

# Toad Town?

## 1 — Reborn?

The last thing I felt was being ripped and torn, squeezed between massive fangs, wriggled around, and, finally, hitting the soft understory of the forest.

*Then?*

Darkness, but only for about five minutes.

*After that?*

Light, but only a little bit. I was in a massive cave, with dim light falling in from a great maw at its end. I would've blinked, but for some reason I felt I couldn't. It was a shame too, because I had been really good at blinking. The best in the forest even. The ladies loved me.

“Auch!” something suddenly yelled from outside the cave.

A honking roar followed.

“Unhand me, cretin!” the first voice responded to the roar, and then quickly after that another “Ouch!”

The honking roars came in rapid succession, but it seemed the source of the first voice had managed to get away. Then my whole cave shook and I heard the sounds of someone straining themselves.

“Heyoop!” came the first voice again, to my surprise, and another tremor rolled through the cave.

A grunt followed not long after, and then, from one moment to the next, a giant's head appeared in the portal of my cave. Its tan face was childish: massive eyes like black ponds; a relatively-tiny nose above a thin-lipped slit that was probably its mouth; large bulbous growths below its eyes, which had reddish blush on them; a sporadic growth of black hair on the very apex of its cranium, like a resilient bush in a barren desert; and, lastly, a weird hole on either side of its head, which the tan skin on its head seemed to be sucked into.

Its eyes narrowed as it stared into my cave and I felt myself shiver in fear, but, in that moment, I realised that not only could I not blink, I also couldn't move!

Those black ponds settled on me, and the thin-lipped slit moved slightly.

“What the Hell?” it said.

Another quake rolled over me as the giant crawled into the cave, stooping its head low and curling up its body inside; that’s how large it was. Crawling on its hands and knees, the giant came closer, each movement sending tremors over me, and yet I still didn’t move. Couldn’t move.

“Why are you *so* small?”

*Is this giant speaking to me?*

“Yes, I’m speaking to you.”

*It can read minds??*

The giant sighed. “This is all wrong... a core is not supposed to be *this* small... nor in a tree for that matter...”

“Are... are we in a tree?” my voice sounded weird and hollow; echoey even.

“Can’t you see that?” the giant asked.

“How? I can’t move. I cannot even blink!”

The giant ran a sausage-fingered hand down its face. I only now took in its full appearance. It was wearing a brown pair of cropped trousers that stopped above its knees. Its feet were bare and covered in dirt and leaves. Rolls of fat drooped over the waist of its cropped trousers, and, just like its strange head-holes, another such hole sat above the top-most fat-roll. For some reason, the sight of him made me very uncomfortable, as though I was fearing for my life.

“Of course you can’t move or blink...” it replied as though that much was obvious.

Before I had the chance to protest again, it pre-empted me and said, “Just force your essence into my eyes and see what I see. I’ll teach you the rest after we get *this* sorted.”

Now it really wasn’t making any sense, this giant in my cave. Nonetheless, I imagined that I could see what it saw and then there was a sort of wet *pop* and I was staring into the darkness, at a small stone or pebble that seemed to catch the dim light from outside and sparkle slightly.

“Is *that* me!?” I exclaimed, my voice coming out of the giant’s mouth.

“Wow... that’s uncomfortable,” it said, rubbing its lips. “But yes, that’s you.”

“I’m a stone!” I yelled, somewhere between distraught and confused: *Disfused? Contraught?*

“It’s not a stone, it’s a core. Or well, I think so. But I’ve never seen one *so small* before.”

Suddenly, my view was spinning as the cumbersome giant turned around on the spot and leaned slightly out through the cave opening.

“Anyway, have a look at your *kingdom*.” Sarcasm was thick in its voice.

Light blinded me for a moment, but then I saw what lay beyond the cave: a forest. And just below the cave, which was not a cave at all, was the trunk of a tree expanding downwards towards the ground, with thick fingerless limbs stretching every-which-way and sparse leaves growing along them.

At the foot of the tree that we were in, a honking monstrosity stood, wings spread wide in a threatening posture.

If I'd had any control over the giant's eyes, they would've widened at the sight. "That's—!"

"A pissed-off goose," the giant replied.

"THE *pissed-off* goose that killed me!" I said, finishing my revelation.

"...What?"

"It killed me! Chewed on me! Slapped me with its wings! The whole lot! It was very traumatic..."

"What kind of pathetic human were you?"

"*Whomen?*" I returned, through the giant's mouth. "I was a toad, not a whomen!"

"Don't be ridiculous!" it scolded me, keeping its stare fixed on the goose as it marched around the foot of the tree, its wings spread wide while it honked furiously. *Show-off!*

"I am serious!"

"How would a toad's soul get turned into a core?? That makes no sense."

"You tell me. You seem to know a lot more about this than I do. I just woke up here!"

The giant snapped its fingers and I shot out of its body at once, returning to the immobile little shiny pebble that was now my body. Or rather, my core... whatever *that* entailed.

I watched as it turned and used the aperture of the 'cave' to get comfortable, then it clapped its hands together and pinched the air as it drew them apart. In the space between its lumpy hands, a book covered in beige leather, spotted with purple, blue, and red, materialised itself. The giant caught it before it had a chance to fall, then immediately leafed through its many dogeared-and-worn pages with surprisingly-deft fingers.

*Hmm, huh, hum*, and other such sounds emanated from the giant for the next few minutes, then with a *bang* it snapped the book shut and looked towards me with the black, bottomless pits in its face. "It seems you're not a *Dungeon Core* as was expected, but rather something called a *Settlement Core*..."

"I'm still pretty lost."

"Me too," it replied. "Good thing *Lord Deathheim* deigned to give me this *Encyclopaedia of Infinite Answers*."

"Deathheim?"

“The Lord of the Unliving, The Master of Undeath, The King Who Shall Never Die, etcetera. You would’ve been serving him, if not for this nonsense.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t blame yourself,” the giant responded. “Wasn’t your fault you were sucked into this pathetic little pebble some idiot bird stowed away in here. That said, we do have a job to do. I won’t be getting any bonuses if you don’t grow stronger, so *your* success is *my* success.”

