his

worries slip away. The Apocalypse Force's threat, the Unity's vengeance, the remote possibility of Earth's destruction... the sea let him forget them all, if only for a minute.

I missed this. Basil floated on his back with his eyes closed, letting the waves gently carry him around. He enjoyed the peaceful moment and heard Shellgirl swimming at his side. *No fighting, no worries, no nothing.*

"Kui." Kuikui floated on the water nearby the way a duck would, a scene which drew a smile from Basil. Rosemarine kept her body half-submerged, her vines anchoring themselves to the sand and her head staying above the surface.

Bugsy was building a sandcastle on the shore. He used his firebreath to turn sand grains into pillars of glass, which he planted on the beach to serve as a solid foundation for the construction. Plato, ever the opportunist, rested in the shade of his teammate's new building.

Bugsy had turned out to be a surprisingly talented architect and engineer for a giant centipede. Basil wondered how much of it was instinct or raw talent.

A splash of water hit Basil in the face, much to his surprise. He turned to face the source of the treacherous attack: Shellgirl, whose carapace floated like a raft.

"Got you," she said with a grin.

"Let me show you a secret technique, passed down to me by generations of swimmer warriors." Basil pivoted in the water, his feet pointing at Shellgirl. "Water Splash Overdrive!"

Basil moved his feet up and down at high speed. His System-enhanced strength allowed him to unleash a mighty wave of water right in Shellgirl's face. "Cheater!" she accused him with a laugh. "You have legs!"

"That's why it's a secret technique." Basil smirked at her. "Not everyone can do it."

"That was just a dick move!" She pointed her cannons at him. "Now this means war!"

Shellgirl opened fire at him, although her barrels unleashed streams of water rather than ice pearls. Basil dodged the attack by diving below the surface, then grabbed Shellgirl from below and dragged her underwater.

"I win," Basil said upon emerging. "By K.O."

Shellgirl returned to the surface, right under Kuikui. The velociraptor soon found himself sitting atop his teammate's floating shell, much to his confusion.

"Guys!" Shellgirl called to the rest of the team for reinforcements. "Wanna play? We can form teams!"

"I'll cheer for you from the sidelines," Plato replied without enthusiasm. "Fight for my entertainment."

"If you're wounded, you can retreat to my home base!" Buggy replied as he finished raising a tower of sand and its outer wall.

"I'm here, Mister!" Rosemarine struggled to float in Basil's direction. However, as a plant with vines for legs, a wave soon carried her away. "Help!"

Basil grabbed Rosemarine and let her sit on his shoulders. "Here," he said. "You focus on attack, and I on defense!"

"Kuikui, as my new employee, I order you to dominate the water splash market!" Shellgirl shouted to her own partner. "Let's kick their ass!"

"Kui win!" the velociraptor replied as he expanded his wings. "Kui rule!"

An intense duel followed as both teams tried to drown the opposition. Rosemarine's many vines provided better range for water splashes, but Shellgirl provided a stable attack platform for Kuikui to launch waves from. In the end, the conflict ended in a tie.

"You know, I thought we should focus more on monster hunts," Shellgirl said. "But I changed my mind. This is fun."

It was. Basil dealt with stress in two ways: either by beating the shit out of someone or drowning his fears with mindless entertainment. He wouldn't have developed his video game addiction without his money troubles.

What Estrid said... Basil tried to think of it as like global warming. A phenomenon so large that he could only contribute so much to halting it. He needed to focus on the small stuff he could influence rather than dwell on existential dread. Small moments of happiness mattered more to Basil than world-saving quests.

"If I had evolved, we would have won," Rosemarine said grumpily.

"We can have a rematch after you transform," Shellgirl replied with confidence. "What do you say, Partner?"

"Sure." Basil opened his menu and checked his classes available; particularly the new ones.

Druid: A versatile magician combining natural magic with the power to shapeshift into powerful werebeast forms. STR (B); AGI (C); VIT (B); SKI (D); MAG (A); INT (D); CHA (C); LCK (C).

Dragonknight: A mighty fighter class imitating the power of dragons; whether to ride them or slay them. STR (A); AGI (A); VIT (C); SKI (B); MAG (D); INT (D); CHA (B); LCK (C).

Both classes were interesting, but Basil decided against investing in them for now. He was more interested in the teleportation Tamer Perk Kalki had told him about. He was only a few levels away from it, and so spent all of those he kept in reserve.

Level 8, 9, 10, and 11 Tamer Stat Gains: +4 STR; +3 AGI; +2 VIT; +3 SKI; +3 MAG; +4 INT; +4 CHA; +2 LCK. You earned 120 HP and 65 SP.

Monster Cure I (Active): 20 SP, [Support], [Life]. The tamer heals a small amount of HP for all monster members of his party (HP recovered: Tamer Levels+MAG); the Tamer and other Players do not benefit from the healing, but the effect applies regardless of distance.

One for All I (Active): If you are a party's leader, you can teleport your party back to your designated Lair at will. 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 call one ally at a time. Neither teleportation effect works in dungeons or magically warded areas, and they cannot cross dimensional boundaries.

The pleasurable power thrill that followed the stat increase couldn't compare to Basil's joy at obtaining his new Perks. Teleportation at will would make his party's life so much easier.

Now that he had reached level 23 total, the System showed him Rosemarine's metamorphosis choices.

Killaplant Rosemarine Eglantine de la Barthe can transform into:

- **Gunflower** (Plant/Artificial). A living artillery whose seed bullets and flower turrets can inflict ailments and devastate the entire battlefield.
- **Tropidrake** (Plant/Dragon). A tropical plant dragon combining miraculous healing abilities with the power of the sun.

A dragon? The Gunflower choice made sense considering Rosemarine's fondness for firearms, but Basil couldn't imagine her as a giant reptile. Did she unlock that metamorphosis path after they defeated Steamslime? Come to think of it, what factors influenced the choices available to a monster? Stats? Affinities? The System wouldn't answer his questions, much to Basil's annoyance.

"Rosemarine?" Basil asked. "Gunflower or Tropidrake?"

"Tropidrake!" she replied with enthusiasm.

"Really?" Her choice surprised Basil, especially considering her love for firearms. "Don't you want more guns?"

"I already have guns, Mister!" Rosemarine replied candidly. "Miss Shellgirl's barrels are big enough for us."

"Mine can fire more than seeds," Shellgirl added with a coy grin.

"As a Tropidrake, I can heal everyone and eat the sun all at once!" Rosemarine chirped. She pointed a vine at Basil's heart. "You fed and protected me when I was small and weak, Mister! Now it is my turn to protect you!"

Touched by her concern, Basil gently grabbed Rosemarine and lifted her above his head, Lion King style. "Tropidrake it is then."

No sooner did Basil utter these words that Rosemarine began to glow. Her size and weight increased to the point Basil had to drop her mid-transformation so as not to sink.

Well, looks like she'll give Buggy a run for his money, Basil thought as Rosemarine's glowing form grew as large as the centimagma... and kept going. Basil's joy turned to surprise and terror. *Wait, she's not stopping?!*

Rosemarine expanded by many meters in the blink of an eye, pushing back Basil, Shellgirl, and Kuikui. "Kui!" the velociraptor shrieked in fear as he was nearly tossed overboard from Shellgirl's back. "Kui!"

"The hell!" Shellgirl complained. "Stop!"

But nobody could interrupt the metamorphosis process. Rosemarine's sudden growth sent a colossal wave crashing down on the beach. Plato let out a shriek of surprise upon seeing it and hastily climbed up Buggy's tower of sand to escape the flood. As for the centimagma himself, he burrowed under the beach to avoid contact with water.

Basil was thrown on the shore alongside Shellgirl and Kuikui. When he rose up to his feet and turned his head around, a colossal beast stood in place of Rosemarine.

The creature dwarfed every other member of the team. Basil estimated her height as around five meters and her length at three times that amount. Although she didn't match Steamslime's titanic size, Rosemarine was now larger than any land animal he knew of before the apocalypse.

The ground trembled as her four legs walked on the beach, each of them ending with swirling roots rather than claws or paws. Her varan-like body had multicolored leaves for scales, with fruit pustules growing at various places. Her long tail ended in foliage, and the head...

Rosemarine's head made even Basil pause. A flower made of dozens of large petals stared at him, literally; for a yellow, reptilian eye nested within each of them. A colossal, circular mouth with at least three rows of fangs let out a heavy breath at the flower's center. A forked purple tongue came out of this hungry abyss to lick Basil on the chest.

She was...

"Beautiful," Basil whispered.

He had found the hedge of his dreams.

Congratulations, [**Killaplant**] Rosemarine transformed into a [**Tropidrake**]! Rosemarine gained the [**Sunflower**], [**Sunbeam**], and [**Harvest (Tropidrake)**] Perks! Her existing Perks have been altered and strengthened!

Rosemarine rose on her back legs and let out a roar to shake the heavens.

Bugsy's unharmed head emerged from the sand after the water receded. "Everyone, are you alright?"

"Bugsy, you saved my life!" Plato remained atop the tower of sand, trembling in fear of the water. It was a testament to the centimagma's talent that his sandcastle survived Rosemarine's transformation. "One of them at least! When anybody asks who my favorite bug is... I'll say your name! I'll say Bugsy!"

Rosemarine looked up at the skies, rose on her feet... and jumped in place. Her sheer weight prevented her from rising higher than a meter, but she blew out a cloud of sand upon landing. Shellgirl grabbed Kuikui and hid him inside her carapace for protection, while Basil covered his face with his hands.

"Rosemarine, what are you doing?" he asked after coughing sand.

"I'm trying to eat the sun, Mister, but it's too far away!" Although Rosemarine's appearance had changed greatly, her voice did not. She glared at the sun with her many eyes. "I will get you next time..."

Basil smiled and checked Rosemarine's new stats.

Name Rosemarine Eglantine de la Barthe (Tropidrake)

Type Plant/Dragon

Faction The Bohens

Experience 47,418/51,000

Immune

Resist

Weak

N/A

Fire, Wood, Life, Water,
Earth, Light.

Plantslayer, Dragonslayer, Corrosion, Metal,
Frost, Lightning, Darkness.

Level

Health Points

Special Points

20+3

2540

525

Strength

Agility

Vitality

Skill

39

25

35

28

(A+20%)

(C+20%)

(B+20%)

(C+20%)

Magic

Intelligence

Charisma

Luck

36

10

27

32

(B+20%)

(D+20%)

(C+20%)

(B+20%)

Physical Mind Soul Corrosion Metal Wood Life Support Ailment

-

-

-

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)

Rosemarine had gone from the party's weakest member to probably the strongest. Her transformation had altered her Perks and some of her elemental affinities.

"Boss," Buggy whispered as the party gathered around their new heavy hitter. "I don't think Rosemarine will fit inside the house anymore."

"Gee, you think?" Basil replied. Buggy had a point though. Basil had been so floored by Rosemarine's newfound appearance that he forgot the logistical problems involved. "She could fit inside Steamslime's shell though..."

"She would make a nice pack mule too," Shellgirl said with a whistle. "Imagine the stuff we could transport on her back."

"Mister, can I carry the house?" Rosemarine asked candidly. "That way, we can eat chicken everywhere!"

"Kui new house!" After a moment of hesitation, Kuikui leaped on Rosemarine's back and nested among the leaf-scales. "Kui warm! Kui not move!"

"Are you abandoning me?" Shellgirl pouted and pointed her barrels at the velociraptor. "Traitor!"

"Treachery is the wages of those who trust bir—" Plato stopped halfway through his sentence, his ears turning. He looked up at the skies with his eyes wide open in shock. "Basil, do you see what I see?"

Basil glanced in the same direction as his cat and noticed three black points in the skies. Three winged forms observed the party from afar high above the sea. Basil squinted until he distinguished green exoskeletons, hornet wings, and crimson compound eyes...

"Fuck..." Basil whispered in astonishment as he recognized the creatures. The phantom pain of darts piercing his flesh flared in his chest. "Megabug?"

Apollyon Drones

Level 10 [Bug]

Realizing that they had been spotted, the three bugs flew north.

"Shoot them!" Basil ordered Shellgirl. "Shoot them down!"

"Partner, they're too far away!" she protested. "I don't have that kind of range!"

Rosemarine glanced at the bugs. Her petals glowed, first brightly red and then a luminous yellow. Her mouth closed as her flower of a head shone like the sun. Particles of light gathered within the tropidrake's body. "Sun..."

Basil and his teammates covered their eyes to protect themselves from the brightness. "What the—"

"BEAM!"

Rosemarine opened her mouth wide and sunlight poured out of it.

A golden ray of energy pierced through the cloudless skies in a straight line, its radiance illuminating the ocean's surface. The beam crossed the enormous distance between the beach and the bugs in an instant. Two of them were immediately vaporized, but the third managed to dodge the attack.

Rosemarine moved her head to orient her beam, yet her enormous body made her movement sluggish. By the time she ran out of sunlight to breathe at him, Megabug's clone had already escaped behind the horizon.

"I'm so sorry," Rosemarine apologized as her petals returned to normal. "I tried."

"Hey, you got two out of three," Shellgirl comforted her. "It's a win in my book."

"Why didn't we receive experience?" Plato asked in confusion.

"Too low-level," Basil replied, his jaw clenching in frustration. One of the drones had escaped. "With such a large difference, the experience penalty reduces our gains to zero."

"Kui got experience," Kuikui said, but nobody paid attention to him.

"Mmm." The cat wagged his tail. "On one paw, it pleases me that the guy who took my first life is now as weak as a goblin compared to us. On the other paw, seeing that hornet again worries me."

"It should." Basil's jaw clenched. Megabug was only a vanguard, a grunt, and the other scouts had followed in his wake. From the direction in which the survivor had flown, Basil assumed he was moving to Seignosse. "Seems like the Apocalypse Force took over the closest dungeon."

"I have enough grinding for the day," Plato complained. "Can we skip this one?"

"But Mr. Plato, if we wait they might attack us first," Bugsy said. "Shouldn't we seize the initiative?"

"I could devour them all," Rosemarine said with enthusiasm.

"Personally, I'm spent," Shellgirl said with a sigh. "Not all of us are close to metamorphosis."

Basil shared most of his party's lack of enthusiasm. Attacking the dungeon before its inhabitants could mobilize made sense, but the Apocalypse Force was no mindless horde of goblins. They were organized, deadly, and could potentially teleport troops to defend the dungeon. An attack on it had to succeed on the first try.

That, and the party was in no position to launch an assault now. They were SP-exhausted, tired, and out of healing items.

"We'll prepare first," Basil decided. A little reconnaissance wouldn't hurt either. "And bring explosives. Lots and lots of explosives."

They would give the Apocalypse Force the Steamslime treatment.

"Yo dog, I hear somebody else coming," Plato warned. Another form flew straight at the beach, but came from the east rather than the north.

Basil summoned his halberd, only to lower his weapon when he recognized the newcomer.

"Hello there," Vasi said while landing her flying broom on the beach. "Did you miss me?"

"Vasi!" Shellgirl immediately approached the witch and gave her a high five. "You're back!"

"About time," Basil said. He was relieved to see Vasi back in one piece. "I thought something bad happened to you."

Vasi playfully put a finger on her lips. "Am I dreaming, or did you just say that you were worried about me?"

"I was," Basil replied with a shrug. If Vasi wanted to embarrass him, she had miscalculated. "No news usually means bad news."

"My, you are so sweet Basil, but you had nothing to worry about." Vasi put a hand on her waist and glanced at Rosemarine. "What fertilizer did you use to make her grow so huge?"

"Blood and guts," Rosemarine replied with a joyful voice.

Vasi chuckled. "Why do I have the feeling that I missed a lot?"

"You did," Basil replied. "How did your meeting go?"

"Pretty well. I met with this Tye, expecting a talented merchant..." Vasi grinned ear to ear. "And then he turns out to be one of the greatest magicians I've ever encountered! He might be even more powerful than Mom!"

"Your mother?" Shellgirl gasped. "Didn't you tell me that she can cast Tier X spells?"

"She can," Vasi confirmed with a nod. "So imagine my surprise when I met an archmage of her caliber. We ended up discussing spell optimization and magical theory."

Basil raised an eyebrow. "For nearly two days?"

"What, you never debated spellcasting past midnight? My poor Basil, what am I going to do with you?" Vasi smiled. "If you want the full story, I told him about my plan for Samhain and he helped me smooth out my transformation ritual. I also informed him of your interest in the multiverse, and he said he was eager to discuss it in person. He even gave me a trinket so we could teleport to his shop more easily."

"What, like right now?"

"Basil, meeting an archmage is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!" Vasi teased him with a chuckle. "I'm kidding, but we shouldn't make him wait too long. From experience, ancient spellcasters do not deal well with lateness."