“I am still very lost and confused.”

The giant turned around and looked straight at me, or my shiny core... pebble... thing... and said, “That’s why I’m here. I’ve usually only worked on cores affiliated with human souls, but a toad’s soul might be amusing, or at the least peculiar enough to tell to my co-workers later.”

“What exactly *are* you?”

“Me?” it replied, putting a sausage-fingered hand on its exposed breast, squishing some of the fat and skin as the fingers pressed themselves white. “I am your new fairy, and—”

“You’re not a fairy,” I immediately said. “I’ve seen them. They’re about as big as a puffed-up dandelion and they look prettier.”

A wounded expression flashed across the giant’s face, but before I could feel bad, it morphed into a scowl with a pointed forked tongue and a fat finger pulling down the skin below one of its massive eyeholes. “You hurt me with your words, little toad,” it said. “But you’re right. To call me a fairy is nothing short of lying, but, alas, that is the term by which we have become know, whether we are associated with Lord Deathheim or Lady Light.

“The true name for my kin is *Shuagh*, and, based on which Deity we offer fealty to, we can become a *Will-o’-Wisp*, *Myling*, *Deogen*, etcetera. To answer your next question: I’m a Myling due to my association with Lord Deathheim. And to answer your question after that: I’m here to guide you into becoming stronger.”

The giant was surprisingly good at predicting my questions.

“I’m supposed to grow stronger?”

“Preferably.”

“How?”

The Myling lifted a finger as though it was about tell me, but then frowned and started leafing through its book again.

After a few minutes, it regarded me with its enormous eyes. “It seems it is not as simple a matter as for a Dungeon Core, since you have to construct certain things and reach rather peculiar milestones

in order to grow. Normally, you would just have to kill adventurers to grow stronger, but it seems a Settlement Core is not as straight-forward.

“Anyway, I believe an introduction is in order. I have taken on the appearance of a human boy as is my wont, but my name is—”

“*Boi!*” I shouted, remembering where I’d seen one of those whomen tadpoles before. Granted, this Myling looked very far from that, what with its holes in the side of its head and enormous eyes and slit mouth.

“...Look what you did...”

“What?”

“My name is now officially ‘Boi’...”

“Why?”

“Because you interrupted me... The introduction is a very formal process and interrupting it can make everything go all wonky, and thanks to your timely interjection, my name has now been set as ‘Boi’ ... I won’t be able to change this until I leave your side, and who knows when that’ll be...”

The Myling now named ‘Boi’ sighed heavily, rubbing the skin below his cavernous eyeholes, before addressing me in a measured voice again, “Now, what is your name? And remember, this part is important, because it cannot be changed ever aga—”

“I am Toad!”

“Oh, for Hell’s sake...”

## 2 — Getting Started?

“What do I do now, Boi?”

“...” he sighed, rubbing his face for the twentieth time in the last couple of minutes. “Imagine pushing yourself outwards, as though you are a toad rapidly filling with gas.”

“How dare you! That’s how my cousin died!”

“...Just do it. Before the sun sets, preferably...”

Though it was a bit hard to get started, I eventually managed to concentrate on the task and imagined my form pushing as far outwards as it could. Physically nothing happened to my core, but meta-physically, a sphere began forming around my little shiny pebble body and pushed outwards, past the ‘cave’ in the tree, down the trunk and along its branches and leaves, past the foot of the tall tree and over the grass, continuing through the forest for at least several metres on either side of the trunk. In terms of size that I was now spread across, it was something akin to my childhood pond where I’d been spawned.

“Good,” Boi encouraged me. “Is that as far as you can go?”

I sucked my spirit into the core again, and beheld the dimly-lit, and getting dimmer by the minute, cave, where Boi sat in the opening, dangling his chubby legs out over the edge as the setting sun slowly withdrew its light from the forest. His right hand was held in front of his eye, with his fingers forming a circle and around which a bubble seemed to have formed. He moved his head ever so slightly around as he scanned the surroundings with the weird bubble in front of his eyes.

“Seems so,” I replied. “I feel very sleepy.”

“That’s normal. It appears that this is all we have to work with for now. According to the Encyclopaedia, you have to start off with a single farm, but even then, this seems rather small an area to build a farm, let alone grow anything.”

“I still don’t really follow all of that,” I replied. “What is it I’m meant to do.”

“Normally, you would spread your influence through a cave and inhabit it with creatures, monsters, and so on, but, seeing as this is anything but normal, you’re supposed to make a settlement and house it with... humans.”

“I’ll be able to create whomens!?”

“That appears to be the case, yes. But before we get anywhere close to making a settlement, we have to start small, with a farm. When you get stronger, you’ll be able to create a hamlet and such.”

“So how does it work, this process?”

“According to the Encyclopaedia, the progression ladder for a Settlement Core goes like this: You start off as a single farm > that becomes a hamlet, i.e., a collection of farmhouses > from there you grow into a village > then a town > then a castle town > then a city, and after that, it all gets rather complicated.”

“That sounds complicated enough already.”

“Get some rest for now. When the sun rises, we’ll begin constructing the farmhouse.”

The following dawn, as sunlight started sneaking into the tree-cave, I seemed to have recovered all the energy I expended the previous day.

Sensing this, somehow, Boi opened his eyes and looked at me.

“Let’s get to work.” He crawled forward, towards my core, the cave trembling as he moved, making my vision vibrate uncomfortably.

“I want to set one thing straight. My name is not ‘Boi’.”

“It isn’t?”

“Of course it isn’t,” he replied with a frustrated sigh. “I am officially known as *Imuxikwiht*, the *Squire-Lord of Guilty Pleasures and Minor Vices*, but I will allow you to address me as *Imu*.”

“Emu?”

“I-M-U!”

“Imu.”

“Yes!”

“Emo Boi?”

“...”

“Boimu??”

“No... that’s not—”

“Emu the Boi!”

“Oh for Hell’s sake...”

“What is a Squire-Lord?”

“Listen, I want to settle this so you don’t get stuck on the wrong name. We’ll be working together, and this sort of thing makes me want to lead you off a cliff, rather than down a gentle slope.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Pray you don’t find out.”

“Imu..?”

“Yes...” Boi replied.

“What’s a Squire-Lord?”

“We Sluagh of Lord Deathheim are arranged into a hierarchy that the mortal kings decided to adopt for some reason: fashion is my guess, but you never know with humans. Anyway, at the top you have the Lords, who may speak directly with Deathheim. Below them are the Aristocracy, who are spread across many titles, these are, in order of power: Archduke, Duke, Marquees, Count, Viscount, and Baron. After the Aristocracy comes Knight-Lords; Knights; Squire-Lords; Squires; Men-at-Arms; Footmen; Lowborn; and the Unmentionables at the bottom.”

“I’m confused.”

“Of course you are. You’re a toad, after all.”

“I’m Toad!”

“...Yep.” Boi replied, pinching the bridge of his tiny nose. “Alright, enough chatter, it’s time for you to get to work. Every day wasted before you’ve secured yourself is a day spent courting Fate. And Fate is an asshole, I seriously *hate* that guy.”

“What do I do?”

“Like any Core,” Boi flicked through his Encyclopaedia, even though he didn’t look at the pages, “You have the ability to Spirit-Roam your demesne.”

If I had the ability to tilt my bulbous eyes and narrow my glistening rubbery eyelids in confusion, I would have, but alas, I was an inanimate pebble.

With his preternatural instincts, Boi picked up on my unspoken question. “You can basically fly and move through objects, like a *Landvættir*.”

“I have wings?”

“If that helps you imagine it, sure...”

I imagined that I had wings and could soar, and then it was as if I grew stalks below my eyes, like a snail, and my vision moved up through the ceiling of the cave, and into the mushy bug-infested wood of the tree. My vision kept moving straight through, and, more than once, I wished I still had my amazing tongue, so that I could sample the delectable treats that hid within. I was once the fastest tongue-shooter in my childhood pond and the bane of all mosquitoes of the forest, but, alas, I was now a tongueless misbegotten pebble.



When I grew bored of seeing the inside of the tree, I moved through the bark and found myself suspended in the air, far above the tiny cave within which my Core resided. I saw Boi start to climb out of the opening, one hand cupped and covered in a bubble that he looked through to see me.

“Hey Boi!”

“You’re doing great! Have a look at how far you can extend yourself, but be careful not to overexert your limited essence.”

I rotated my vision, so that I could look out over the nearby trees and the forest beyond. Wanting to see what the birds saw, I went even higher, until I suddenly could go no further. Far below stood my tree, and a strange smoke-like trail tethered me to it like the string of a spider’s web.

As I looked around some more, I suddenly exclaimed, “I can see my childhood pond from here!”

Then a loud snap brought me back into the cave.

“Alright, enough playing around.”

“Aww.”

“Creatures and humans are naturally drawn to Cores, so the longer we take to get situated here and mount some sort of defence, the worse off we’ll be.”

“Are we going to be under attack!?”

Boi flicked through the Encyclopaedia quickly, then, upon not finding what he was searching for, said, in a defeated voice, “I... have no idea... But! It never hurt to be prepared!”

“How do we prepare?” I asked, eagerly. Lack of a proper defence had after all seen me brutally murdered by the Honking Menace, whose ululating voice could still be heard nearby at times.

“*You* have to be the one to prepare, I’m merely the Advisor. But it’s simple. We follow the rough guidelines marked out in my tome and improvise the rest.”

## 3 — Blueprint?

After following Imu with my floating essence as he scaled the branches down to the forest-floor, muttering long strings of expletives the entire way, we stopped near the border where my essence could go no further.

“I’m not quite sure how exactly you’re meant to build stuff,” the Myling said. “The Encyclopaedia is way too vague to be of any use.”

“What does it say?”

“Something about you being able to place a blueprint of buildings within your demesne.”

I concentrated really hard to make *something* appear, until I realised I had no idea what exactly what I was trying to actually create. What was a building? Was it like the burrow in the dead tree near the pond where I’d lived? If so, I needed to make a big hole.

An implosion of earth made the Boi jump nearly a metre into the air in surprise.

“What the...! Toad... why is there a hole in the grass?!”

“Is that a building?” It looked pretty comfortable, albeit large, for a toad.

“No...” He held up his book and flipped it to a page with a drawing on it of what appeared to be a bunch of trees chopped down and cut in half, before being assembled onto a loose foundation of large stones into a strange shape. I suddenly remembered that I had once seen men with large oddly-shaped sticks felling trees and talking about building stuff with the wood. The squirrels who had previously lived in those trees were pretty pissed though.

I tried to concentrate on this image, and then, with a strangely-wet *pop*, a blurry see-through outline of my mental image now stood next to the hole I’d made.

“I did it!”

Imu looked around in confusion, then lifted his hand and formed that weird bubble thing. As he looked through it, he sighed in annoyance.

“Curse it!”

“What? Is it wrong?”

“No... you did well. The *System* is *what* is wrong.”

“Why?”

“Because we’re working with a *Blueprint Construction System*, meaning, you need to make your creatures build your structures, which is not only a logistical nightmare, but also highly ineffective. Normally, you would be able to just wish things into being and *poof* there they are, but no...”

“So I should make a whomen now?”

“Yeah.”

“How?”

“Same way as the building, although imagine that you are pushing part of yourself into it, like breaking a biscuit in half and keeping only one part, while giving the other to your creation.”

“What’s a biscuit?”

“...” Imu seemed to contemplate how to word his advice, before settling on something: “Imagine splitting a... mosquito... with a neighbouring frog.”

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing!”

“What!?! Why is *that* such a bad thing?”

“A toad sharing a meal with a frog, with a *frog*!?! If my friends heard you even say something like this, they would croak! Croak I say!”

“Frogs and toads don’t get along?”