"Oh, can we go?" Shellgirl grabbed Basil's arm like a child eager to go to Disneyland. "An archmage merchant could teach us so much! Come on, come on!"

Basil rolled his eyes, but he didn't have the patience to argue. "Give me time to test my new teleportation Perk," he told Vasi. "And let's meet this Tye."

He had so many questions to ask him.

Chapter 34: Man vs Superboss

One for All worked exactly as advertised. Basil triggered the Perk after storing the campervan in the inventory and the party found themselves back at the house's entrance in a flash of red light.

And *only* the party.

Basil was holding Vasi's hand when he activated his Perk, but she didn't teleport with them. The witch returned to the house on her flying broomstick around half an hour later, very much annoyed.

"I swear I didn't know," Basil promised her as he and Shellgirl stuffed sliced triceratops steaks into the freezer. The others, Rosemarine in particular, had left to meet up with the elves and drag Steamslime's shell to the house. "You aren't mad?"

"I don't blame you," Vasi replied, although there was an edge to her voice. "But your Perk suffers from a serious oversight."

"Oh, I know a workaround!" Shellgirl snapped her fingers. "Next time, you can store the campervan in your inventory with Vasi inside!"

"I've never tried to store my car in the inventory when it had living passengers," Basil said. Shellgirl's idea intrigued him, but he didn't feel comfortable testing her theory on a friend. He decided he'd stuff the trunk with a gagged goblin, mafia-

style, and store the campervan. "If they survive the trip, they could describe how the inventory looks from the inside."

"I would like to learn where items go as well, but I'll pass on the testing phase." Vasi glanced at the dinosaur pieces. "How about you give me a cut as an apology for leaving me stranded?"

"Sure," Basil replied. Vasi had done him many services so he didn't mind sharing with her. By now she was almost a part-time member of his party. "But I'll keep the thunderbird's feathers and ankylosaurus armor for myself."

"What do you intend to do with them?"

"My Slaughterer Perk prevents me from wearing damage-reducing armor," Basil explained. "If I do, I'll lose access to my Berserker abilities... with a few exceptions."

"Let me guess," Vasi said. "You won't lose your Perks if you wear a monster's skin like a barbarian?"

"Yes, and since I've seen thunderbirds' feathers absorb electricity..." Basil grinned wickedly. "No more lightning weakness."

"You should ask Orcdad and Orcmom for help," Shellgirl suggested. "They make pretty good clothes from fur and scales."

"I might," Basil agreed as he put the last steak on ice. With today's spoils safely in storage, they were ready for the big trip. "Vasi, we can leave when you want."

"I can't wait." Shellgirl pumped her fist. "I'll finally meet Big Business!"

"Since you asked so nicely." Vasi took her hat, put a hand inside, and brought a small, thumb-sized crystal skull out of it. "Prepare yourself. Your life is about to get wild... or wilder."

Basil shrugged. Little could surprise him after watching the world end and fighting a dragon-snail.

The crystal skull shone with a purple glow. Ghostly lights filled its eye-sockets and the teeth morphed into the shape of a ghastly, skeletal grin. Darkness oozed from the device to swallow the kitchen in the blink of an eye. A chilling cold sank its claws into Basil's bones, and his head hurt like hell as a screen flashed before his eyes.

You have left your world for a Trimurti System-compatible one. Some of your Perks and Stats might function differently. Your abilities will return to normal when you go back to Earth.

Warning: your Magic Stat has been merged with Intelligence (average value of 24 selected).

The shadows receded before the faint light of candles. It took a few seconds for Basil's eyes to adjust to the new luminosity and the smell of dust in the air.

"Welcome," Vasi said. "To the shop between worlds."

It was... surprisingly small.

Basil had expected a vast magical supermarket bustling with wares, not a single floor antiquarian shop. It couldn't be bigger than his own house, with a chandelier and candelabras to provide a modicum of light. The left wing showcased shelves full of books and grimoires, while the

right contained rows of alchemical wares, from potions to athanors and even a metal automaton.

At the shop's center, glass-top display cases featured a tasteful variety of weapons, accessories, amulets, shields, armors, dragon skulls, and other items. The crystalized statues of a crying warrior woman embracing an armored man—a sibling or relative from their similar faces—occupied the gallery's center. That piece alone among the items didn't display a price tag, only its name: *The Fool Princess and the Mad Prince*. A headless black knight's armor stood next to the gallery, wielding a shield in one hand and a dark flail in the other.

The shopkeeper was scribbling on a scroll behind a wooden counter. His appearance was odd, to say the least. The man looked ageless, neither old nor young, with short hair as white as snow and the pallid skin of a walking corpse. He wore plain, tattered scarlet robes. No weapon, no accessory, no nothing.

The shopkeeper looked up at his guests with crimson eyes. His face was average, almost common. Yet Basil found it unnerving all the same. He couldn't put his finger on why, but something about the man felt *wrong* beyond his albinism.

"Welcome to my humble establishment," he said with a low, friendly voice. "I am Walter Tye, owner of Tye's Boiling Cauldron."

His tone was calm and soothing, his lips pursing into a thin smile, but the eyes... The absolute detachment in his gaze betrayed his true nature. Basil had seen that stare before on Bulgarian TV when the news showed the latest mafia catch.

This man, Walter Tye, was a cold-blooded killer. Yet the smile he showed Vasi appeared strangely genuine.

"Punctual," the shopkeeper whispered. "I like it."

"I said I wouldn't keep you waiting," Vasi replied before introducing the others. "This is Basil, and—"

"Shellgirl, co-CEO of Bohens International!" Shellgirl extended a hand to Walter with a confident salesman's grin. "I'm so happy to make your acquaintance, Mr. Tye! I'm sure this is the beginning of a profitable business association!"

Walter glanced at the hand with amusement before shaking it. Shellgirl's grin faltered a little at the contact. "So cold," she whispered under her breath.

"If you would allow me a few minutes to finish my letter, I'll be with you shortly," the shopkeeper said after breaking the handshake. "You can check the wares in the meantime, if anything catches your fancy."

Basil took the hint, but he didn't look at the wares first. Instead, he searched for an exit. Vasi was right, this Walter Tye was *dangerous* with a capital D and Basil would rather cover his team's rear if the worst came to pass.

He immediately noticed a complete absence of doors, with the only exits in sight being locked windows. Basil looked through one of them to see what lay beyond the shop.

Namely, nothing.

The shop didn't stand on any ground. Only an endless void teeming with distant yellow stars and red nebulae awaited beyond its confines. The establishment floated on its own among a dizzyingly large expanse of nothingness.

We're far away from Earth, Basil guessed after failing to recognize the constellations. The thought of joining Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin among the pantheon of space explorers filled him with both joy and unease. How powerful is this man, to create a place like this shop?

Vasi didn't seem bothered. The witch was studiously reading a grimoire from the library, while Shellgirl checked the weapons and accessories on display. Basil noticed a flaming sword, a shield with a giant eye in its center, and even a dark wood bow among them. He studied the latter until the System decided to show him its stats.

Skadi's Fell Bow

Family: Weapon (Bow).

Quality: S.

Power: + 22 SKI.

Crit: +30 %

Accuracy: 100%

Effect 1: [**Allslayer**]: Inflicts supereffective damage against all types except Divine (x3 damage).

Effect 2: [**Supreme Ice Rune**]: +30% [Frost] damage piercing through Resistance.

Effect 3: [**Envenomed**]: 30% chance of inflicting [Poison] on a successful hit.

Effect 4: [**Infinite Quiver**]: Skadi's Fell Bow magically produces its own arrows.

Effect 5: [**Skadi's Curse**]: Skadi's Fell Bow will inflict the [Cursed] ailment on users who do not possess a hunting-related class.

The bow of the murdered Norse goddess of the hunt, Skadi. As it turned out, gods make for the most dangerous game of all.

Basil's eyes almost bulged out of his skull as he read. He checked the price tag underneath: 120,000 gold coins. Basil didn't have a currency baseline to compare the price to, but he had heard somewhere a four gram piece of gold cost around two hundred euros before the apocalypse. That bow alone cost many times more than all his party's possessions combined. Basil had never felt so poor.

And if the System was truthful, then this weapon once belonged to a pagan god...

"Oh, you're the first human warrior to check the bow before the big fiery sword." An amused male voice startled Basil from behind. "Why the choice?"

It took Basil a few seconds to realize that the voice came from the headless armor. It must have belonged to a medieval knight, but nobody moved it as it took a step in Basil's direction.

"Don't mind me, I'm the chief's chief of security," said the walking armor. "And don't worry about the price. We accept souls, memories, and firstborn children if you have some to spare."

"Hagen, please stop spooking my customers," the shopkeeper said absentmindedly from behind his counter. "We only take cash."

"Anyway, why the bow?" Hagen asked Basil. "You don't strike me as the bowman type."

"I need a ranged weapon," Basil replied. He heeded the bow's cursed warning and didn't touch it... and it was outside his price range considering its sheer, overwhelming stats. A quick glance at the shop's weapons, those he could identify at least, confirmed his suspicions. "Are all your wares legendary items?"

"Almost." Hagen pointed at the crystal statues with his shield. "These two are trophies and not for sale."

The memory of Dax's petrified citizens flashed before Basil's eyes, and a chill traveled down his spine.

"Why the dark look, friend?" Hagen asked mirthfully. "Don't mourn them. The girl did me in once after I bravely tried to stab her in the back. Out of loyalty, might I add."

"It was a chore to bring you and the others back from the other side," Walter commented from behind his counter. "I would appreciate it if you did not die again, my friend."

"Pinky swear, chief. Pinky swear."

"These items, they're too expensive," Shellgirl commented as she finished checking through the wares. "How can anybody purchase them?"

"No offense, but most visitors are a tiny bit higher level than you," Hagen replied. "The chief's establishment mostly caters to troll liches, would-be dark lords, demon kings, world-hopping pirates and adventurers... the big shots."

"I thought the Level Barrier prevented anyone above level 25 from crossing into Earth?" Basil asked.

"It does," Hagen replied with a dark chuckle. "Which is why *you* came to *us*, and not the other way around. Ain't no barrier to protect anyone here."

The headless armor's words sounded casual, yet Basil didn't miss the menacing edge underneath. The fact the System wouldn't reveal his nature or level bothered him as well. Hagen was cut from the same cloth as his employer. They both disguised their dangerous nature under a veil of affability.

"An exclusive business targeting high-income individuals with luxury purchases..." Shellgirl retreated inside her carapace. "I need to write it down!"

"And nobody tried to rob you?" Basil asked. "You're showing powerful weapons. I would be surprised if nobody tried to take them by force."

"Some tried," Hagen replied evasively.

Walter looked up from his scroll to stare straight at Basil. "Will you?"

Basil sensed an invisible pressure growing on his shoulders, alongside the cold sensation of invisible fingers caressing his neck. A deadly tension spread in the room, making Vasi turn her head in Basil's direction with a worried expression. Shellgirl peeked out of her hideout with trembling lips.

Basil held firm... until a System screen appeared before his eyes and confirmed the danger at hand.

New Quest: The Kiss of Undeath

Recommended Level: 99.

Challenge Walter Tye to a fight and live to regret it.

Reward: 250,000,000 Bonus EXP + Black Philosopher's Stone.

"I'll pass," Basil uttered the moment he saw the recommended level.

Quest canceled.

"Wise choice," Walter Tye commented. The thin smirk at the edge of his lips told Basil that he could somehow see his System screens. The tension in the room immediately vanished and Vasi allowed herself to breathe.

Basil remembered games he had played. Some included a hidden, purely optional boss far more powerful than the last one; a final challenge for players seeking to prove their skills. The Superboss.

Basil had expected an almighty dragon or a slumbering demigod from the Trimurti System, not a merchant in the middle of nowhere, space.

"I have nothing to do with the System sowing chaos in your world," Walter said. He sounded vaguely amused. "It might reward my destruction, but I am neither a cause nor a participant in your little godhood contest. I care nothing for it."

"You can read my mind." Basil didn't mean it as a question, but as a statement. "Wonderful."

"My apologies. Many customers walk into my shop with ill-intent, so I had to vet you first."

Basil observed the man carefully. From what the quest showed, he was probably around level 99... or more. "Why would someone as powerful as you run a shop in the middle of nowhere?"

"I've asked myself the same question," Vasi commented after setting a book aside. "What does an archmage of your caliber even need money for?"

"I don't need gold. I can make it with a snap of my fingers." Walter set his scroll aside and raised an eyebrow. "The question you should ask is not why I would run a shop. It's why not?"

"Yeah, why would you need a reason to make money?" Shellgirl scolded Basil. "Wealth is not a goal, it's an attitude!"

Basil figured it out. "Ah, I get it. Shopkeeping is not your job, but your hobby."

"Yes," Walter confirmed with a short nod. "I will admit there is an ulterior motive beyond leisure. My customers come from many places with their specificities. Trading with them expands my knowledge about the infinite worlds, their magical arts and peculiarities."

"Oh, how do you please your clients?" Shellgirl immediately pestered him for advice. "Do you rough them up a bit to make a sale? Or are you gentle during the act?"

"Each client is unique," Walter replied with clinical detachment. "I consider them all like my patients. You must put them through an extensive diagnosis before you can figure out the right remedy for their ills. I pride myself on finding the perfect treatment for each person."

"Makes sense..." Shellgirl put a finger on her chin. "But how do you make the initial sale? I try to impress boys and girls with my assets, but they never seem big enough. I try to build up chemistry first but... I dunno."

"A good sale is like a surgery." Walter Tye joined his hands. "The client is afraid as they are about to venture into the unknown. You must listen to their fears, assuage them, and lull them to sleep before carving them open and extracting the cancer of dissatisfaction. No patience and understanding, no sale."

"I see..." Shellgirl nodded thoughtfully. "I don't let my customer interactions build up towards a satisfying climax. I'm too focused on seizing liquid assets as quickly as possible."

Vasi glanced at Basil without a word. From her expression, she clearly struggled not to laugh.

I always knew she was a closet pervert, Basil thought grimly. Shellgirl had retreated inside her carapace again, most certainly to write down notes. The advice is good on paper, but I'm not sure if he'll be a good influence on her.

"My letter is done, so I am all yours." Walter studied Basil with a long, thoughtful gaze. "Vasi told me about your plight. I will gladly answer your questions about the multiverse, if I can."

"For free?" Basil asked with a frown.

There were teeth behind Walter Tye's smile. "It cost me nothing, and perhaps one day your friendship will pay dividends. You may be low-level for now, but who can say what you will achieve ten years from now on? All I ask is

that you remember the help I provided, and return the favor if I ever come to you."

Basil finally realized what bothered him so much about the shopkeeper.

He doesn't blink. Neither did Basil notice any natural facial expression since he teleported into the shop. Each smile, each emotion on that cold visage was carefully calculated. This... this entity was playing a human the same way a Hollywood actor might pretend to be an alien on a set. They could make it work, but there was always a tiny detail that gave away the masquerade. *He's wearing a man suit.*

"Are you a god?" Basil asked, trying to see his suspicions confirmed. "Or a demon?"

"I would rather be damned than either." Walter Tye sneered with contempt. "I am human. Or was, depending on your definition. It's a private matter."

"I see." Basil knew better than to push the subject. "And what is this place?"

"I can explain that," Vasi said. "It's a pocket plane between worlds. An artificial island between two continents, if you will. I've heard of a few archmages capable of building them."

"I could teach you how," Walter offered her. "My proposal of an apprenticeship still stands."

"I am touched, truly," Vasi replied with a respectful bow. "But I do not work well with mentors and I prefer to study on my own. Nothing personal. I denied my own mother before you."

The shopkeeper took the rejection in stride. "It's a shame, but understandable."

Basil wondered how much of Vasi's polite refusal came from her stubborn desire for independence or from picking up red flags. Walter Tye struck him as mad, bad, and dangerous to know.

"You're looking for a student?" Shellgirl asked with interest.

Vasi laughed. "A wizardry student, not a business one."

"Shucks," Shellgirl complained in utter disappointment.

A look of genuine sadness and remorse briefly flashed on Walter Tye's cold face, albeit briefly. "My previous apprentice and I had a falling out a few years ago," he explained. "She left a void in my heart."

"Annie will come around, chief." Hagen pointed at the crystalized prisoners with his flail. "Though not as long as we keep these two in storage. Perhaps you should release one as a show of goodwill?"

"Not today." Walter Tye glanced at the statues with... spite? Hate? Basil couldn't quite tell. The man's poker face simply didn't let much through in the way of feelings. "The Great Work is yet unfinished."

"The Great Work?" Basil asked. "A philosopher's stone?"

Walter Tye immediately looked at him with curiosity. "Are you familiar with alchemy?"