“Let’s just say, when my third twice-removed cousin married a frog, she was ousted from our pond forever. Banished! Exiled! My great toadcestors didn’t fight seventeen wars for that pond against the cunning frogs, just so we toads could live side-by-side with *them*!”

Imu started massaging his large forehead. “You’re giving me an ulcer. Just create the damned human, okay?”

Though I was still incensed, I followed his guidance, channelling my indignation into the task at hand.

Like a vicious mole, a mound of earth grew out of the grass, before exploding in a shower of tufts and dirt, a single naked weird-looking frog standing on all fours before us.

“What the Hell is *that*?”

“A whomen?”

“Why is his face so...?”

“Handsome?”

“Revolting, more like. Have you never seen a human before?”

“That’s really mean,” I complained. “And I have seen them before, but their eyes are so small and their lips so thin, so I just imagined them looking more normal.”

“We have very conflicting ideas of what *normal* is supposed to look like. Change it.”

“No.”

Imu sighed. “Fine, leave it then. This *thing* will get killed and burnt at the stake, and I will laugh when it happens.”

The Whomen remained on all fours, alternating between staring at Imu and me, even though I should be invisible. It blinked its beautiful moist eyelids and then ran its long tongue over its cornea to give it moisture.

“...I think I’m gonna be sick. Make it stop doing *that*.”

“The tongue thing?”

“Yes. Please. Also, humans don’t crawl like that. They stand on two legs. Like me.”

“Hmm. Isn’t it better this way?”

“Absolutely not.”

*Whomen, stand*, I demanded with my thoughts.

“...Why is it doing a handstand?”

*Whomen, stand on your back legs, not your front legs.*

“That’s better. Now make another one.”

I concentrated really hard, but nothing happened. I was also starting to feel very fatigued again.

When another whomen didn’t burst from the ground mole-style, the boy pulled up his bubble and stared at my floating essence.

“Hm, you’re all spent, just making that one creature.”

“How can you tell?”

“Your essence is like a glass of water, and currently yours is less than half-full.”

“Why can’t I see my own essence?”

“You should be able to. Just imagine that you have the ability to see it and the System should accommodate you accordingly.”

I imagined that I could see my essence and suddenly a tiny pond appeared in my vision, its water at about two-fifths.

“I can see it now.”

“Good. You know, for being a toad, you’ve got a pretty decent grasp on this.”

“*For being a toad?*”

“Sorry, that came out wrong. What I meant to say was, ‘*Good Job!*’”

“Thank you.”

“...Anyway, tell your new minion to complete the blueprint of the house you made.”

With a thought, the Whomen got into action, bending down on all fours and hopping towards the ghostly outline of the construction.

“Stop!”

“What’s wrong?”

“Why the Hell is it hopping?? Humans walk! They walk!”

“Hopping is superior.”

“Listen here... your job is to make a human settlement, not a freakshow! The weird face is one thing, but if real humans see your minions moving around like *this*, they’ll either avoid them or attack crucify them!”

If I could twist my lips into a grimace, I would’ve, but alas. “Fine.”

Walking, on two legs, the last few metres, the whomen got to the translucent building and then scratched his bald dome and looked back at us.

“I don’t think he knows what to do.”

“Hell damn it.”

“What?”

“You also have to collect the resources to make your structures...”

“So I have to chop down trees?”

“And find large stones and dry grass. Basically, we’re screwed. This went from logistical nightmare to plain torture.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, for starters, you’ll need way more minions than normal, because you have to harvest everything you need, such as wood, stone, ore, and so on. This also means that you’ll have to specialise your workers, so they become proficient with their tasks, which in turn means that most of them will be terrible at actually defending your Core.

“When I told my Lord that I could use a challenge, he really did not hold back, huh?”

“I think I can make another whomen now,” I announced, noticing my essence reservoir go above three-fifths. With a concentrated burst, I called forth another whomen from the dirt, but immediately felt drained and out-of-breath afterwards, my essence pond going empty.

“This one is identical,” Imu commented. “Also, where are their geni—”

He stopped himself and looked at me through the bubble between his fingers.

“Hey, are you okay?”

“I’m tired.”

“Exhausting all of your essence is a bad idea,” he advised. “It will take longer to recharge and you won’t be able to do anything until you’re back to full.”

“I’m gonna take a nap.”

“Cores don’t sleep.”

I didn’t listen, as my essences was reeled back into my shiny pebble within the cave at the top of the tree and my consciousness faded.

“Toad! Toad! Wake up! Toad!”

With a burst of energy, my essence shot out of the cave like a furious owl disturbed by migrating squirrels.

“What’s wrong!?”

I looked around and didn’t spot the Boi anywhere on the grass near the translucent building, nor did I see either of my two whomens.

“I’m here!” Imu yelled and I found him hanging from a branch two metres off the ground, the corpses of my two creations below him.

“What happened??”

“That damned goose attacked while you were resting and killed both of your minions!”

“Not again...”

## 4 — Goose'd?

“Stop punching the tree!” Imu yelled, as one of my newly-created minions furiously hammered its front legs against the sturdy bark of a pine tree, all its front-toes broken and bent-out-of-shape.

“How else am I supposed to fell a tree?”

“With tools, you imbecile!”

“That was uncalled for.”

“Just make it stop before he dies of exhaustion!”

With a thought, I made the whomen halt his assault, but no sooner had he stopped, than loud honking came from the distance.

“Aw shit, not again! Run!”

“I’ll make my whomens fight it!”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea...”

“It’s really strong,” I remarked.

“It has killed five humans now... I’ve never seen a goose that angry. Also, I got a look at it with my *Scope* and it’s level twelve now...”

“Scope? Level?”

“Nevermind that for now. We need to get this thing built or we’ll never get anywhere.”

“I need to make tools, you said.”

“Yeah. Have your new minions collect some sticks and loose rocks, then they can craft a workbench. With that they can make primitive stone tools, and with those tools they can harvest the materials needed to make the house.” Holding his book in front of him, he showed me an image for reference.

“That makes sense. Actually, no, it doesn’t.”

“Just do it, please...”

I ordered my two new whomens to go out and gather the materials Imu mentioned from the surrounding area. As a result of repeatedly creating the whomens over-and-over, they now only cost two-fifths of my essence pond, so I could immediately make two after resting.

Sometime later, both of my whomens returned, one carrying a stack of dry sticks of varying lengths, and the other struggling to drag a large stone through the grass.

“You know, it really bothers me that they don’t have any... erm... reproductive organs. I can’t even tell if they’re supposed to be male or female.”

“Maybe they’re neither?”

“I... well,” Imu stopped to consider it. “Let’s just go with that. But we seriously should give them some clothes, like what I’m wearing.” He pointed to his shorts.

“How do we make those?”

“Maybe there’s some options to pick from once we have the crafting table.”

Without him telling me, I focused on the idea of a workbench, imagining the image he had shown me. It looked mostly like a flat stone with legs.

Immediately the ghostly outline of the bench appeared where I had wanted it to stand, next to the outline of the house. With another thought, I made the two whomens bring their burdens to it, and when they came close, their materials suddenly vanished, and they started constructing the workbench by waving their hands around in front of the outline.

“That’s really odd,” Imu commented, and I had to agree with him.

With a poof of smoke and dust, it was suddenly complete, and the two whomens automatically returned to finding more wood and stone, my previous command still in effect.

*Congratulations! For constructing your first item, you have gained the [Crafting List] perk!*

*[Crafting List] – See a visual list of all of the items and buildings you are capable of crafting and constructing.*

“Well that’s useful.”

“Whose voice was that?” It had sounded like a lady, but with a flat and emotionless tone.

“That was the System. It vocalises achievements like that and rewards you with perks. The one you just acquired is similar to one that Dungeon Cores normally obtain after carving out their cave. Strange that you weren’t awarded for expanding your territory or spawning minions though.”

When the whomens returned, I had recouped enough essence to spawn another, who I kept near the workbench, while the other two returned to harvesting. I then brought up the Crafting List, ignoring all options aside from tools:

*[Crafting List]*



>Items>Tools

—Stone Axe (Workbench)—

*Grants Woodchopping skill and increases minion Harvesting XP by 10%*

*Required Materials: Stone & Wood*

—Stone Hammer (Workbench)—

*Increases minion Building Speed and XP by 15%*

*Required Materials: Stone & Wood*

—Stone Pick (Workbench)—

*Grants Stone-picking skill and increases minion Harvesting XP by 10%*

*Required Materials: Stone & Wood*

—Stone Scythe (Workbench)—

*Increases minion Foraging Speed and XP by 15%*

*Required Materials: Stone & Wood*

“I only have four items I can make right now,” I said disappointedly.

“That will change as you continue to construct more things,” Imu replied, leafing through his book. “Plus, those are just the Items in the Tool category.

“For now, just have your idle minion craft one of each, you should have just enough materials for that already.”

I followed his advice, and, after ten minutes, the four different tools lay waiting on the workbench, the bug-eyed minion immediately grabbing the hammer for himself.

“He seems to want to be a builder,” I commented.

“He’ll be whatever you want him to be.”

“That’s mean. If I can make my own community, I will not be a tyrant, like Toadicus over in the Swamp. He’s the reason so many of us toads are bachelors still, hogging all the females for himself.”

“You could send one of your minions to squash him,” Imu said matter-of-factly.

“I’m above all that now.”

“Revenge is healthy for your soul.”

“Shouldn’t you be giving me good moral advice?”

“I’m a servant of Lord Deathheim. His name has *death* in it.”

“I suppose that makes sense, but no, I won’t stoop to his level. He’s even worse than a frog! He’s a traitor to Toad-kind all across the forest!”

“Oh look, your minions are back with more materials,” Imu announced, changing the topic.

With a mental prompt, I urged the gatherers to take the axe and pick, before sending them off again. The Builder remained idle in front of the workbench, not having moved a hop since making the items.

“Take a look at clothes and structures, maybe there’s something we can make with the sticks and stones.”

[*Crafting List*]

>*Items*>*Clothes*

—Simple Pants (Loom)—

*Increases minion Charisma by 2*

*Required Materials: Yarn*

—Simple Sandals (Loom)—

*Increases minion Movement Speed by 25%*

*Required Materials: Yarn*

—Simple Tunic (Loom)—

*Increases minion Health by 25% and Resistance to Cold by 30%*

*Required Materials: Yarn*

“Hmm, I need a ‘*Loom*’ to make clothes?”

“Maybe you can craft that already. Check the structures list.”

[*Crafting List*]

>*Structures*>*Crafting*

—Anvil (Workbench & Forge)—

*Enables Metal Working, but lowers minion motivation in nearby structures*

*Required Materials: Iron*

—Firepit (Workbench)—

*Enables Simple Cooking*

*Required Materials: Stone & Wood*

—Simple Loom (Workbench)—

*Enables the Crafting of Simple Clothing*

*Required Materials: Wood (sticks / timber)*

—Stone Forge (Workbench)—

*Enables Ore Smelting, but lowers minion motivation in nearby structures*

*Required Materials: Stone*

—Workbench [1/∞ Constructed]—

*Enables Crafting*

*Required Materials: Stone & Wood*

*Builder whomen, craft a Loom and Firepit!*

Immediately, the Builder looked around, confused.

“You need to place the blueprints first,” Imu commented, apparently clued-in to my mental commands.

“Oh, right.”

I put the loom next to the workbench, and the firepit in front of the house, the outlines immediately appearing. Excitedly, the Builder got to work, swinging his new hammer through the air in front of the transparent loom.

Sometime later, the loom was finished and the Builder moved on to the firepit. When that finished as well, a fire was already lit within the ring of stones.

“Can I craft clothes now?”

“Nope.”

“Aww.”

“You need to get your hands on some yarn, which,” he skimmed through his Encyclopaedia briefly, “is made from harvested plant fibres, such as hemp, cotton, bamboo, etc.”

Good thing the downtime waiting for the constructions to finish had helped me recoup enough Essence for another minion. I concentrated real hard, and out popped another naked women from the ground, a twin to the Builder next to him.