"A bit," Basil admitted. He supposed his interest in it, alongside his pharmacovigilance training, explained why he had unlocked the Alchemist class. "My world's alchemy was

mostly medieval mumbo-jumbo. The System changed that, but I'm still figuring out what works and what doesn't."

"I should have expected as much considering your Alchemist class." His answer seemed to please Walter greatly. "A shame you didn't take more levels in it."

"That's the least of his problems," Hagen commented. "His build is all over the place."

"What do you mean?" Basil frowned. He never had the occasion to talk with individuals knowledgeable about level progression. "You make it sound like I made mistakes."

"No matter the System, it is almost always better to specialize in a few classes rather than to spread your levels," Walter explained. "A class' Perks grow exponentially stronger the more you invest in them, especially when you cap them out. Your seven classes give you versatility, but I fear you will regret your choice in the long term. I suggest that you focus on developing those you already have rather than try out new ones."

Basil listened to the advice, but he wasn't sure if he would follow it. Basil was after self-sufficiency rather than power, hence why he took levels in Gardener and Fisherman. He couldn't afford to specialize yet.

However, Walter Tye had used a very important turn of phrase.

"No matter the System," Basil repeated. Such a short sentence, and yet heavy with implications. "How many are there?"

Walter Tye snapped his fingers and a blank scroll materialized on the counter. He grabbed his scribbling

feather, drenched it in ink, and started drawing disparate dots all over the surface. A disappointed Basil watched in silence.

"What?" Walter asked, his voice laced with a hint of annoyance.

"I expected a light show or holographic presentation," Basil admitted.

"I prefer the simplicity of paper and ink." Walter shrugged his shoulders. "These dots represent the multiverse, an infinity of worlds. Most of them do not have Systems, but some do. Fundamentals like experience, classes, and levels remain the same, but each of them has specificities. My homeworld's Yggdrasil System, which holds sway in my shop, works on different physics than yours."

Yggdrasil... Basil knew the name as Norse mythology's world tree. Skadi, whose bow was on display, belonged to it too. Was that a coincidence? Neria mentioned that the Metal Olympus faction believed in Hellenic gods, so it wasn't far-fetched to imagine Norse gods running around.

Could he be Loki? Basil wondered as he observed Walter Tye. Considering how the shopkeeper reacted to questions about his true nature, he would keep his thoughts to himself.

"I've noticed the absence of a magic stat," Basil said out loud.

"It's but one of many details. Both monsters and humanoids can access classes in our world, but dangerous creatures possess 'racial' levels."

Basil scoffed. "Like what, a dragon class?"

"My world's System introduced a similar mechanism," Vasi confirmed. "Though it was not always the case."

"Systems may differ in the details, but they mostly follow compatible internal logic. They speak the same language, so to say, and often share common roots." Walter drew lines between multiple dots, connecting them. "This compatibility allows for... communication, for lack of a better term."

Basil's eyes widened as the puzzle's pieces started to fall back into place. He remembered the server inside the Ogre Den dungeon, and it *clicked*.

"The internet," he whispered. "It's like the internet."

Walter raised an eyebrow. "I am not familiar with the term."

"Shouldn't you, since you can read minds?" Vasi asked with a grin.

"I do not do it all the time. That would be impolite."

"People use devices called computers to communicate in my world," Basil explained. "They run on wildly different exploitation systems or technologies, but they communicate together through common protocols. It's a network of networks."

"Interesting." Walter gave Basil a sharp nod. "Would you mind bringing me one of these computers next time you visit?"

"Would you trade it for a legendary weapon?" Basil asked. He wouldn't let a good negotiation opportunity pass.

"Perhaps not for a unique artifact, since the device seems commonplace in your world," Walter replied. "But I'm sure

we can figure out a win-win trade."

"Now you're speaking my language," Shellgirl commented. "Leave it to me, Partner. I'll get you the best deal possible."

Walter was unfamiliar with computers, in spite of the fact that his shop catered to high-level adventurers from many worlds. His reaction implied that Earth's technology was not commonplace. It made sense to Basil. With magic at their fingertips, civilizations may never need to develop tools more advanced than bows and hammers.

"Walter, do you know where Systems come from?" Vasi asked. "My world's dragons pretend they created it, but they'll say anything to sound important."

"I've traced back many Systems to two progenitors. Two, shall we say, supreme deities." Walter stretched the last two words as if it physically hurt him to say them. Basil suspected him of misotheism. "They collaborated to create multiple worlds and seed them with Systems, including mine."

"For what purpose?" Basil asked.

"I intend to ask them that question when I locate them." A dark look passed over Walter's face. Basil had a pretty good idea of what the 'discussion' with his makers would entail. "But they did not create all the Systems across the infinite worlds. Some, it seems, arose naturally from random magical interactions. Others were the brainchildren of cosmic entities."

"Of Overgods," Basil guessed.

"Yes, whatever," Walter said with a shrug. "I suspect your Trimurti System's roots differ from mine, but they are similar

enough to interact and thus create bridges between the worlds they administer. These inter-System connections are what you call Incursions."

That cleared the root cause of the phenomenon. Basil glanced at one dot and pictured it as Earth. He then studied the web of arrays connecting it to a dozen other worlds. His mind struggled to capture the size of it all.

"Are Incursions common?" he asked.

"It depends," Walter replied sharply. "My world is part of a cluster with eight others that periodically and partially merged. These Convergences, as we called them, happened as part of a natural process similar to periodic planetary alignment. In contrast, your Incursions are wholly manufactured from what Vasi told me."

"Merged, happened," Basil repeated. "Past tense. You can halt Incursions?"

"Yes," Walter replied flatly. Basil's heart skipped a beat in his chest, but the shopkeeper quickly dashed his hopes. "However, the method I used to achieve it is completely unique to the Yggdrasil System. You won't be able to replicate it."

"I can always try," Basil insisted.

Hagen chuckled. "Does your world follow a thousand-year prophecy foretelling the end and rebirth of all things?"

Basil clenched his jaw. He was about to mention the Book of Revelation, but almost all religions included their own end of the world scenario. Considering the existence of so many gods, Basil couldn't tell which one was accurate.

"There is another method available to you." Walter smiled thinly at Basil. "Have you not figured it out? I thought you did, considering you blew up the first dungeon you came across."

Basil tried to figure out what he meant, and almost beat his head over the counter. The answer was painfully obvious.

"The dungeons brought the Trimurti System to Earth." Basil clenched his fists. "If they're gone, the System will follow."

"In theory," Walter confirmed. "Hunting them all would be a centuries-long task."

Basil crossed his arms as he considered this new information. As far as he knew, thousands of dungeons summoned monsters across all corners of the globe. Destroying them all would demand coordinated effort from the entirety of Earth's population... and the Unity could make more neurotowers anyway.

"Even if you can't destroy them all," Walter said, having clearly read Basil's mind. "The fewer dungeons active on your planet, the less processing power will go to the Trimurti System. It will make it more difficult to connect to other worlds."

"Destroying a few dungeons won't prevent Incursions," Basil summed up, "but it will delay them."

It would also screw with the Apocalypse Force and the Unity as a bonus. Destroying dungeons wouldn't return the world to normal, not without a concerted effort, but it would give mankind breathing room. He needed to inform Neria at the first opportunity.

"It's not the best course of action," Basil said. "But it's the best I can think of."

"Tsk, tsk, Partner." Shellgirl wagged a finger at him. "Maybe you can't think outside the box, but I do."

Basil scoffed. "You've got a better idea?"

"As a matter of fact, yes I do!" Shellgirl replied with a grin. "From what I gathered here, Dismaker Labs didn't create the Trimurti System as their core product. They imported it from another world using their technology."

"What about it?"

"Would you try something so risky without hedging your bets, Partner?" Shellgirl asked. "Wouldn't it make more sense to keep an off-switch ready in case the deal backfired?"

Basil stared at his companion as if she had grown a second head. "You think Dismaker Labs put a failsafe in their server network?"

"That's what I would do in their place," she replied. "Pretty smart, huh? It's like our TV. You don't have to walk to the screen to push the buttons. You just need to find the remote."

Basil couldn't tell if Shellgirl was delusional or utterly brilliant.

"Could it be?" he asked Walter. "I mean, is it technically possible?"

"The Yggdrasil System overseeing my world is an integral part of it, as pervasive as gravity. The rise of deities in my

reality were a byproduct of the System, not its end goal." Walter pointed his quill at Basil. "Your Trimurti System, however, was intentionally summoned for the explicit purpose of achieving godhood. The people who did it probably set special parameters. I doubt they could make the rules, or else they would have made themselves gods from the get-go... but they could tweak them."

"They slipped an update along the way," Basil guessed. Dismaker Labs restricted class access to humans and elves for some reason. Come to think of it, it was awfully suspicious. Why could they access Player classes when humanoids like orcs could not? Was it an oversight... or a feature?

If Dismaker Labs indeed added a failsafe to their neurotower network, then the world could potentially return to normal. Basil needed to confirm the theory. If he needed to travel to Paris for answers, then so be it.

For the sake of his peaceful life.

Chapter 35: Man vs Spy

In the end, nobody purchased anything. Basil neither had the currency nor an item worth trading, at least for now. Even Walter's potions and crafting recipes were too expensive for his meager funds.

Basil was happy with the trip all the same. Walter Tye was a dangerous man, but a knowledgeable one. He had given the team much to consider.

"Can you tell me more about the Trimurti System?" Basil asked.

"I know little more than you." Walter shrugged. "I can tell you this: your Earth is not the first world touched by the Trimurti System and three supreme deities administer it."

"I've guessed as much."

"It's the deities part that matters," Walter pointed out. "Most Systems are self-sufficient. They need no overseer to function. If three deities found it necessary to involve themselves in its day-to-day management, then there must be a reason. Perhaps they serve a function in it."

Shiva the Destroyer, if that was indeed he who shattered Elysium, embodied devastation. The other two members of the trinity, Brahma and Vishnu, represented creation and preservation respectively. If Shiva's role was to destroy the world if summoned, what were the other two doing?

Basil had a gut feeling he was about to figure it all out. A little more digging and all the pieces would fall into place.

"Have you met with members of the Apocalypse Force?" Basil asked. "Or the Unity? Metal Olympus?"

"I have vaguely heard of the first two, although I've yet to encounter either of these groups," Walter replied with a frown. "Metal Olympus is completely unknown to me. They must be native to your world, or perhaps they come from a corner of the multiverse I'm unfamiliar with. I can ask my other clients if you wish."

"That would be nice." Basil squinted at the shopkeeper. "Though I assume you won't do it for free."

As expected, Walter Tye asked for a favor in return for his services. "Come back to me with computers and related technology. I pay handsomely for a job well-done, whether in gold or information. You will not regret it."

New Quest: Forever Serpent's Errands I

Recommended Level: 5.

Walter Tye is digging down the internet rabbit hole. Bring him a high-quality, functioning laptop to enlighten him (Youporn and furry pictures optional).

Reward: 1500 Bonus EXP.

"Sure," Basil agreed to the offer. Abandoned laptops were easy to come by nowadays. "I'll need a way to come back here, however."

Walter Tye snapped his fingers and a small crystal skull identical to Vasi's appeared in the palm of his hand.

"Take this," he said. "It will teleport you and up to two other people into my shop."

"Not more?" Basil asked as he grabbed the skull. It felt strangely light and warm to the touch in his hand.

"As far as customers go, I prefer quality over quantity."

"It makes it harder for thieves to break in," Hagen commented. "The skulls only work for the people they're attuned to. So if a thief loots your corpse, they can't reach this place."

"My, did you share these gifts with others?" Vasi asked coyly. "I'm jealous."

"Mayhaps," Walter replied evasively. "A good shopkeeper never reveals their clients' personal information. I take no sides."

Aka, he will sell weapons to our friends and enemies alike, Basil read between the lines. The Apocalypse Force, the Unity, Earth's armies, they're all customers to him. Nothing more.

Walter Tye smiled at Basil. His lips had a predatory edge to them. "I often make friends with customers, but we are too early to reach that stage, Basil."

"Will you give us a discount if we befriend you?" Shellgirl asked.

"Perhaps." Walter bade them farewell with a polite nod. "Good luck on your journey. Especially you, Vasi. We will meet again."

He snapped his fingers and darkness swallowed Basil's group once more. When it receded, they were back in his kitchen.

Your Stats and Perks returned to normal. Your Magic and Intelligence separated once again.

"He is an interesting man, wouldn't you agree?" Vasi noted.

"A dangerous one," Basil corrected. *Maybe the most dangerous I've met yet.*

"So much to do." Shellgirl pointed a finger at Basil, as if daring him to take up a new challenge. "Now that's Big Business, Partner! An exclusive shop pleasuring the highest net worths! I've been trying a grassroots discount strategy, but clearly we've got to up our game!"

"I'm not opening a shop in my backyard," Basil stated before facing Vasi. "You said he helped you refine your Samhain ritual?"

"He did." Vasi put a hand on her waist. From her expression, she was about to ask for a favor. "If your proposal still stands, I would require your assistance on that front."

Basil sighed. After she went to the trouble of organizing a meeting with Walter, he could hardly deny her. "Go on."

"My version of the ritual only requires specific items and Samhain. The right tools and the right time. Walter's improved ritual, which will benefit me more in terms of power and experience, requires a right place too." Vasi's smile strained a little. "I need to cast it in an active dungeon."

Of course. Couldn't magic rituals have simple conditions? At least this one didn't need a human sacrifice or a volcanic eruption.

"The two dungeons closest to us, the one in Seignosse and the Water Sanctuary in Lourdes, are both held by the Apocalypse Force," Basil pointed out. "Infiltrating either is a risky proposal."

"I know," Vasi replied, her expression darkening a little. "I'll perfectly understand if you want to sit this one out."

"Are you kidding?" Shellgirl asked with a grin. "We were planning to hit one of these two anyway!"

"Seignosse's dungeon is on our radar," Basil explained. Megabug's fellow insects had probably reported his party's existence to their superior, which left only one solution to cover their tracks: the cement shoes checkout. "And you heard Walter, destroying dungeons will delay the Incursions and benefit everyone in the long-term. We can attack Seignosse, clean up the place with your help, let you run your ritual, and then blow the place up afterward."

"Looks like the stars align then." Vasi playfully put a finger on Basil's chin. "Consider yourself hired as my bodyguard, Basil. I'll make it worth your while..."

Basil gave her a blank, empty stare. If she was trying to fluster him, she needed to up her game.

"You're no fun to tease," Vasi complained. "But I'm patient. I'll break that poker face one day. I swear it."

"Your assets are useless against me, woman," Basil boasted. "The only red you'll see on my face is goblin blood."

"Don't tempt me." Vasi sat on the kitchen counter and crossed her legs. Basil had to admit she had mastered the 'femme fatale' look. No wonder she drove paladins lovesick. "Anyway, mind if I set up shop in your basement until

Samhain? It'll be easier to coordinate an attack on the dungeon if I don't have to run back and forth to my house."

"Sure, you can take one of the guest rooms upstairs." Neria Elissalde never complained about it. "Up for fried velociraptor tonight? Kuikui doesn't mind eating his own kind."

"Sure, I'll bring drinks and pastries for dessert."

"Awesome!" Shellgirl gave Vasi a high five. "We'll be the best roommates ever!"

"It's only temporary," Basil said. "Vasi's only crashing for a while."

The two women gave him a familiar glance; the very same Basil's own university flatmate once used when he said one of his friends would sleep on the couch *'only a few days, until he finds a better place.'*

He ended up staying for two years.

As promised, Estrid's elves helped the party carry Steamslime's shell to the house by twilight.

Rosemarine and Buggy did the heavy lifting for the latter part. The mighty duo dragged the ruined snail-dragon's former habitat with chains, like horses pulling a carriage. They brought down many trees, scratched the road along the way, and wrecked the fence.

In short, they had left a clear trail to the house.

"In hindsight, this may not have been my brightest idea," Basil said with a groan. Steamslime's colossal, ravaged

mechanical shell stood by the river and overshadowed his house. As it wasn't technically part of his Lair, the Stealthy feature didn't hide it from view.

"Any flier will see it from miles away," Vasi said. The witch sat on a pile of luggage almost as tall as Basil himself. As for Shellgirl, she had gone to the orcs with monster parts to make into a Berserker outfit. "Your secret base won't stay that way much longer."

"Your world uses miles instead of kilometers?" Basil asked with a sneer. "If so, I pity it."

"Miles sound classier than kilometers," Vasi shot back.

"It's okay, Mister," Rosemarine said as she nested inside the shell. Since she was slightly smaller than Steamslime, she fit in just right. House Garden's party gathered around her like chicks flocking to a mother hen. "I will protect you."

"The queen has a castle!" the vegetables sang. "All hail the queen's castle!"