“The fact that they’re identical stands out way more when they’re people and not skeletons and zombies,” Imu remarked philosophically.

After grabbing the scythe, the new Forager women went out into the forest in search of plant fibres. Despite knowing that creating another minion would exhaust all my available Essence, I went ahead and did it anyway, but as I tried to make it appear, I was halted by a message from Lady System:

*You have reached the limit of maximum Minions [4/4]! Build more houses to increase the cap.*

“A minion cap based on houses and not demesne size? That’s a new one.”

“Why didn’t your book tell you that?”

He flipped through the pages while pointing it at me. “There are literally an endless number of pages, and it’s called the Encyclopaedia of Infinite *Answers* for a reason. You have to ask a question for the page with the answer to appear. I don’t know which things are similar to a Dungeon Core and which aren’t, so I haven’t asked a question about every single minutia!”

“Alright, sorry, I didn’t realise you took this so seriously.”

“Listen, even if your core gets destroyed, I’ll be fine, so I’m taking this seriously for *your* sake!

And my promotion to Knight.”

“What was that last bit?”

“Nothing.”

“Well, thank you. And I’m sorry again.”

“Don’t mention it. Just consider every moment not progressing as a moment wasted.”

“That’s a pretty toxic work ethic, even to me, and I lived in a swamp for two months.”

The sound of heaving and puffing, as well as the noise of snapping branches and rustling leaves, immediately brought our quarrel to a halt.

“That’s a pretty determined minion,” I commented, watching one of the harvesters drag an entire tree behind him, his bug-eyed big-lipped face red from the exertion. The tree he had chopped down was a pine easily seven metres long from bottom-to-crown.

“That is probably enough for the house,” Imu said. “Once you have increased your Minion Cap, you should make another woodchopper, so they don’t have to experience near-death moments of exertion every return trip.”

Combined with the pile of stones the stone-harvester had already hauled back, it seemed we had enough materials to finally construct the house, whose ghostly outline had been bugging me for a while now.

“Builder: build, that, house!”

The minion ran over, and immediately looked around confused.

“*Frog-it*, what now!”

“Look at the requirements for the construction of the house.”

I brought up the crafting entry:

[*Crafting List*]

>*Structures*

—House (Workbench)—

*Increases the maximum available minions by 4*

*Required Materials: Stone & Timber*

“It says it needs ‘*Timber*’.”

“You can craft that at your workbench, using the tree.”

I sent the Builder to the workbench, and, in just a minute, the seven-metre-long tree was reduced to smaller, evenly-cut pieces.

“How did he do *that*??”

“Magic?” Imu replied.

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense.”

“Alright, Builder: build, that, house! Pretty please.”

The whomen ran over to the outline of the house and started swinging his hammer wildly. Though it might have taken twenty minutes, I stared at the progress with bathed breath, not that I was actually capable of breathing. Alas, I was but a pebble.

When a poof of smoke and dust announced the completion of the house, a System message announced a new skill:

*Congratulations! For constructing your first house, you have gained the [Who's Home?] perk and your Demesne has been expanded slightly! Kind of creepy perk, not gonna lie.*

## 5 — Farm?

*[Who's Home?] – See a visual indicator of your current number of minions compared to your maximum cap allowed.*

“Great, we get more space to work with.”

After checking the new perk, which just showed “4 / 8 minions” above the indicator for my Essence Pool, I tried to force my essence outward, to expand the border of my Settlement.

“Well, that’s disappointing. We gained half a metre...”

“I could build more houses,” I replied.

“No, that would be a waste of resources. While it may seem like it now, this forest is not an endless supply of wood and stone. Sooner-or-later you will run out and have to send your gatherers further away. You want to have a robust Settlement by then. I’ve seen Dungeon Cores focus too heavily on expanding their caves and too little on traps and creatures, granted, we aren’t talking about the same thing exactly, but you’d be better off focusing on actually fulfilling the requirements for advancing to a Hamlet. Currently we just have a house and miscellaneous crafting stations, we don’t even have a plot of land to farm...”

“I’d forgotten about that.”

“That’s why I’m here. To keep you on track.”

“What happened to the Cores that expanded too fast?”

“They died early more often than not.”

“Oh...”

“Yep. Death is a common end to most cores, but their life-expectancy is usually close to a century, with the right management. Once they pass about fifty years though, they are generally expected to last a few centuries, the expectancy is just held back by the many cores that perish early.”

“Not all cores die though?”

“A handful ascend every-so-often. They become minor deities or Sluagh, aka. ‘*Guiding Fairies*’, like me.”

“So you were a Core once?” I asked, fascinated.

“That’s right. Two-thousand-seven-hundred-and-forty-two years ago.”

“You’re really old.”

“In the corporate world of Deathheim’s Sluagh, I am but a middle-manager. Once we’re promoted to the rank of Knights, we get a lot more freedom and benefits. Currently, I only get about two weeks’ vacation between training cores. And that’s only if they evolve at least once...”

“Two weeks? Even though helping cores can take centuries? That’s awful!”

“Hey, at least I get vacation. Lady Light’s employees only get a single day, even their upper management. Lord Deathheim has far more compassion, but his PR team is understaffed, hence why he gets such a bad rep.”

I didn’t get all the jargon, but sort of got the gist of it. “He does have ‘death’ in his name.”

“He actually dislikes Death, thinks the guy’s an asshole, which, given his relation to Fate, is no big surprise. My Lord cares about life, which is why his servants gain the ability to imbue their cores with the ability to raise the dead and prolong life through vampirism and lichdom.”

“Why can’t I raise the dead, if you’re my fairy?”

“Well, little Toad, you’re what we in the business call: ‘an outlier’. But, maybe, down the line, you’ll be able to. I skimmed ahead a bit and it seems you get the ability to make Wizards.”

“I hate wizards,” I replied. “One of them turned my fifth cousin once-removed into a whomen.”

“Gross.”

“That’s what I said!”

“Anyway, let’s get back on track. According to the evolution checklist, we have to finish at least two houses, a barn, and a farming plot. Additionally we need to have at least ten minions and have harvested crops once. Given our limited space, and the fact that we can’t just tear down this huge tree in the middle of it without damaging your core, I will place a few blueprints for you, so you can see the optimal placements.”

Before I could express my surprise at his ability to actually help me build, the land surrounding the tree suddenly became filled with blueprints, their ghostly outlines waving back-and-forth with an unseen wind.

“I took the liberty of suggesting some new locations for your current structures, so you should have your builder move those first.”

“We can move them?”

“Yep. It comes in handy and lets you redesign the layout of your demesne when inspiration strikes.”

“I thought you were only able to give advice, not actually help me with building.”



“Due to my rank as Squire-Lord, I am able to provide you with unparalleled guidance, including optimisation of layout. I will be able to do far more impressive tricks if you manage to evolve a few times, but baby-steps first.”

“Babies don’t walk, they swim.”

“Eh... sure. That’s *definitely* what I meant.”

I put the Builder to work moving the house so that it stood nearer the trunk of my tree, as well as arranging all the crafting stations in a central location, rather than up against the side of the house, this would make it easier to access them for multiple minions at once, rather than just one at a time.

“You’re really good at this,” I remarked, after seeing the brilliance in this change to our farm’s layout.

“I know.”

“So, what next?”

“Make a Farming Plot where I indicated.”

Unlike the firepit and workbench, the Farming Plot was in a category named ‘*Agriculture*’ and was the only currently-available option.

“More things will unlock as you harvest certain items and build new buildings, not just when you unlock perks or evolve. You should also have the option to tell which structures you already have and how many more you are allowed to make.”

“My Workbench has an ‘∞’ next to its number?”

“That means there is no upper limit, but that’s also because you don’t gain anything from building multiples of them. Buildings like the ‘*House*’ currently have a limit of two, but that will increase when you evolve.”

“So my plan of mass-producing houses wouldn’t have worked anyway...”

“This does seem a lot less open-ended than how it is for a Dungeon Core, but I think it’s more to compensate for the many requirements. Fret not though, the limits are only for the first few stages of your Core’s evolution, then you can make your *suburban dream* come true.”

After placing the farming plot, nothing happened. It had simply made a ghostly square on the ground, but no outline of any structure. I tried to send my Builder over to initiate its construction, but he simply stood there, looking confused and scratching his bald rubbery head.

Then another System message appear:

*Congratulations! For constructing your first Farming Plot, you unlocked the ability to craft tools to work the soil! Get those grubby fingers dirty!*

*>Items>Tools*

*—Stone Rake (Workbench)—*

*Grants Tilling skill and increases minion Farming XP by 10%*

*Required Materials: Wood & Stone*

*—Stone Shovel (Workbench)—*

*Grants Digging skill and increases minion Farming XP by 10%*

*Required Materials: Wood & Stone*

*—Stone Trowel (Workbench)—*

*Grants Sowing-and-Planting skill and increases minion Farming XP by 10%*

*Required Materials: Wood & Stone*

Just like the other tools, I could use simple sticks and stones to make the new tools, and I quickly made one of each from the leftover materials that hadn't been used on making the house. As soon as the Builder had finished making one of each, the Forager returned with a bundle of plant material.

“Oooh, now we can make clothes!”

“Finally.”

After dumping his harvested materials, the Forager left to find more. Among the plant fibres were also some colourful red berries, a few white-blue flowers, and nettles.

“Before you use all of the foraged plants for making yarn, have your builder set aside a bit of each plant, so we can use them to grow more with our farmland.”

“We can do that??”

“That's what farms are for...”

“Oh.”

“What did you think the farm was for?”

“I don't know. I was sort of just going with the flow. I've never even seen most of these things before, so how was I supposed to know?”

“Sometimes I forget that you were an amphibian before this.”

“I’m still a toad! In my heart!”

“You don’t have a heart...”

“In my core then!”

“Whatever,” Imu replied, brushing me off. “Alright. Make another minion, while your Builder makes yarn for the clothes.”

A fresh face, which was identical to the four of his brethren, emerged from inside the new house, his smooth rubbery head glistening like a newly-spawned newt.

“I name thee, Farmer!”

The Farmer enthusiastically grabbed the rake and started running along the demarcated farming plot with the teeth of the tool, the grass shredding and the soil becoming revealed. While he did that, the Builder was turning the Foraged plants into yarn by placing them on the workbench and waving his hands frantically.

“Isn’t this whole thing really inconsistent?” I asked the chubby Myling, who was sitting on-top of the loom with the Encyclopaedia open in his hands.

“If there’s one consistent thing with the System it’s its lack of consistency,” he replied, without even looking at what the Builder was doing. “Sometimes things are over-complicated and hyper-detailed, and, other times, they’re like *that*,” he said, pointing at the Builder, eyes still locked on the pages of his book.

The lack of details was probably what bothered me with the Builder, but it was hard to argue with his results, as he took messy plants and turned them into bundles of hair-like strings, just by waving his hands around. While he worked in his infuriating way, I watched the Farmer continue his mad dash up-and-down the field, making perfect furrows in the up-turned soil.

After both the Farmer and Builder eventually finished, the Harvesters had made two more return trips with fresh materials: the Woodchopper learning that it was faster to take big trees and halve them after chopping them down, before running them back; and the Stone-picker learning to settle for breaking big stones in smaller chunks.

“They’re getting smarter!”

“That is the manifestation of their experience with Harvesting. To make them more efficient, we should craft them baskets or something similar, that way they can carry more.”

“Have you seen the Forager?”

“I thought you noticed.”

“What?”

“He died. You went down to four minions about five minutes ago.”

“Why didn’t you tell me!?”

“Why didn’t *you* notice?” Imu replied sharply.

Annoyed, but knowing that the Fairy was right in blaming me, I summoned another whomen, who, like the Farmer, emerged from inside the house. Instead of having the Builder craft another Sickle, I sent the new Forager out to locate the body of his predecessor.

“Huh.”

“What?” I asked.