"Strap some wheels on it and it could make for a moving caravan," Estrid Firekiss suggested. She had come alone to the house, with her fellow elves vanishing as quickly as they came. "Staying on the move is the best protection against detection."

Unfortunately for her, Basil was the ultimate evolution of the modern human: the Homo Sedentary. He wouldn't move from his house, at least not until after winter.

The steam-powered shell more than made up for its lack of discretion with usefulness, as it could produce easy energy with access to the stream. Basil's gas reserves weren't

limitless and solar energy didn't provide enough for the team's ever expanding membership.

"Yo, dog, look at what we found." Plato dumped a bag full of books at Basil's feet. "Are these what you were looking for?"

"You scouted Dax's library?" Basil asked. "Good thinking."

"See, Basil, this is why I nap eighteen hours a day," Plato declared with pride. "It gives me the mental processing power to anticipate future needs."

"Oh, then you can help calculate how much energy we'll need to survive the next winter without exhausting our reserves."

"Once again, Basil, you approach a problem without thinking outside the box." Plato smiled smugly. "You shouldn't calculate energy, but our cushion supply."

"I can cast fire spells for heating if you need it," Vasi said before examining the books. "Did you find any magical grimoires, oh prince of cats?"

"I dunno," Plato replied. "I nabbed stuff I thought Basil needed."

"Let me check." Basil searched the bag. Plato had grabbed every book that vaguely mentioned India: *In Light of India* by Octavio Paz, *India: A Million Mutinies Now* by V.S. Naipaul, *The Argumentative Indian* by Amartya Sen, and by far the biggest academic grimoire of them all, *A Short Introduction to the Veda and Hindu Religions*.

One book, however, stood out from the rest.

"*Architecture for Dummies?*" Basil read the cover.

"I-I took that one for myself, Boss." Buggy snapped his mandibles in embarrassment. "I, uh, I thought our fence would benefit from a watchtower."

Basil considered the pros and cons of transforming his house into a fortified camp. He would have said no once, considering the risk of discovery, but the Apocalypse Force's presence in the region and a quick glance at Steamslime's shell changed his mind.

Buggy took his silence for reluctance. "Sorry Boss, I should have known it was a stupid idea—"

"We'll need at least two watchtowers, not one," Basil interrupted him. "Let's dig a ditch around the fence too. There must be a reason why all medieval castles have ditches."

"I-I will build them right away, Boss!" Buggy raised one of his many tiny hands. "Can I work on expanding the henhouse too? We will need more space for Kuikui's future babies!"

Oh right, Basil had almost forgotten about Kuikui. The young dino-rooster was checking on the hens, smelling them, feeling them. Basil's chickens were obviously a little apprehensive of the larger dinosaur's presence, but not as much as he feared.

"Kui harem?" Kuikui asked Basil, pointing at the hens and rabbits with his claws.

"Yes, Kui harem," Basil replied.

"Kui hump rabbits too?"

"If Kui wants." Basil's rabbits already romanced the hens on their own, so it wouldn't change much. "Is Kui ready?"

"Kui good. Kui... inseminator." Kuikui cleared his throat, his tail wagging slowly. "But Kui... Kui anxious about his performance."

"I can brew an enhancer," Vasi said. "If you can stand the Blind ailment."

"It's alright, Kuikui." Basil pat his velociraptor on the head and whispered in his ear. "I'll be there."

Vasi put a hand on her mouth to smother her laugh, and Kuikui looked up at his owner with his big reptilian eyes. "You'll be there for Kuikui?"

"I'll be watching," Basil promised. "Cheering you on. Make sure you don't fuck up."

"Poor choice of words," Plato snickered in the background. "Shouldn't he be the wingmate and not the other way around?"

"Shut up, Plato," Basil said, as Kuikui looked down on the grass. "You're shaming him!"

"I will be there for you too, Kuikui!" Bugsy promised with enthusiasm. He had truly embraced the farmer lifestyle. "I will put cushions in the coop and build a cradle for the chicks! I'll help from start to finish!"

"Okay, I'm out," Plato said before walking away into the house. "Wake me up for dinner."

"I will have to leave too soon, Lord Bohem," Estrid said. "Can you show me your holomachine?"

"Yes, yes, of course." Basil turned to Kuikui. "Can you hold out for a minute?"

"Kuikui not sure," the velociraptor replied. "But Kuikui will try."

Basil took it as a good sign for his pantry's future and led Estrid into the garage. Vasi followed them out of curiosity.

"You know, this is only the second time I've met an elf in the flesh," the witch told Estrid. "Your kind is bouncing back from near-extinction in my world."

Estrid's eyes lit up with hope. "My kind thrives in other worlds?"

"I wouldn't say *thrive* considering the propensity of dragons to abduct their princesses, but most elves are living the good life." Vasi didn't miss the frown on Estrid's face when she said 'dragons.' "I take it you are not a fan of flying lizards."

"Is there any world safe from them?" Estrid glanced at Vasi with compassion. "I'm sorry to hear your world suffers from their rule."

"Their rule?" Vasi laughed so hard that she almost choked on the spot, much to Estrid's confusion. "Dragons? They think lead poisoning is a disease to turn gold to lead! How can you expect them to rule *anything*?"

"I take it there's no Unity in your world?" Basil asked as he activated the holomachine.

"There is a dragon god in the pantheon and one dragon-ruled southern empire," Vasi conceded after calming herself, "but the undead vizier does all the work. Dragons are more like giant cats in Outremonde; they would rather nap on golden cushions than do meaningful work."

Estrid watched the witch with an indecipherable gaze. Basil guessed that the mere *idea* of a harmless dragon was simply too alien for her to process. The elf turned her gaze away from Vasi and focused on the thrumming holomachine. Runic symbols appeared on its polished mirror surface, which Estrid immediately decrypted.

"I know these signs." The elf touched the mirror screen and lighted up one symbol after another. "They are a coded language that the Trimurti System does not automatically translate."

"But you can read it?" Basil guessed.

"Yes and no. The symbols are a mystery to me, but my Oracle class allows me to guess Steamslime's password." Estrid completed a sequence of five signs and white mist filled the 'screen.' The fog had depth to it, much like an advanced three-dimensional effect. "It means hoard."

Basil snickered. "Really?"

"I'm not surprised," Vasi said with a giggle.

"Lord Bohem, a dragon's password is always hoard, treasure, gold, or a variation thereof." Estrid glanced at the slot used to fit gems in. "The machine will not work without a game inside."

"There's no internet connection, like Steam?" Basil asked.
"No geolocalisation?"

"I am not familiar with the terms you use, but no, this machine is not connected to anything. Or if it was, the connection was cut when you defeated Steamslime."

Here went Basil's hopes of hacking the Unity, but at least it meant the dragonlords wouldn't track the holomachine back to his house.

Steamslime had dropped nineteen gems after his death. The System wouldn't tell Basil what each of them contained, but it did give him the names. He picked the one called *Wyrde's Grimoire*, as Steamslime mentioned that name before his demise.

"Does the name Wyrde mean anything to you?" Basil asked Estrid. The elf's expression darkened. "It does."

"Grandmaster Wyrde is the supreme leader of the Unity," Estrid explained. "She is an archmage and crafter of immense power. I heard rumors that she can cast Tier XII spells and invented half of the Unity's machines."

Vasi had shown Basil that some monsters could cast spells and craft under the right circumstances, so it didn't surprise him much. Dragons were bound to be overpowered, no matter where they came from. "What's her level?"

"According to rumors..." Estrid cleared her throat. "Above 90."

No wonder she and the Maleking had been rivals for years. Basil took solace in the fact she wouldn't break into Earth anytime soon as he inserted the gem into the holomachine.

The fog filling the mirrored screen cleared, revealing a holographic projection of a magnificent dragon; not a snail-like parody of one like Steamslime, but a true European dragon with four mighty legs and awe-inspiring translucent wings. The dragon was slim and refined, with scales of polished silver, shining sapphire eyes, and great white horns. Lightning seemed to course in her veins as if they

were circuits and runic symbols burned on her wings. The beauty of the beast left Basil almost speechless.

The holomachine's processing power surpassed even that of the Playstation 5. The image of the dragon was so lifelike, so detailed, that Basil briefly wondered if he was peering through a window. Estrid kept a hand on her sword, as if half expecting Wyrde to leap through the mirror and attack them for real.

The dragon did no such thing. Wyrde instead locked eyes with Basil as if she could see him, her maw of sharp fangs opening to whisper soft words.

"I am Wyrde, Grandmaster of the Unity." The dragon's voice was serene, feminine, and almost motherly. Basil would have attributed it to a smooth therapist rather than a world-conquering flying reptile. "If you are a dragon, then you are the happy owner of a spell training and simulation program of my own devising. If you are not a dragon, you are violating Unity law and committing a grade-one thoughtcrime. Please report this holomachine to the nearest station and turn yourself in for reeducation therapy."

The pre-recorded speech drew Basil back to reality. No matter how lifelike the creature looked, it was only a program. One that sounded very much like a North Korea ad too.

"Training program?" Basil asked. Vasi leaned in to listen. "Can you teach me magic?"

The holographic dragon nodded sharply. "This training program can guide you up to spellcasting Tier VI according to most Systems."

"Tier VI?" By now, Vasi leaned in so much on Basil's shoulder that he could feel her breath on his neck. "How interesting."

"However, to ensure optimal progression, you must learn all the spells of a Tier before unlocking the next one," Wyrde pointed out.

The System confirmed her words to Basil.

Holomachine can serve as a magic tutor, allowing you to learn spells if you meet the right criteria.

Wyrde waved her clawed hand and a floating spreadsheet appeared in front of her. "Here is the list of magical disciplines my program can teach you under the current System."

- Thaumaturgy
- Necromancy
- Psychism
- Chronomancy
- Astromancy
- Arithmancy
- Ritualism
- Runic
- Performance
- Geomancy
- Shamanism
- Witchcraft

Vasi's expression reminded Basil of a child in a candy store. Her eyes burned with greed and curiosity.

"Basil," she said, ever so softly. "You know you are my dearest fri—"

"Yeah, you can use the machine to train." Basil dismissively waved a hand at the machine. "I don't care."

"You are such a sweet gentleman." Vasi lightly kissed him on the cheek. The gesture and the warmth of her lips startled Basil, and to his annoyance he felt a little more blood than usual rushing to his head. The witch smirked in triumph. "Oh my, I finally left you flustered. I'm disappointed that a mere light kiss was enough."

"You took me by surprise, that is all," Basil replied with a grunt. "Can't you find a better hobby?"

"Not so long as you remain so amusing to tease."

"You have unlocked: 0 spells," Wyrde said with noticeable distaste. "You must work harder. Nothing less than excellence is befitting of a member of the dragon race."

Steamslime had clearly slacked off on his phenomenal cosmic power studies.

"Why is Prayer missing from the list?" Basil asked. The scene reminded him of his university days and fruitless attempts to get bored teachers to explain themselves.

"Prayer is for minions, as is Diabolism," the digital tutor replied with disdain. "A true dragon does not barter or submit for power. They are power."

"Diabolism is fiend-related magic," Vasi explained. "It usually involves forming demonic pacts for power."

Basil rolled his eyes. If the dragon spoke the truth, then the Trimurti System recognized at least fourteen schools of magic. Basil assumed the existence of a class for each, if not more.

"Can you define the term 'minion'?" Apparently, the alien program could adapt to his questions, so Basil might as well fish for information about the Unity.

"Minions are non-dragon races," the silver dragon explained with quiet arrogance. "Minions are like children, naïve and fragile. If left to their own devices, they hurt themselves and each other. They need us dragons to protect them, to teach them the right way to live. That is why we created the Unity. To unite the universe under our guidance and save the lesser races from themselves."

The casual racism and colonial rhetoric made Basil want to puke. Vasi's cheerful expression turned into one of utter distaste, and Estrid herself looked about to choke.

"This is who they are," the elf said. "They look down on us."

"These dragons are even more overbearing than my world's," Vasi noted. "I didn't think it was possible."

"What if minions refuse dragon guidance?" Basil asked rhetorically. "What if they resist?"

"Minions do not have the emotional maturity to meaningfully talk back," Wyrde answered calmly. "If they were sufficiently enlightened, they would understand that dragon rule is the hallmark of an advanced civilization. Certainly, some minion species are too barbaric to grasp this simple fact and we must use force to let them see the errors of their ways. That is heartbreaking. But whenever you harbor doubt about our mission, you must always remember..."

The dragon put a hand on her reptilian chest.

"This is an act of love."

She managed to say it with a straight face and a voice brimming with conviction.

He was a worm in the ground, smaller than a finger.

His two eyes were too primitive to distinguish colors. His mandibles could do little more than burrow in the ground. The dart at the end of his tail could barely inflict damage. He was weak even among weaklings, a pathetic example of a level 1 monster. Perhaps one day, if his hive killed enough prey, he would evolve into a stronger form.

But he was not the mouth of the swarm.

He was its eyes and ears.

"I shall take my leave, Lord Bohem," the red-haired elf said as the human Bohem accompanied her to the limit of his domain. It was she who the worm had followed to this place, so far away from the nest. His orders were to watch and listen so the swarm could feast later. The elves were weak, and the weak were the food of the strong. "I've had my fill of dragons."

"Thanks for your help," the human Bohem replied. "If you ever want to settle in the Barthes—"

"No, thank you. In fact, we will leave the region the next day. If your suspicions are correct and the Apocalypse Force took over the nearest dungeon, then we can't afford to stay. Normal monsters will fight us if we cross their path, but the Apocalypse Force will actively hunt us down."

She was right to be afraid. The swarm had taken over many dungeons on this planet, more than even the Unity. One

day, so very soon, they would conquer them all and usher in the end of all things.

But the swarm cared nothing for elf weaklings. Not when a better prize had shown himself.

The worm hid in the dirt unseen, his eyes and smell hidden by fresh grass. The feline had almost detected him once, but he thought him no more a threat than the mindless frogs in the swamp. A mistake. For the worm was himself, but he was also the swarm.

And the swarm knew the human. It had watched through a murdered drone's eyes as Basil Bohen blew his head off. The swarm understood what he was.

An enemy.

"They won't be a threat for long, but suit yourself," the human Bohen said. "Any way we can stay in touch? Do you have a radio?"

"I'm afraid not." The elf smiled sadly. "If we were part of a guild, we could communicate over long distances. Alas, this is not to be."

"Alright." The human Bohen extended a hand. "Good luck then."

"Until our paths cross again." The elf shook the Bohen's hand and left.

The worm did not follow her. He crawled stealthily after the human as the Bohen retreated back into his hive of stone and wood. As the worm watched, so did the swarm. A will stirred inside the hive mind, the terrible soul of the Horseman of Famine. The worm felt Lord Apollyon's mental

presence pierce through the boundary between worlds and fill his mind, whispering orders...

And then claws plucked the worm from the ground.

"Kuikui found pretty food!" his captor said before offering the worm to a hungry hen. "You must mate with Kuikui now!"

The larva died screaming down a chicken's gullet and the swarm cared nothing for it. He had fulfilled his purpose.

They knew where the Bohem lived.

Chapter 36: Man vs Fire

When Basil finished cooking the fried velociraptor bucket, the *Major Chicken* episode was reaching its midway point.

"Lieutenant Salmon, why?" young Sergeant Chick asked as he held the dying warrior in his arms. *"Why did you save me? I thought you had betrayed the Meat Brigade?"*

"I was only pretending to switch sides... so I could figure out Emperor Vegan's master plan." The *Major Chicken* writers couldn't show blood due to heavy censorship, so only water poured out of Lieutenant Salmon's wound. *"No matter what Emperor Vegan pretends, Major Chicken was right... fish is still meat. Red or white, skin or scales... we're all meat inside."*

"What a wonderful device, this television," Vasi slurred as she slouched on the sofa, holding a vodka bottle with one hand and scratching Plato's back with the other. With her messy hair and many grams of alcohol in her system already, the witch was the perfect picture of a professional partygoer. "The dialogue is corny as fuck."

"Nah, Cornmaster was destroyed two episodes ago," Shellgirl replied in between beers. Buggy and Kuikui were the only watchers too fascinated by the episode's big twist to drink. Plato purred on his cushion, and Rosemarine...

Basil sighed and glanced at the room's open window. One of Rosemarine's enormous eyes peeked through the frame.

"I'm so sorry," Basil apologized as he tossed her a crispy velociraptor leg. "I wish I could enlarge the house further."

"It's okay, Mister," Rosemarine replied cheerfully. Her forked tongue caught the piece of meat and swallowed it whole immediately. "I see it all from here!"

She was the only plant in the house to keep up with the series. The rest of House Garden didn't particularly enjoy watching a cartoon about meat lovers beating the ever-loving crap out of vegetables.

"Here's our savior coming!" Vasi rejoiced as Basil arrived with the food: a salad for Shellgirl and the fried raptor bucket for everyone else. "Got any sauce?"

"Curry and barbecue." Basil sat between Plato and Buggy with a satisfied grin. "Just in time for the good part."

"I tried to defeat Lord Quinoa and I... I failed." Lieutenant Salmon coughed water. *"You must take my protein energy and team up with Major Chicken to defeat Lord Quinoa. It's the only way you'll defeat this weedsucker, Chick."*

"But if I do that..." Well-animated tears dripped from Sergeant Chick's eyes. *"You will..."*

"I'll be destroyed," Lieutenant Salmon said, so he wouldn't have to utter the cursed 'killed' word. *"But I'll pay the price... so that you may live."*

Sergeant Chick closed his eyes in pain and took Lieutenant Salmon's hand within his talon. *"We'll win... we'll defeat the Vegan Empire, Lieutenant Salmon. I promise."*

"Don't cry, soldier. I know... you can do it..." Lieutenant Salmon transformed into particles of protein light flowing into Sergeant Chick's body. *"Tell Major Chicken... that he was right."*

Sergeant Chick wiped his tears as the lieutenant completely disappeared. The young soldier grunted with rage and sorrow, with lightning crackling in the background. His muscles expanded and his feathers turned a shade of gold. An epic bass rock music played as the sergeant roared to the skies.

"*QUINOA!*" Sergeant Chick shouted as loud as his lungs would allow, sending rocks flying with the sheer power of his voice.

"He's going Superbuff Musclemode!" Buggy gasped. "I thought only Major Chicken could transform?!"

"Can Kui do that too?" Kuikui asked, mesmerized by the scene. "Kui must eat protein!"

Basil pointed at tonight's dinner. The hungry velociraptor hungrily tried to commit cannibalism by seizing a fried wing, but fell into the bucket instead.

"Hey, leave some for the others!" Plato immediately leaped from his cushion and tried to pull Kuikui out of the bucket. "You stupid halfbreed bird!"

"No racism under this roof, Plato," Basil said as he unstored *A Short Introduction to the Veda and Hindu Religions* from his inventory. "*Major Chicken* marathons are a moment of peace and tolerance."

"Put that book away," Vasi chided him. "Didn't we study enough today?"

Basil wasn't sure if he could call testing alien holographic games studying. After growing sick of listening to Wyrde's dragon supremacist rhetoric, the duo had tested the eighteen other hologames inherited from Steamslime.

Almost all of them were dating sims. The uncensored kind.

Basil had considered playing them to better understand the Unity's culture, but set the games aside when the porn-level dialogue became too much for him. Some of the lines would haunt him for the rest of his days.

'I want your eggs in me, master! I'm gonna hoard your seed, master!' Basil shuddered at the mere thought of playing those... those torture devices again. He had no idea Steamslime was so depraved.

There was a silver lining to the testing phase though; one of the games, *Crafting Factory X*, was a crafting simulator in the same vein as *Wyrde's Grimoire*. Basil could learn a few recipes from it.

"It's okay, they'll spend ten minutes shit-talking each other and having flashbacks before fighting," Basil replied. The fight in question was one of the cartoon's best, so he would afford it his full attention once it began. "I've got time to read."

"Yo, Partner, that makes me think." Shellgirl chewed a cabbage leaf and swallowed it whole. "I gave Orcdad and Orcmom the thunderbird feathers and ankylosaurus hide. They said they would have your new Berserker cloth ready by tomorrow."

Basil grinned ear to ear. Soon, he wouldn't have to fear the lightning ever again. He was even happier to notice a 'Trimurti' chapter in his book's summary. Plato had chosen well.

The Trimurti are a trinity of supreme deities central to Hindu religions, Basil read, embodying the universal cycle: Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Shiva the Destroyer.

They are associated with the Tridevi, a trinity of goddess consorts. Each member of the Trimurti is said to periodically send avatars to Earth to preserve Dharma, or righteousness.

Each member of the Trimurti had their own section in the chapter, although Brahma's part was considerably smaller than the other two. Vishnu and Shiva had clearly eclipsed their partner in importance in India. Even his goddess-consort Saraswati enjoyed more pages dedicated to her.

So much for the creator of the universe, Basil thought. Vishnu's part was a lot more extensively detailed and his chapter included drawings. The god was represented in the book as a blue-skinned, regal humanoid with four arms. His hands held a golden disc, a lotus, a mace, and a conch shell of all things. The last part reminded Basil of Kalki.

He flipped to the next page without thinking too much of it... and froze in shock.

The book included another picture of Vishnu, one that Basil found eerily familiar. The god was depicted as playing flute on the back of a many-headed serpent, with a half-bird humanoid guarding him. The memory of Kalki playing to an audience of monsters flashed in Basil's mind.

"Do you truly think your animal strength is a match for my vitamin-powered psychic powers?" Lord Quinoa taunted Sergeant Chick and Major Chicken. *"Salmon thought the same, and look where it led him."*

"Don't you dare utter his name, monster!" Sergeant Chick replied. *"The lieutenant gave his life so that we may live! It's something you vegetables will never understand!"*

"This world will never bend to your master's will, Quinoa!" Major Chicken declared with patriotic pride. *"You cannot*

cancel meat!"

The *Major Chicken* cartoon faded into the background like a droning noise. Basil focused too much on the picture to pay attention to his surroundings. It had to be a coincidence...

Spurred on by an irresistible gut feeling, Basil all but devoured the information on Vishnu.

Vishnu the Preserver is one of India's most popular deities and outright considered the supreme god by a few sects, he read. The goddess Lakshimi is his eternal consort and partner in love. Vishnu is usually depicted as sleeping on the back of the serpent demigod Ananta Shesha or riding the great bird Garuda in battle. Whenever evil and chaos threaten the world, Vishnu reincarnates as a human avatar to restore order.

The book included the list of Vishnu's avatars according to competing scriptures. Matsya, Rama, Krishna... and the very last of them.

"Kalki," Basil whispered.

"What did you say, Boss?" Bugsy asked. The centimagma glanced at his leader with concern. "Are you alright? You look pale."

"I'm... I'm alright, Bugsy." A lie. The more Basil read, the more uncertain he felt about the future.

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.

Basil remembered Kalki's words. How he woke up feeling he was in the wrong place at the wrong time; how he was looking for his girlfriend Padma, even if he couldn't remember what she looked like; and how he smelled of lotus according to Plato...

Basil summoned another item from his inventory. Kalki's conch shell gift materialized in his hand, as light as a feather and warm to the touch. Basil compared the Sanskrit symbols to those listed in the book.

They matched those in Vishnu's chapter a little too well.

"Fuck." Basil stored both his book and shell in his inventory before bolting out of the sofa.

"Where are you going, Partner?" Shellgirl asked. Vasi looked over her shoulder at Basil, clearly worried for his well-being. "You'll miss the big fight!"

"I watched it at least five times already," Basil replied as he hurriedly moved to the empty garage. Once inside, he summoned his campervan from the inventory, opened the front door, and immediately activated the military radio on the driver's seat. The device thrummed upon activation.

"Neria, I need to talk to you." Basil activated the emergency communication procedure as Officer Elissalde taught him. This particular signal was to be reserved only for extreme case situations. "I know it's late, but it can't wait."

Only static came out of the radio. Basil waited for seconds, then minutes. His frustration turned to worry.

Basil hadn't actually expected Neria to answer immediately, not so late into the evening. She had other duties to attend to. However, *someone* should have picked up the emergency call. The signal was to be rerouted to another radio officer in Bordeaux's forces so the intel could travel up the chain of command.

Yet as nobody answered Basil's call, he wondered if something happened in the city.

"Neria? Officer Elissalde? Is anybody there?" Basil grit his teeth as his questions were met with nothing more than static noise. "Goddammit, this is urgent! Worldshaking!"

"Basil, what's happening?" Basil looked over his shoulder to find Plato staring back at him. "I've never heard you getting bored of a Major Chicken episode and you're acting weird lately."

Basil set aside the radio and gathered his breath. How should he put it?

"I think I know who Kalki is," he explained. "And he might help us return the world to normal."

"I knew the guy was more than he looked," Plato replied with a nod. "So who is he?"

"A Hindu god with Alzheimer's and one of the Trimurti."

Plato took in the news with surprising calm. He locked eyes with his owner, wagged his tail, and finally sighed in disappointment.

"I won't lie," he said, "when you said god I expected a giant cat."

"Can't confirm his identity yet, but there are far too many coincidences." Basil considered his options and quickly reached a decision. "Pack your things, we'll travel to Bordeaux at dawn to track him down."

"What?" Plato jumped in place. "Didn't you want to scout the Apocalypse Force's dungeon tomorrow?"

"I know what I promised Vasi, but this can't wait," Basil replied. Helping his new flatmate become stronger paled before the possibility of meeting a member of the Trimurti. Neither did he enjoy leaving the house behind, but the stakes were simply too great. "It's too important and our friends in Bordeaux won't answer my call."

Plato tensed. "You think something happened to the dog sisters?"

"Maybe." A visit from an amnesiac god was never a banal occurrence. "We need to check."

"I can say goodbye to my peaceful autumn and quiet winter, can I?" Plato complained. "Fine, I'll inform the others."

The house trembled as Rosemarine howled outside its walls. "Mister, Mister!"

"What is it, Rosemarine?" Basil shouted back.

"Lights, Mister!" Rosemarine replied joyfully. "Beautiful lights everywhere!"

Basil rushed outside the house with a terrible gut feeling and Plato at his heel. The new moon was almost invisible in the night sky and the cold wind carried the smell of burning wood. Basil found Rosemarine curled in the garden with the rest of the vegetables, all of them looking at the skies.

The west was ablaze.

Basil watched in horrified silence as the light of fires illuminated the horizon. Columns of smoke rose to the heavens above and obscured the stars. The wind carried warm ash all the way to the stream. The party's livestock screeched in fear in their coops and hutches.

"Beautiful," Ghostie Pumpkin whispered. The rest of House Garden watched the scene with big, impressed eyes. Basil had to admit the sight was both beautiful and terrifying in equal measures. It appeared as if someone had lit candles as far as the eye could see.

"Mister, are the trees evolving too?" Rosemarine asked naïvely. "Like me?"

To Basil's horror, her idea no longer sounded so mad. He had grown used to such weirdness by now.

"What's going on?" Vasi and the rest of the party emerged from the house in confusion. The witch blinked at the sight of the burning horizon. "My gods."

"Should we evacuate, Partner?" Shellgirl asked with a worried tone. "Fire and I don't mix."

"No need for that yet," Basil replied. They would pump water from the stream if the fire reached the house. With Rosemarine's size and Shellgirl's own ice attacks, they shouldn't fear anything.

Something felt wrong about this scenario. The Barthes were a marshland ecosystem, wet and moist, full of streams and ponds. A fire shouldn't spread so quickly, especially without a thunderstorm.

"What an odd scent..." Plato smelled the wind. "Yo, dog, do you notice it too?"

Basil inhaled sharply and grit his teeth upon recognizing the detestable smell of white phosphorus.

This fire was artificial.

"Bugsy, use your Tremorsense," Basil ordered. His halberd materialized in his hands. "Do you notice anything?"

"I hear explosions in the distance, east and west," Bugsy replied, his antennae touching the ground. The centimagma's eyes widened in shock. "Boss, I sense something in the earth too and a droning noise coming towards us!"

"I hear it too." Plato hissed and unsheathed his sword. "Hornets!"

The Apocalypse Force, Basil guessed with a frown. He *knew* he would regret letting one of their drones escape. A quick glance at the east side of the marshes confirmed the presence of fires in that direction as well. *Are they trying to smoke us out of hiding?*

"Did they mistake France for Vietnam?" Basil grunted. He didn't like the situation at all. The gearsmen had already wandered far too close to his home for his liking in the past. "Everyone, prepare for battle."

"Do you have a plan?" Vasi asked him. "We can't see them through the smoke."

"Partner, my customers live on the other shore!" Shellgirl pointed at the fires in the east. "They're in danger too!"

"They can take care of themselves," Basil replied. Protecting their home was the team's priority, everyone else would wait. "We'll split into two groups and—"

A buzzing noise echoed across the marshes, interrupting him. Basil looked up at the western fires and realized his plans would die in the cradle.

A swarm of a hundred Megabugs flew out of the smoke rising from the horizon. The flames below reflected on their green exoskeletons and flapping wings. Most of the bugs were unarmed, but a few carried small spheres with fuses. Basil felt a terrible chill travel down his spine when he recognized the items in question. After all, he had designed a few of them himself.

White phosphorus bombs.

"Shoot them down!" Basil ordered his party. The swarm was flying straight in their direction. "Shoot them down! Don't let them reach us!"

Shellgirl opened fire first with her ice pearls. Buggy assisted her with his firebreath, Kuikui with lightning bolts, Vasi snapped her fingers to cast a fireball spell, and Plato used his Wind Slash technique. House Garden's Demon Tomato assisted with tiny fireballs unlikely to do any damage.

The volley of projectiles shot down insects from the skies; some were killed instantly, their explosive payload bursting into fiery blasts. But most of the swarm gained ground on the party.

"Mister, I can't charge!" Rosemarine complained. A few shining particles appeared around her petals, but not enough to light them up. "Not enough sunshine!"

Argh, Rosemarine's Perks had changed after her metamorphosis and Basil didn't have the time to check how they had been altered! He checked her status screen for the Seed Decoy upgrade in case he could exploit it.

Fireseed: 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 Fireseed if she suffers from a Body Ailment.

If anything, Basil considered it a downgrade compared to her duplication power. "Rosemarine, summon Fireseeds and throw them at—"

An explosion rocked the garden before he could finish his sentence.

The party gave their all, but most of the swarm managed to reach their position. The bugs flew above their heads and dropped their bombs. A white phosphorus blast sent Basil reeling backward. A flash of bright light blinded him for a few seconds and Rosemarine's howl of pain echoed in his ears.

When Basil regained his eyesight, he wished he never did. For the scene unfolding before him was his worst nightmare made reality.

The house was on fire.

A bomb had blown up the roof to smithereens and set the upper floor on fire. Flames incinerated Vasi's guest room and collapsed part of the facade the party had so lovingly crafted. The windows had shattered from the blast, their shards laying on the dry grass outside. White phosphorus

dripped from the kitchen's walls, ravaging stone and steel alike.

The sound of the framework collapsing paled before the screams of his livestock. One of the bombs had hit the rabbits' hutch, blasting half of its inhabitants to bloody pieces and setting fire to the rest. A horned hare ran to the water stream in desperate agony as white phosphorus burned his fur and flesh. The blast had also broken the coop open, letting the panicked hens run away.

Rosemarine too received a few projectiles. Her leaf-scales protected her from the brunt of the flames, but a few spots of fiery slime burned all across her back. House Garden desperately tried to water the melting greenhouse with tools Basil had left behind, to no avail. Flames were already spreading to the party's crops and turning them to ash.

For a few seconds, Basil simply couldn't move. He was paralyzed, a prisoner of his own body. He could only watch as Old Man René's last memento, the holy ground entrusted to his care, the place he had called his home, burned before his eyes.

Basil's hands tightened so hard on his halberd's shaft that he felt blood dripping from his fingers. He looked up at the treacherous bugs above his head. The swarm stared back at him, its members diving down from the skies to finish him off. The ground shook beneath Basil's feet and yet he felt no fear.

A fire hotter than white phosphorus burned inside his heart.

A blaze of unyielding rage!

Chapter 37: Man vs Home Invaders

Basil cut down the first bug foolish enough to enter his halberd's range. Another followed and then a third. But no matter how much blood Basil tasted, his thirst for vengeance only grew stronger.

"They burned the rabbits!" Buggy roared in fury. His fiery breath set a flying drone ablaze. "You bastards!"

The Apollyon drones lacked enough alchemical bombs to sustain a bombardment and so switched to other options. A few attacked Basil's group with bursts of wind magic from above; others descended to engage the party in close combat. Flames covered the world and smoke polluted the air. Chaos ruled.

"Kui wives!" Kuikui shrieked in despair. His hens had fled for their lives alongside the surviving rabbits. "Kui divorced!"

"Kuikui, use Rain Dance to extinguish the flames!" Basil barked out orders. Anger fueled his body and heart, but his mind remained unclouded. "Buggy, you're immune to fire, salvage whatever you can!"

Basil knew it was too late to save the whole house as it had suffered too much structural damage. But it was full of mementos and memories dear to him. His books, René's trophies, the photos, the holomachine... he couldn't let the flames take them.

"Yes, Boss!" Buggy rushed into the burning house and Kuikui started waving his wings like a cheerleader. Shellgirl and Plato answered the bugs' bombardments with projectiles of their own. As for Vasi, she summoned her flying broomstick with a whistle before engaging the swarm in aerial combat.

Alas, the bugs brought reinforcements.

The ground underneath Rosemarine split open and a terrible horror burrowed out: a colossal worm the length of a school bus with blue exoskeleton plates, half a dozen red eyes, and a hungry maw full of sharp fangs. The beast bit into Rosemarine's left flank and attempted to coil around her.

Worm of Famine

Level 20 [Bug].

Faction: Apocalypse Force.

"Mister, the food is attacking me!" Rosemarine bit back into the worm's hide, the two titans brawling under the shadow of Steamslime's shell. House Garden's members abandoned their doomed attempt to save the greenhouse to rush to the tropidrake's rescue.

"Protect the queen!" they said. The vegetables jumped on the worm's back to stab and bite it. Their valiance could not overcome the difference in power nor the beast's thick armor, but it was the thought that counted.

Basil found himself facing bugs on the ground without backup. A dozen Apollyon drones charged at him from various angles, their stingers sharp and deadly.

There could have been a thousand and they would still have been outmatched.

After checking his allies were far enough away, Basil whispered two little words brimming with fury.

"Warp Spasm."

The Berserk ailment took over and Basil saw red.

He expected the Apollyon drones to turn into goblins, to taunt him about his past. Nothing of the sort happened. Basil saw the bugs for what they were: insectoid vermin that dared to destroy his home and hurt his own. He could only hear a droning buzzing all around him. Plato's meowing, Shellgirl's words, Rosemarine's cries... all noises faded into the background, drowned by the swarm's symphony.

Yet when an Apollyon drone met his gaze, the voice that came out of his mouth belonged to René.

"I trusted you with everything I owned, Basil, over my own blood," he said. "And you lost it all."

Fueled by new strength and single-minded fury, Basil charged into the fray.

He split the first bug to enter his range in half with his halberd. The second, Basil punched in the gut with his free hand. His fist gored through the exoskeleton, smashed the heart, and came out of the drone's back. Basil then tossed the corpse at the third drone with enough force to knock him onto his back.

A fourth and fifth drone charged at Basil from two sides. Moving faster than both, he sliced one of his assailant's arms off. As the drone screamed and covered his bloody stump with his last hand, Basil grabbed his kindred by the back of the head and held it against burning grass. The bug's howl of agony didn't soothe his rage in the slightest.

"You're like my family," the one-handed drone mocked Basil with the Old Man's voice before firing a burst of wind. Basil raised the drone he was holding up as a shield and charged. The swirling wind tore the flesh from the drone's bones, but it resisted long enough for Basil to reach his quarry. "An utter disappointment."

"Shut up!" Basil snarled as he tossed his shield aside and chopped off the offender's head. "Shut up, shut up, shut up!"

The remaining bugs attacked him from all sides. Basil's sight blurred as he hacked drones left and right. The slaughter became a whirlwind of screams and guts. He vaguely remembered the sound of crushed bones, the taste of bitter flesh, the warmth of blood on his cheeks...

When the rush of Berserker rage receded, Basil stood alone surrounded by dead foes. He almost tripped on dismembered limbs and glanced at his bloodsoaked clothes. How many drones had he killed in the Warp Spasm's five minute duration? A dozen, a hundred?

It wasn't enough. Nowhere near enough.

"Something's wrong." Basil turned around to find three more Apollyon drones staring at him with fearful eyes. They had had a clear shot at his back and didn't take it. Dread paralyzed them. "I'm no longer Berserk, but I'm still *pissed*."

Megabug had once nearly slain the party, but that was twenty levels ago. The bug's fellow scouts posed no greater threat to Basil in a fight than flies. Shellgirl and Plato shot them out of the skies by the dozens. Rosemarine dragged the worm fighting her into the stream. Even Vasi, who didn't benefit from the party's Tamer-related boosts, handled

herself well. The witch flew around the battlefield while blasting bugs left and right with shadowy spheres.

Yet as Buggy dragged the TV and holomachine from their burning house, Basil realized that the drones didn't need levels to hurt him.

"I got them, Boss!" Buggy said with pride. "I got the TV—"

The house exploded in a cataclysmic blast.

Like any good alchemist, Basil stored bombs, flammable substances, and other explosives in his basement alongside the gas generator. René had invested in a pretty good fire protection system, so he had thought it wise to safekeep the dangerous stuff underground.

But as the Apocalypse Force's white phosphorus ignited his reserve, Basil realized he had sorely miscalculated. Kilos worth of bombs detonated underneath the house and shattered the few walls still standing. The roof broke into fiery debris propelled into the sky, forcing Vasi and the swarm to disperse to avoid them.

Buggy, the closest party member to the detonation, was blown back and landed on the grass alongside the holomachine. Their TV's screen, already partially melted from the heat, shattered on impact. The campervan kept in the garage was flung into the stream. It bounced off Rosemarine's back and sank below the waters. Shellgirl resisted the burst of hot air and dust, but the more fragile Plato and Kuikui rolled backward.

Basil ignored the fiery debris falling all around him. He stared in silence at the fuming crater where his house once stood.

"Our house..." Plato stopped attacking the drones. Much like his owner, he couldn't take his incredulous eyes away from their home's fiery grave. "They... they blew it up. They blew it up."

Not even ruins remained of the Old Man's house.

Black clouds obscured the sky above Basil's head. Cold raindrops fell upon him, first a few, then a downpour. The water extinguished most of the flames and raised a faint mist of steam over the garden, but it did nothing to quell the inferno within Basil's heart.

Kuikui changed the weather to [**Rain**]! The [**Water**] and [**Lightning**] elements will be strengthened, and the [**Fire**] element weakened!

Basil roared to the skies in wrath and despair.

His voice shook the three drones on the ground from their paralysis. Two of them promptly flew away, abandoning the third to its fate.

"Running won't help!" Basil raised his halberd and took a step towards his newest victim. "I'll hunt you down all the way to Siberia if needed!"

"No, Lord Apollyon, I swear I can take him!" The last bug drone held his head in his hands. "Please... Argh!"

The bug's body shone with the bright light of metamorphosis.

Realizing the danger, Basil swung his halberd to behead the creature. A metal stinger parried his weapon's blade.

"This smell..."

Light dissipated from the Apollyon drone, revealing its new form. The insect's exoskeleton had taken on a bloody red hue and its compound eyes glowed with a sick yellow light. The stingers at the end of its forearms shifted into metal drills. Its claws were sharper, its mandibles more like knives. Black circuits pulsed with energy along its translucent wings as organic, lamprey-like mouths opened on its shoulders.

Apollyon Vessel

Level 25 [Bug/Artificial]

Faction: Apocalypse Force

"You smell of the Avatar of Preservation, yet you are not them." Two voices came out of the bug's mandibles; the droning noise of a lowly hornet, and the deeper buzz of a creature far, *far* mightier. "An item—"

Basil pointed his free palm at the bug's face. "Inventory—"

The creature realized the danger and pushed Basil back with a swift kick to the chest.

"Road roller!"

Basil's hand shone and a road roller taken from Dax materialized from his fingertips. The vehicle fell to the ground with enough weight to blow ashes in all directions. Yet the bug deftly dodged the improvised projectile.

"Did you keep this tool in your inventory just in case?" the bug noted with vague amusement as he moved around the road roller. "That trick will not work twice on us."

"Who the hell are you?" Basil snarled. The rest of the swarm had mostly retreated except for the worm struggling with Rosemarine. Yet this one creature remained.

"Can't you tell?" Blood dripped from the creature's mandibles. "I am the voice of the swarm, the spirit of hunger. I am the thirst, I am the drought, I am the wasteland. I am the vanguard of the Apocalypse."

The bug's shadow briefly grew to an enormous size. The shade that was cast in the house's dying flames didn't belong to anything humanoid. It was the shadow of a colossal insect, with cannons for antennae and the power to match.

"I am Apollyon," the bug declared as his shadow returned to normal. "Horseman of Famine."

Basil sneered in contempt. "I expected a bigger cockroach."

"This puppet is but a vehicle for my spirit to ride. My true body awaits on the other side of this crumbling barrier barring our way." Apollyon raised one of his drill-darts at Basil. "Where is the avatar? You received a gift from him. I can smell it on you."

Kalki. The Apocalypse Force knew about Kalki.

"What do you want to do with him?" Basil replied, trying to distract the bug and find an opening.

"You will warrant no revelation from me." Apollyon snapped his mandibles in frustration. "No matter. I will beat the answer out of your lungs after eating your eye—"

Basil charged before he could finish.

Apollyon was no Megabug and saw the sneak attack coming. Yet as his drills moved to parry him, Basil raised his halberd with both hands and put all his might in the strike. The two duelist's weapons clashed among the ashes and steam.

Apollyon gave up first. No matter how powerful his host body, Basil was stronger. His blow propelled Apollyon backward, leaving him open for a second strike.

"Waste away," Apollyon whispered, his eyes shining as the halberd came for his head. "Famine!"

Cramps took hold of Basil's limbs midswing. He felt his strength vanish in an instant, replaced with exhaustion and tiredness. His breath weakened, and the world became a little slower. His vision blurred. His stomach growled with hunger.

[**Famine**] Ailment! All physical stats debuffed for ten minutes! You will lose 1/16th of your SP per minute!

The halberd missed ever so slightly. Apollyon's drill-darts spun as he counterattacked in close-combat. Basil dodged a strike aiming for his head and another for his chest. His body was slow, almost as if he had just woken up.

How? Basil thought as he found himself on the backfoot, parrying or dodging blows the best he could. He was supposed to resist all ailments! Did that bug bastard possess a Perk allowing him to bypass it?

"Don't you dare touch my human, you dirty hornet!" Plato jumped to Basil's rescue, backed up by Kuikui. "Wind Slash!"

Air swirled around Plato's rapier and cut through raindrops. Apollyon raised a hand, his drill producing a wind blast of its

own. The two forces collided in a mighty clash that blew the cloud of dust over the clearing.

"Kui help master!" Kuikui roared, his voice stronger and higher-pitched than any rooster. "Brave Howl!"

Strength and Magic buffed!

Basil felt new might fill his bones. It didn't fully compensate for his existing debuff, but at least his halberd no longer felt so heavy in his hands. He flanked Apollyon from the left while Plato attacked from the right. The Horseman of Famine danced around the battlefield, parrying one blow after another.

"You shouldn't have destroyed this place!" Plato hissed as his rapier clashed with Apollyon's dart. "It was precious to me!"

"My thrall slew you once." Apollyon lunged at Plato. "I will do so again."

Showing agility beyond what any cat could achieve, Plato leaped above his enemy's drills and slashed Apollyon mid-jump. The rapier's tip pierced the bug's left eye, leaving him half-blind.

"You shouldn't have destroyed this place!" Plato taunted the bloodied Apollyon. No sooner did the cat land on the ground that he returned into the fray with uncharacteristic fury. "You shouldn't have woken up the panther!"

"This house was more than a place. It was a dear friend's gift." Basil didn't raise his voice at Apollyon. No shout could match the brimming anger in his words. "You can't fathom how much we'll hurt you for this."

"You have destroyed many of my thralls and denied me a dungeon," Apollyon replied. Basil felt him growing winded from the constant assaults. "Did you expect no retribution for taking arms against us?"

Apollyon buzzed in pain as a lightning bolt hit from behind. Kuikui followed the sneak attack with a second bolt as Basil hit the bug's chest. His halberd pierced through the exoskeleton and the blow spilled green blood all over the ground. Yet Basil failed to slice Apollyon in half as he intended.

The bugman's wings flapped at high speed, unleashing a burst of wind all around him. Basil, Plato, and Kuikui were pushed back. The compressed air hurt Basil all the more because of his vulnerability, yet he shrugged off and rushed into the fray once more.

He was too pissed to feel pain.

"The Maleking will create a new world for us," Apollyon rasped with a hand over his chest wound. "A hell for the weak and a heaven for the strong."

"Guess you were damned from birth then," Basil snarled as he and Plato moved in for a killing strike.

"You won't have to wait for your boss' leave to see hell," Plato added.

"Left to your own devices, your lot became dangerous." Apollyon unfurled his wings. "I won't allow you to grow any stronger."

Apollyon took flight to avoid Basil and Plato's strikes. Halberd and rapier hit only dirt as the bug hovered above the group.

"Poisonous flowers allowed to bloom are future headaches," Apollyon said from above as the small holes on his shoulders vomited black spikes. "I will pluck you here and now. Dart Missiles."

A dozen black spikes flew out of Apollyon's shoulders and fell upon Basil's group in a rain of destruction.

"Dodge!" Basil shouted. He avoided a projectile, as did Plato. Kuikui didn't share their luck. A missile hit him on the side, blowing off his left wing and feathers. "Kuikui!"

"Fascinating," Apollyon mocked them. "You are strong enough to match this vessel's strength even when debuffed, but you seem to lack effective long-range options. Such an oversight—"

An ice pearl shot by Shellgirl hit Apollyon in the face, making him flinch. Vasi targeted him with a fireball from behind immediately afterwards. Apollyon sensed her approach, dodged, and raised a hand in the witch's direction.

Vasi barely had the time to blink as a blast of wind hit her in the face. The blow tossed her off her flying broomstick.

Basil's eyes widened in horror as Vasi fell from almost ten meters high. She hit the edge of his house's crater with the sickening sound of breaking bones, close to Kuikui.

"Fuck!" Basil rushed at them as fast as he could.

"Help them, Basil, we'll cover you!" Plato shouted, wind swirling around his rapier.

"We'll take him on, Boss!" Buggy breathed flames at Apollyon from the ground, assisted by Shellgirl. "You make

me ashamed of being a bug!"

"That's what you get for destroying my assets!" Shellgirl snarled at Apollyon. Her barrels fired ice pearl after pearl, but few of her projectiles hit the mark. "And for hurting my friends!"

"We are famine," Apollyon said while retaliating with dart bombardments. "We will burn your fields, eat your crops, and destroy your roads. No matter the blood we shed, our hunger will forever gn—"

"Yeah yeah, whatever," Plato interrupted him. The cat moved in front of Shellgirl and Bugsy, before using his Wind Slash to shoot down projectiles from the skies. "Just die and be done with it!"

Basil used Apollyon's distraction to reach his wounded allies. Kuikui whined from his broken wing and Vasi was bleeding from the head. The witch looked about to fall into a deep sleep that she would never wake up from.

Shit.

"Vasi, Vasi you hear me?" Basil had no healing potions to use, and Rosemarine was too busy dealing with her own foe to help heal the group. Which only left a single option to save Vasi's life. "Join my party now!"

"I..." Vasi grumbled, her face pale and gaze dizzy. "What...."

"Kui hurt..." Kuikui whined.

"Join my party! I can't heal you otherwise!" Basil temporarily expelled Shellgirl, the member of the group with the least bruises. This left a spot open. "Do it now!"

"I..." Vasi whispered, her eyelids half-closed. "Alright... must sleep..."

Changeling Vasilisa Yaga joined your party! Vasilisa unlocked the [**Hag Coven**] hidden Perk!

"Yes!" Basil rejoiced. Using his dwindling SP, he activated his healing Perk. "Monster Cure!"

A green glow covered all his allies save for Shellgirl.

"Monster Cure," Basil kept casting. "Monster Cure. Monster Cure."

Kuikui's feathers regenerated and his wing fell back into its proper place. Blood stopped flowing out of Vasi's wound and her face regained some color. The white phosphorus burns on Rosemarine's back vanished.

"I feel better, Mister!" Rosemarine chewed the half-dead worm monster in her teeth before swallowing it whole. Having dealt with her own foe, the tropidrake turned her attention to Apollyon and attempted to bite him. The more agile bug dodged Rosemarine's clumsy attacks and blasted her in the face with a wind burst.

Having stabilized his allies, Basil threw his halberd at Apollyon. The bugman dodged by flying to the side, but he could only predict so many attacks at once. Bugsy burned his left wing and Shellgirl pierced the right with a well-aimed projectile. Apollyon started losing altitude.

"You'll pluck us like flowers, that's what you said?!" Basil shouted as he rushed after Apollyon. "Well, I'll pluck off your wings like the bug you are."

Fueled by single-minded fury, Basil tackled Apollyon before he even hit the ground. The two rolled among the ashes, brawling and kicking and biting. Basil's fists might as well have been made of steel. He felt no pain as they pummeled Apollyon's ugly face into the ground.

"Leave some for us!" Plato joined in the beatdown by stabbing Apollyon's last remaining eye with his rapier. Buggy's mandibles closed around the monster's left forearm and ripped it off. As for Shellgirl, she kneecapped him. "I hope he has nine lives too, one death won't be enough!"

Basil didn't know how long they beat Apollyon within an inch of his life. A minute, an hour? No matter how hard he struck, the bug just refused to die. He was agonizing in his own blood, dismembered and broken, yet he wouldn't stop breathing.

"We have killed billions..." He rasped. "On countless worlds..."

Basil gathered his breath and stepped away from Apollyon. The group formed a circle around their mangled foe, who remained defiant even with both eyes ripped out and no limbs left to fight with.

"I shall return. For your people. For everyone." Apollyon spat blood. "For you."

Basil stomped Apollyon's mangled skull under his heel, killing him at last.

Yet the fatal blow provided him with neither joy nor satisfaction. If anything, Basil felt even more frustrated. This bug was a mere puppet controlled from afar and the true mastermind lived to threaten them another day.

Your party earned 90000 exp (13500 for you). You earned two levels (total 25).

Basil glared at the mangled corpse one last time before checking on his team.

"Everyone alright?" he asked. Plato was throwing dirt at Apollyon's corpse as a last sign of disrespect, Shellgirl was treating Vasi's wound the best she could, and Rosemarine checked on the members of House Garden.

"Kui's wives, gone." Kuikui lamented in despair. "Roof gone..."

"It's alright, Kuikui, we all made it in one piece," Buggy said, trying to cheer the velociraptor up. "We've won."

Basil's jaw clenched so much that he felt blood flowing from his teeth. Buggy reeled back at the sight.

"You call *this* a victory, Buggy?" Basil waved a hand at the smoking ruins of his house. Only the holomachine and Steamslime's shell had survived the battle more or less intact. Most of the Barthes had been reduced to ash, its trees burned to the ground. "Our home, the food, the garden, my lab... René's things..."

Basil shook his head and sighed in defeat. "All gone."

"Basil," Plato whispered.

"What?"

"René wouldn't hold it against us, and you know it."

His cat's words felt like a bucket of cold water to Basil. He understood, intellectually speaking, that Plato was right. Yet

Basil still blamed himself for failing the Old Man.

"René entrusted it to us," Basil whispered. "Because he cared. Because we cared."

"I know, Basil," Plato replied. His eyes were colder and more vengeful than ever before. "He took us in because we were strays with no home to call our own. These bugs robbed us of it. I'm as furious as you are, but you shouldn't be angry at *yourself*."

"We're alive, Partner," Shellgirl said. Rosemarine walked towards the group, with House Garden's members under her care. "Houses can be rebuilt, but the dead can't come back."

"Yes, we live to take vengeance." Plato glanced up at his owner with a determined look. The cat, who usually couldn't be bothered to do anything, now brimmed with fury. "They crossed the line, Basil. You know what that means."

Yes, he did.

"This means war," Basil replied quietly.

Chapter 38: Man vs Oath

When dawn reared its head, the sun rose upon a land of ash.

Standing atop a mound near the stream, Basil and Plato witnessed the devastation with grim hearts. The air was thick with ashes carried by the cold autumn wind. The grayness of death had taken over the lush nature of the Barthes. Everywhere he looked, Basil saw burned husks of trees, piles of dust, and the charred bones of an animal that couldn't escape the inferno in time.

And the silence... a forest teemed with life, yet the Barthes were now as silent as an open grave. Its animals had fled the devastation, never to return.

It took decades for the European Union to create natural wildlife reserves through the Natura 2000 initiative. The Barthes had been one such protected area among thousands of fragile ecosystems protected by law. Some of the species that lived in the area were rare or outright endangered.

What the dungeons started, the Apocalypse Force finished. It would take years for the area's ecosystem to recover, if at all.

Everyone had lost a home today.

"You know Plato," Basil said, his voice raspy in his throat. "René dedicated decades of his life to studying the Barthes' ecosystem. He surveyed the crane population, helped reintroduce amphibians back into their natural habitat, fought against invasive algae, lobbied the government to set up a path where tourists could walk along without disturbing the animals..."

"He was a nerd," Plato replied.

"He was. He built his house so far away from civilization so he could be closer to the nature he loved so much." Basil waved a hand at the devastation. "This sight would have given him a heart attack."

It angered him that the Old Man's tombstone directly faced this devastating landscape. It almost looked like a post-mortem insult.

Of all the Barthes' landmarks, the shrine near the river was the only one to have miraculously survived. Trees had been laid low, ponds filled with dust and the marketplace rendezvous point was now a barren wasteland, but the old church and its tombstones still stood. Basil wouldn't call it a miracle, though it did soothe his heart a little.

"Why are we here?" Plato asked as they faced René's tombstone. "To bring flowers?"

"I would have if I could find any," Basil replied. The Apocalypse Force had burned his greenhouse to cinders and no natural flowers survived the inferno. Apollyon had warned that he intended to make Earth a barren wasteland. The Barthes were but a preview of what would happen to Earth if the Horseman of Famine had his way.

Basil would kill him long before they reached that point.

"We're here to say goodbye, Plato," Basil explained. "We won't return for a while... if at all."

Plato nodded slowly. Once the cat would have protested at the idea of abandoning the marshes and René's tombstone, but yesterday's attack hardened his resolve.

"Thank you," he muttered under his breath.

"Mm?" Basil glanced down at his best friend. "What did you say?"

"Thank you for taking me in with René." Plato looked up at his owner. "Thank you, Basil. It was great to have a roof over my head and fresh food every morning."

"And thanks for waking me up more gently than an alarm," Basil replied with a chuckle. "We might have to skip a few breakfasts from now on."

"Hunger will make me deadlier." Plato stretched his back. "I can't wait to hunt again. Do you think you could make bug meat tasty?"

"With the right spices, I'm sure I can make it trendy."

And they would have a lot of practice. Eventually, Basil would get bug cuisine right.

"I'm sorry, Old Man." Basil made a cross sign with his hand in front of René's tombstone. "I couldn't protect the home you entrusted to us."

"It's not your fault," Plato repeated for the hundredth time today.

"It is." Apollyon had made a point. Basil had destroyed a dungeon and expected little to no consequences for it. "I thought we could weather the apocalypse in peace if we kept our heads down. I forgot that trouble finds you even when you don't look for it."

Basil had forgotten that the best defense was a good offense and the preemptive obliteration of all potential threats, followed by a sustained campaign of intimidation to deter future attacks.

"But I swear it on your tombstone, Old Man." Basil pumped a fist. "One day I'll rebuild the house and the Barthes. Even if I have to haul back new frogs all the way from Bulgaria."

"Maybe it's for the best we move on," Plato snickered. "It will lull the birds into a false sense of security. They'll come back, breed, and rut, blissfully unaware of my approach as I stalk them all over again..."

A bird serial killer slumbered in every cat. The urge could stay quiet for months, sometimes years, but it never went away.

"See you soon, Old Man." Basil bowed one last time before the tombstone, as did Plato. "We'll be back."

After paying their last respects, the duo traveled back to their home's ruins. Everyone was already working hard. Only Vasi was missing from the gathering, having left as soon as she woke up to check on her old hut.

Kuikui and House Garden's members piled up whatever supplies survived the battle, from a few cans of food to a few half-molten electronic pieces. Unfortunately, Basil's Nintendo Switch wasn't among them. His favorite console perished, never to return like the Lair Points he invested in his destroyed home. It was yet another insult on top of his injuries.

Rosemarine and Buggy worked in tandem to repair Steamslime's shell. The former lifted plates of metal harvested from city vehicles and the latter melted them into the structure with his firebreath. The dismembered husk of Basil's road roller awaited its turn next to the structure.

Estrid pointed out that Steamslime's shell could make for a good caravan if equipped with wheels. Basil strongly considered following through with her suggestion by harvesting components from road rollers and cranes in Dax. Rosemarine's strength would allow her to pull the modified shell like a carriage.

This mobile fortress would never be as practical as a campervan and would demand a lot of repairs, but it could transport a large number of people on the road. Only Basil knew how to drive among his party.

As for Shellgirl, Basil found her talking with a guest near the stream: the youngest member of the orc family the group met at the market a few days ago. The teen—Orcine, if Basil's memory served—had come without her parents, her rusty iron mace tainted with dried blood. She wore the same horned helmet her mother once did.

"Hi, Partner," Shellgirl waved a hand at them, a concerned look on her face. Her orc friend nodded respectfully at Basil. "Did you find any other survivors?"

"No," Basil replied sadly. "I checked the cave you indicated but found it empty. Your gremlin and hobgoblin friends left no traces behind them."

"Pff, I say they ran," Plato said. "We didn't find their corpses."

"I... I hope they're alive." Shellgirl sighed, having expected to hear of their demise. "They were more than customers to me."

"Cowards," her orc friend said with a sneer. "They ran rather than defend their home. Once a goblin, always a goblin."

Basil couldn't agree more. When somebody threatened you, you had to strike back even harder; or else you invited further bullying. Strength was peace. Basil had learned that lesson early in his life, and he would teach it to the Apocalypse Force the hard way.

"Orcine, was it?" Basil asked.

"Yeah, that's my name," she replied with a snort. "Do all ogres have poor memories?"

"Only the human ones," Basil deadpanned. "Anyway, I'm glad you made it out alive."

Orcine scowled and looked at the ashes with angry eyes. Shellgirl bit her slimy lip, clearly embarrassed.

Basil put the two and two together. "Where are your parents?"

"The bugs bombed our hut while dad and ma were sleeping inside," Orcine said with sorrow that echoed Basil's own. "If I hadn't gone out to take a piss, I would have burned to death too."

It would have been the fate of Basil's party too if they hadn't all been awake during the raid.

"I'm... I'm sorry to hear that." Basil struggled to find the right words. He only had one conversation with the orc family, but it was still a tragedy to hear of their demise. "I apologize. The swarm came for us. Your family shouldn't have been caught in the crossfire."

"The bugs came to kill and steal," Orcine replied angrily. "That's what locusts like them do. Even if they had a bone to pick with you, they didn't stop at your pretty face. They hurt my blood and for that, they have to die. I ain't here for sympathy, humie."

She grabbed her mace and hit the ground with it. Her strength made the earth tremble a little, drawing gazes from the rest of the crew.

"I'm here for payback." Orcine put her weapon on her shoulder. "Shellgirl told me you intend to retaliate, so I came to assist."

"It's an understatement," Basil rasped angrily. "I intend to *devastate* them all, the bugs and their supplier."

Orcine raised an eyebrow. "Supplier?"

"They have a crafter," Basil explained. He was certain of it. "You need access to specific chemicals to craft white phosphorus bombs. I don't think the bugs knew how to make one of these devices on their own, let alone enough of them to wage a second Vietnam war."

"Agreed, Partner," Shellgirl replied. "The bugs have an infrastructure. Somebody built the goods and they delivered the payload."

"What's Vietnam, some kind of food?" Orcine snickered. "All I hear is that somebody helped the bugs trash our place, and they're in for an asswhooping."

"All signs point to Seignosse," Basil said with a nod. "So yeah, we'll hit the place hard and settle the score."

"Then count me in," Orcine declared. "The more in a brawl, the merrier."

"Welcome aboard." Far from Basil's mind to deny anyone their rightful revenge. "I can add you to my party temporarily, if you want an extra Tamer Perk."

"Sure," Orcine replied. "I got something for you too."

Shellgirl clapped her hands and unstored an item from her inventory. A rough tribal garment materialized in her arms. The chest plate, arm, and leg protections were made from painted ankylosaurus armor and dark red scales. Blue thunderbird feathers covered the shoulders, pecs, and back. When Basil touched the armor, he felt a slight current of electricity pass in his twitching fingers.

Dinothunder Mantle

Family: Clothing (Armor).

Quality: B

Effect 1: [Lightning Rod]: Grants Immunity to [Lightning] and Lightning attacks affecting the wearer recharges their SP instead of inflicting damage.

Effect 2: Boosts the power of Physical attacks by 20%.

Effect 3: [Unused].

A garment made from Thunderbird feathers and dinosaur scales. If you haven't stood naked in the middle of a thunderstorm to catch the fire-in-the-skies, then you're not man enough to wear it.

As this clothing is made from monster skins that you have personally slain, Dinothunder Mantle is compatible with Berserker.

"It's great work," Basil said. The craftsmanship was rough around the edges, but of excellent manufacture nonetheless. "Your parents completed it before their deaths?"

"They died first, but I completed it myself," Orcine replied. Her lips pursed into a grin showcasing her sharp canines. "Consider it a trade for the new Perk."

"Come on, Partner, put the merchandise on!" Shellgirl encouraged Basil. "Make us wet with envy."

Basil ignored her particularly poor turn of phrase and put the armor over his clothes. It was surprisingly light for clothing made of dinosaur scales. Basil suspected the armor distributed the weight across his body to make it easier to wear.

Once he had put the armor on, Basil glanced at his reflection in the river. Finding something missing in it, he unstored his halberd and adopted a barbarian warrior pose. His mirrored self oozed testosterone.

Perfect.

"How do I look?" Basil asked his crew.

"Like half like a bird," Plato taunted him. "It's not a good thing."

"Don't listen to him, Boss, you look great," Buggy cheered him.

Rosemarine nodded in support. "When you ride me to battle, Mister, we will bring about the end times."

"Kui good," Kuikui encouraged Basil. "Kui better with feathers."

"Now strip!" Shellgirl whistled, helped by Orcine. "Show us the abs!"

As every good rockstar did, Basil made himself more desirable by denying his fangirls' wishes.

A shadow passed over his head. Basil half-expected an Apollyon drone to attack the party again, but instead, Vasi landed her flying broomstick in the

ashen clearing. The witch examined Basil head to toes with a coy smirk on her face.

"The mantle looks good on you," she complimented him. "I love it."

"Thank you," Basil replied politely. "What about your hut?"

Vasi let out a long, tired sigh. "They thoroughly burned it. My potions, my books, my research... all gone."

"Even the berry juices?" Shellgirl asked in horror. As Vasi nodded sadly, her clam mimic friend clenched her fists in rage. "These savages don't respect anything!"

"I guess that I am officially homeless." Vasi locked eyes with Basil. "I humbly request a place under your giant shell."

"You will have it." Basil cleared his throat in embarrassment. "I... apologize."

"You apologize?" She chuckled. "For what, my hut's destruction? It was beyond you."

"For adding you to my party," Basil clarified. "I know you didn't want to and you agreed under duress."

"Oh, that?" Vasi waved it off. "I would have minded if you didn't do it to save my life. It would be terribly ungrateful of me to hold it against you."

Basil suddenly realized why he appreciated her so much: she was the perfect neighbor, forgiving and helpful. "Glad we're even then," he said. "I'll remove you from the party, so you aren't beholden to me anymore."

"I would rather not." To Basil's surprise, Vasi shook her head. "Actually, I would like to stay in it long-term if that's possible."

Basil observed the witch as if she had grown a second head. Did yesterday's injury give her amnesia? "A day ago, you would rather have died than suggest it."

"A day ago you hadn't saved my life, Basil," Vasi replied with a deadpan voice. "This world is dangerous, and while I prefer to keep to myself... teamwork *is* indeed the best survival strategy."

"Please, Partner, say yes!" Ever the merchant, Shellgirl immediately lobbied to get her friend into the group. "We'll crush it!"

"We do lack a flyer and magical artillery," Plato said before glaring at Kuikui. "Since that one can't fly."

"Kui flies!" the velociraptor protested. "One day!"

"The new Perk you gave me is simply too good to pass up, handsome," Vasi added. "Come on, check it out. I'm sure you'll find it useful to you too."

Basil immediately checked his party's status screen. A short reading of the witch's new ability enlightened him.

Hag Coven: If Vasilisa is in a party that includes at least two other members capable of casting Witchcraft Spells, whether they are Players or Monsters, then she can form a coven with them. A coven's members can intuitively cast unique Witchcraft group 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 Vasilisa's Perk, Basil Bohem can fit in as a placeholder in her coven even if he cannot cast Witchcraft spells.

"So I count as..." Basil scoffed. "What, a witch doctor?"

You do not meet the prerequisites for the [**Witch Doctor**] spellcaster class.

Of course.

"Vasi, we don't have anybody capable of casting Witchcraft spells," Basil pointed out. "You won't benefit from that Perk."

"Yet," Vasi replied with confidence. "Give it time. The odds of one of your pets learning spellcasting are better than me finding two other witches willing to form a party with me."

"Oh, you think I could become a sea witch?" Shellgirl asked with enthusiasm. "I could enter the hex market then!"

"Mayhaps we can start a partnership," Vasi mused with a chuckle. "I curse them, you sell the cures."

"Mmm... unethical but profitable..." Shellgirl put a finger on her chin. "Tempting, tempting..."

"The problem is that our group is far too large," Basil pointed out. With parties having a limit of six, Vasi's inclusion meant excluding another member. He quickly figured out a solution. "Rosemarine, you will form a secondary party with House Garden for the moment."

"I will lead the vanguard and eat the enemies' children!" Rosemarine boasted. "We will fertilize our roots with blood!"

"We shall protect the queen with our lives, King Basil," Ghostie Pumpkin swore to Basil. All the vegetables knelt before him and pledged an oath to defend

Rosemarine to the last.

"By the way, I took a detour north to scout our attackers," Vasi said. "I saw very few drones patrolling the skies. Far too few of them."

"They probably threw all their cannon fodder at us," Plato guessed with a nod. "It's what I would do in their place. Let the minions do the work and only get off my cushion once I run out of them."

Vasi nodded in agreement. "With the swarm's losses, only a token force is left to defend the dungeon."

"For now," Shellgirl replied grimly. "The dungeon will have created new monsters to pick up the slack in days."

"We need to strike them quickly anyway," Vasi said. "Samhain is days ahead and I need the dungeon for my ritual."

"So what do we do, Boss?" Buggy asked his leader. "We attack the dungeon, run the ritual, and then blow up the place?"

"We won't destroy the dungeon," Basil said.

All eyes turned in his direction.

"We won't?" Buggy asked in surprise.

"We will exterminate all the bugs inside its walls and conquer the place," Basil said with surprising serenity. Now that the berserk rush of adrenaline had run out, his mood had settled from violently angry to quiet hatefulness. "We will claim the server and use it to form a Guild of our own. According to the System, it will allow us to create interlocked parties. It'll make it easier for us to level up and organize."

"But... Boss..." Buggy snapped his mandibles in incomprehension. "Last time we destroyed the Ogre Den because you didn't want to face raiders. If we conquer a dungeon, we will have to defend it. The Apocalypse Force will try to take it back."

"I know." Basil smirked cruelly. "I'm counting on it."

It would give him many opportunities to bleed them out.

With his back turned on the stream, Basil faced his allies. He had rehearsed his speech in his head since the raid's end and he finally had the audience he needed.

"So far, I've been trying to follow our Lord Jesus Christ's example," he said after clearing his throat. "Keep to myself, turn the other cheek, let bygones be

bygones. Forgive and forget."

Basil thought that by minding his own business, the various factions vying for control of the Earth would leave him alone. He had been mistaken.

"But by focusing too much on the New Testament, I forgot the Old one's fundamentals." Basil clenched his fist. "For God taught us a very good lesson when he razed Sodom and Gomorrah for their sins: that when faced with unrepentant wickedness, fire and brimstone really are the solution. The Lord didn't reward Satan's cruelty with ice cream, but by throwing him into a lake of fire to suffer forever. We'll follow his example with the fiends of the Apocalypse Force."

Yesterday's fireworks would look like embers compared to the devastation to come. The Horsemen thought they brought the apocalypse to Earth? Basil would show them a real armageddon.

"You girls," Basil waved a hand at a clueless Orcine and Vasi. "You girls have been excellent neighbors. You've respected my people's rights and boundaries, so I can't quite call what will follow the Third Neighborhood War. It would be a misnomer."

He would settle for a grand crusade instead.

"I, Basil Jean-François Bohén, son of Dragan and Aleksandra Bohén, I hereby swear a blood oath before our Lord Jesus Christ!" Basil shouted at the rising dawn. "The Apocalypse Force has declared war upon me, as did the Unity before them! They've burned my home, hurt my friends and family, and destroyed my Nintendo Switch! I shall not rest until I have avenged this insult a hundredfold!"

Basil cut his palm open with his halberd, letting his blood drip into the river before his team's astonished eyes.

"I shall be a plague upon their houses!" he snarled. "The ten plagues of Egypt rolled into one and then some! I will be the flood, the scourge of God! I will crush them as Michael once cast Satan down from heaven! I will drag the Horsemen from their mounts and make bags out of dragonlord scales! Yes, I shall not rest until I have driven off the Apocalypse Force and Unity from my world! Only then, when the holy land of Earth is finally cleansed of hostile invaders, will I finally lay down my halberd and rebuild my house!"

He would kick all the unruly neighbors from Earth and enjoy a quiet neighborhood at last.

"I hereby declare the Great Neighborhood Crusade..." Basil slammed the ground with his halberd's shaft. "Open!"

A long silence followed his declaration. Vasi broke it by clapping modestly, clearly at loss at how to react to Basil's oath of vengeance. Buggy had tears in his eyes, Rosemarine salivated at the thought of slaughter to come, and Shellgirl glanced at her teammates trying to figure out the best answer to the speech.

"So hardcore," Orcine whispered in amazement. "Can I swear vengeance too? I can cut off my pinkie for drama, it will grow back!"

"Kui first!" Kuikui bit his wing faster and whined. "Kui hurt!"

"If you want me to cook dinner tonight, you will all swear," Basil warned his team. His declaration was met with groans, but he ignored them. "This is non-negotiable."

"Sure," Plato said, raising his rapier and prickling the tip of his thumb with it. "I usually use hairballs for this, but after what happened yesterday... I'll make an exception."

Basil nodded sharply and stared at the sunny sky. He had unearthed the war axe and would carry out his vengeance to its final conclusions. His peaceful, homesteady days were over.

Now was the time for bloodshed.

The path ahead was clear. He would wreck the Seignosse dungeon for revenge and then travel to Bordeaux. He needed to check on Neria, to find out Kalki's true identity. Only then would he have a chance to return the world to normalcy and return to his peaceful existence.

Basil would get to the bottom of the Trimurti System's mystery.

No matter the cost.

End of Arc 2

Team's Stats

Name Basil Jean-François Bohén

Type Humanoid

Faction The Bohens

EXP 60,518/68,000

Immune

N/A

Resist

Physical, Corrosion,
Metal, Wood, Fire,
Water, Ailments.

Weak

Manslayer,
Soul, Wind,
Lightning,
Light.

Level

23+2 (Tamer 11; Berserker 3; Alchemist
1; Runesmith 1; Gardener 3;
Technomancer 3; Fisherman 1)

Health Points

1310

**Special
Points**

515

Strength Agility Vitality Skill

38 36 30 27

Magic Intelligence Charisma Luck

24 24 33 23

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 Warp Spasm I

Slaughterer I Jardin Secret I

Alchemy I Magitek

Monster Lair I Spell: Fire Rune

Runic I Spell: Ice Rune

Fishing I Fuel Technology

Greenhand I

Monster Cure I

One for All I

- *Passive Perks*

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.

Slaughterer I (Passive): you gain advanced proficiency with Axes, Maces, Spears, and Unarmed Attacks (x2 damage, +10 percent Crit chances). However, you lose all the benefits of the [Berserker] class if you wield a shield, armor, or accessory reducing the damage that you take. Monster skins and damage resistance provided by spells or perks do not violate this rule.

Monster Lair I (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.

Runic I (Passive): 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.

Fishing I (Passive): you gain medium proficiency with bows, spears, fishing lines and nets (x1.5 damage); any attack you make with these weapons counts as [Aquaslayer] and inflicts supereffective against the [Aquatic] Type (x3 damage). You can also craft fishing [Traps] with or without a recipe and create your own formulas.

- *Active Perks*

Warp Spasm I (active): you can apply the [Berserk] ailment to yourself at will for 5 minutes. While [Berserk], you relentlessly attack the closest target in melee with no regard for your safety, friend or foe, and cannot use [Spells]. In return, your damage is greatly enhanced and you feel no pain.

Jardin Secret I (Active): you can determine an area equal to 1 hectare per Gardener level as your [Jardin Secret]. Seeds planted in the area will have their growth period divided by your gardener level multiplied by 2; [Plant] Monsters grown from these seeds will be naturally friendly to you and can be immediately added to your Party. You can change your garden's location once per week, but if you do, the previous area loses all of its [Gardener]-related benefits.

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.

Greenhand I (Active): 10 SP. You can automatically identify the properties of vegetals, such as the stats of [Plant] monsters or the status information of seeds and fruits with no chance of failure.

Monster Cure I: 20 SP, [Support], [Life]. The tamer heals a small amount of HP for all monster members of his party (HP recovered: Tamer Levels+MAG); the Tamer and other Players do not benefit from the healing, but the effect applies regardless of distance.

One for All I: 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. Neither teleportation effect works in dungeons or magically warded areas, and they cannot cross dimensions.

- 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 winter, 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.

Name Plato (Cait Sith)

Type Beast/Fairy

Faction The Bohens

Experience 60,518/68,000

Immune	Resist	Weak
N/A	Soul, Wind, Wood, Darkness, Mythic.	Beastslayer, Fairyslayer, Physical, Corrosion, Water

Level	Health Points	Special Points
23+2	580	575

Strength	Agility	Vitality	Skill
14	44	15	43
(D+20%)	(B+20%)	(D+20%)	(A+20%)

Magic	Intelligence	Charisma	Luck
30	19	24	42
(C+20%)	(D+20%)	(C+20%)	(A+20%)

Physical	Mind	Soul	Corrosion	Metal	Wood	Life	Support	Ailment
Weak	-	Strong	Weak	-	Strong	-	-	-

Fire	Water	Earth	Wind	Frost	Lightning	Light	Darkness	Mythic
-	Weak	-	Strong	-	-	-	Strong	Strong

Passive Perks Active Perks

Sharp Claws Luck Up

Heavy Napper Wind Slash

Birdbane N/A

Nine Lives N/A

Swordsmanship I N/A

Personal Perks:

- **Sharp Claws:** your claws inflict SKI-based damage. You gain advanced proficiency with unarmed attacks, fangs and claws (x2 damage, +10 Crit).
- **Heavy Napper:** while under a [Sleep] effect, you recover HP as if you benefited from the [Regen] positive ailment.
- **Birdbane:** your attacks with natural weapons inflict [Birdslayer] damage.
- **Nine Lives:** when you would die, you instead benefit from an [Auto-Revive] effect bringing you back to life at critical health; this also purges you of your ailments. You can be revived eight times before the Perk becomes inactive. 7/9
- **Swordsmanship I:** medium proficiency with swords (x1,5 damage)

Active Perks:

- **Luck Up:** 10 SP, buffs Luck for five minutes.
- **Wind Slash:** 60 SP, Wind, sword technique unleashing a blade of wind.

Name Buggy Alphonse Venture (Centimagma)

Type Bug/Elemental

Faction The Bohens

Experience 60,518/68,000

Immune

Resist

Weak

Fire	Physical, Corrosion, Ailments, Wood, Earth	Buslayer, Elementslayer, Mind, Frost, Water, Wind
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Level

Health Points

Special Points

23+2

1410

315

Strength

Agility

Vitality

Skill

44	29	44	24
(B+20%)	(C+20%)	(B+20%)	(C+20%)

Magic

Intelligence

Charisma

Luck

7	15	19	24
(E+20%)	(D+20%)	(D+20%)	(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

Passive 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.

Name Rosemarine Eglantine de la Barthe (Tropidrake)

Type Plant/Dragon

Faction The Bohens

Experience 60,518/68,000

Immune

Resist

Weak

N/A

Fire, Wood, Life,
Water, Earth, Light.

Plantslayer, Dragonslayer, Corrosion,
Metal, Frost, Lightning, Darkness.

Level

Health Points

Special Points

23+2

2780

565

Strength

Agility

Vitality

Skill

42

28

38

31

(A+20%)

(C+20%)

(B+20%)

(C+20%)

Magic

Intelligence

Charisma

Luck

39

11

28

35

(B+20%)

(D+20%)

(C+20%)

(B+20%)

Physical Mind Soul Corrosion Metal Wood Life Support Ailment

-	-	-	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)

Personal 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.
- **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.
- **Bugcatcher:** natural attacks have the [Bugslayer] effect.

Active Perks:

- **Sunbath:** 40 SP, [Life], [Light]. Regenerates HP to all allies within a ten meters radius; the amount of HP healed increases with luminosity.
- **Fireseed:** 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 Fireseed if she suffers from a Body Ailment.
- **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 (Clam Mimic)

Type Aquatic/Slime

Faction The Bohens

Experience 60,518/68,000

Immune	Resist	Weak
N/A	Physical, Water, Frost, Darkness.	Aquaslayer, Slimeslayer, Corrosion, Metal, Wood, Fire, Lightning.

Level	Health Points	Special Points
23+2	1080	515

Strength **Agility** **Vitality** **Skill**

31 8 47 22
(C+20%) (E+20%) (A+20%) (D+20%)

Magic Intelligence Charisma Luck

31 28 26 28
(C+20%) (C+20%) (C+20%) (C+20%)

Physical Mind Soul Corrosion Metal Wood Life Support Ailment

Strong - - Weak Weak Weak - - -

Fire Water Earth Wind Frost Lightning Light Darkness Mythic

Weak Strong - - Strong Weak - Strong -

Passive Perks Active Perks

Shelter Ice Pearl

Shell Inventory Water Jet

Moneymaker

Passive Perk:

- **Moneymaker:** increases chances of drops if a monster is killed within twenty meters.

- **Shelter:** buffs Vitality, but debuffs Agility at half health.
- **Shell Inventory:** can stock up to one item per level inside the shell.

Active Perks:

- **Water Jet:** 10 SP. Buffs agility, but only in water.
- **Ice Pearl:** 10 SP. Throws a pearl made of ice at a target with cannon; inflicts Frost damage (base power 30).

Name Kuikui the Dinosaur (Velociraptor)

Type Reptile/Avian

Faction The Bohens

Experience 60,518/68,000

Immune	Resist	Weak
N/A	Physical, Earth, Wind, Lightning, Mythic.	Scaleslayer, Birdslayer, Soul, Corrosion, Metal, Frost.

Level	Health Points	Special Points
21+4	580	335

Strength	Agility	Vitality	Skill
20	40	20	36
(D+20%)	(A+20%)	(D+20%)	(B+20%)

Magic	Intelligence	Charisma	Luck
20	5	18	24
(D+20%)	(E+20%)	(D+20%)	(C+20%)

Physical Mind Soul Corrosion Metal Wood Life Support Ailment

Strong - Weak Weak Weak - - Strong -

Fire Water Earth Wind Frost Lightning Light Darkness Mythic

- - Strong Strong Weak Strong - - Strong

Passive Perks Active Perks

Sharp Claws Lightning Bolt

Rain Dance

Brave Howl

- **Sharp Claws:** Kuikui's claws inflict SKI-based damage. Kuikui gains advanced proficiency with unarmed attacks, fangs, and claws (x2 damage, +10 Crit).
- **Lightning Bolt:** 40 SP. Unleashes a powerful bolt of deadly lightning (base power 90, [Lightning] damage).
- **Rain Dance:** 50 SP, [Water], [Support]. Changes the current weather to [Rain] for 10 minutes (empowers [Water] & [Lightning], weakens [Fire]).

- **Brave Howl:** 30 SP, [Support]. Buffs an ally's Strength and Magic for 5 minutes.

Name Vasilisa Yaga (Changeling)

Type Demon/Fairy

Faction The Bohens

Experience 60,518/68,000

Immune	Resist	Weak
N/A	Mind, Soul, Corrosion, Wood, Fire, Frost, Darkness, all Ailments.	Demonslayer, Fairyslayer, Physical, Metal, Light.

Level	Health Points	Special Points
23+2	910	1370

Strength	Agility	Vitality	Skill
19 (D+20%)	24 (C+20%)	23 (C+20%)	25 (C+20%)

Magic Intelligence Charisma Luck

42 35 33 27
 (A+20%) (B+20%) (B+20%) (C+20%)

Physical Mind Soul Corrosion Metal Wood Life Support Ailment

Weak Strong Strong Strong Weak Strong - Weak Strong

Fire Water Earth Wind Frost Lightning Light Darkness Mythic

Strong - - - Strong - Weak Strong -

Passive Perks Active Perks

Yaga Witchcraft II Broomstick

Witch Brew Sweet Kiss

Magical Prodigy Spell: Ember

Hag Coven Spell: Sleep

Spell: Dreamthief

Spell: Witch Mist

Spell: Burning Skull

Spell: Lesser Conjuraton

Passive Perks:

- **Yaga Witchcraft II:** As a daughter of Baba Yaga, Vasi can learn spells up to Tier II from the following schools of magic: *Witchcraft, Thaumaturgy, Ritualism, Shamanism*.
- **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.

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.
- **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: Witch Mist:** Tier II Witchcraft, 20 SP, [Corrosion], [Ailment]. Summons a foul mist inflicting [Corrosion] damage (base power 50) with a 20% chance to inflict the [Poison] ailment.
- **Spell: Burning Skull:** Tier II Shamanism, 20 SP, [Fire], [Soul]. Imbues a cleaned skull with a fire spirit. The skull burns and will unleash a [Fire] breath on anyone attacking their creator or entering their lair uninvited.
- **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.



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