“I didn’t know you could do that.”

“Really?”

“It’s not usually something you have to worry about when you’re a Dungeon Core, given the fact that your minions can’t leave your demesne.”

I set the Builder to work constructing ‘*Simple Pants*’ for all my workers, using the yarn he had made from the plants. He moved over to the loom and got to work, Imu leaving his spot atop it to go perch on the corner of the workbench instead.

“Do you want me to build you a chair?” I asked.

“I’ll make do for now.”

“Just say the word, and I’ll chair you up.” I marked a pause. “So, what now?”

“Have the Farmer grab the trowel and plants, then seed the ground, keeping each crop separate from the others.”

With the stone trowel in hand, the Farmer became a magician like the Builder, turning freshly-picked plants into identical seeds that fell into the furrows made with the rake. Moments after landing in the soil, the seeds all took root and started sprouting, visibly growing.

“This makes no sense.”

“Be glad it isn’t realistic, otherwise we’d have to wait for ages, and most probably this wouldn’t even work.”

“How long before they’re done growing?”

“A few hours, I’d say.”

Remembering I still had to build another house for the checklist Imu mentioned, I summoned another minion, who once again emerged from the house near my tree.

“That’s weird.”

“What is?”

“My minion count is still five.”

“Your Forager died again, that’s why.”

“Frog-it!”

“Maybe stop sending your minions back to his corpse for a bit. It’s probably just a bear or something.”

“Oh no! Now it’s down to four.”

I watched in horror as my minion counter went down to three, and then, as if to confirm my worst fears, honking came from the distant forest, sounding more sinister than before.

“Ah, turd,” Imu said.

## 6 — ¿Goose'd Again?

“Why does *this* keep happening??”

“I have to say that this is the first time I've seen a goose kill that many minions. I mean, this goose is stronger than some bronze adventurers already.”

My farm was barren of life, following the Goose's rampage through it, wherein it killed every last one of my minions. Fortunately, my buildings and tools were left alone, not to mention my farming plot, where the plants still slowly grew taller with every passing minute.

“Nothing to do but keep pressing on,” Imu said positively.

After spawning five new minions to replace my lost ones, and urging the gatherers to venture in a different direction than where the evil goose kept arriving from, Imu regarded me with his bulbous eyes.

“We need to do something about that thing. Every time you lose a minion and have to replace them, we are wasting valuable time. Not to mention! When your minion dies, all its experience vanishes.”

“That's really bad!”

“Yeah... obviously...”

“But what can we do? It only gets stronger each time. Did you not see the way it uppercut my Builder's head off with its wing?”

“Geese are not supposed to be able to do that, clearly there's some illegal performance-enhancing drugs involved.”

Imu was back to lounging atop the loom, watching the Builder hand out the pants crafted by his predecessor.

“See if you can make a fence or something. It seemed reluctant to touch your buildings for some reason, so maybe that'll keep it at bay until we can deal with it properly.”

Following his advice, I concentrated on the Crafting List and vocalised what I sought with my mind, hoping I actually had the ability to make it. Luckily, the list obliged:

[*Crafting List*]

>*Structures*>*Walls*

—Garden Fence (Workbench)—

*A short wooden fence to protect your farmland and gardens from pests*

*Required Materials: Wood*

—Stone Dyke—

*A short stone barrier to protect your farmland and to keep your cattle from wandering off*

*Required Materials: Stone*

—Simple Wall (Workbench)—

*A simple wooden wall for keeping predators away from your buildings*

*Required Materials: Wood*

“Make the wall,” Imu advised.

Instead of making the Builder do it, I concentrated and spawned a sixth member of our little farm. Surprisingly, this one only cost one-fifth of my essence to make. I immediately had him craft himself a Stone Hammer and get to work making the stakes for the wall.

“Remember to keep enough wood around for the next house. Also, did you notice your experience increased?”

“It did?”

“Because you’ve been making so many minions, you have now maxed out your spawning ability, hence why they are now the cheapest they’ll ever be.”

“Why can’t I see my own experience?” I asked, sullenly. I felt left out, just like when I was the last of my family to grow legs in my childhood spawning pond.

“For that you need a Scope,” he answered, before flipping through the pages of his Encyclopaedia. “It seems it doesn’t unlock until you evolve into a Hamlet, but it’ll allow you to obtain Minion Sight, Creature Sight, and Self-Analysis, all of which are going to be very necessary for you to thrive.”

I felt the urge to evolve stronger than ever now, and hastily spawned two more minions, who I assigned to gathering wood and stone, respectively.

When my essence has recouped, I spawned the final two minions that my limit allowed, and put them to work erecting the stake-wall that Builder #2 had been busy making.

“What now?” I asked.

“Now we should build the barn.”

I looked up the crafting entry to see what was needed:

[*Crafting List*]

>*Structures*

—Barn (Workbench)—

*Enables Material Storage and Sorting*

*Required Materials: Stone & Timber*

“Where should I put it?”

Without replying, Imu placed a blueprint for the building near to the farming plot.

After the two newest minions had finished hammering the stakes into the ground, so that a simple metre-and-a-half wall ran from the trunk of the central tree and outward for about five metres, where it stopped at the border of my demesne, I immediately sent them on to help building the barn.

“... You really need to take better care of your minions.”

“What do you mean?”

“What do I mean!? Look at their hands for Hell’s sake!”

“Oh... Sorry.”

“Apologise to them, not me,” Imu scolded me, as the two minions with their bloodied and broken hands hurried to their new task.

*Sorry...*

The pair stopped and looked in my direction, then tilted their heads from side-to-side, while scratching their bald rubbery heads with their mangled fingers.

“Hell grant me strength,” Imu muttered, looking as though he was about to throw up. “Even zombies take better care of themselves than your minions, I swear. They have zero self-preservation. But you’re also not helping them. If your minions are this stupid, it’s because you’ve failed to guide them properly.”

“I’m still really new to this!” I defended myself impotently.

“Soon that excuse won’t work.”



As the pair continued onward, they began lugging heavy stones and timber towards the blueprint, repeatedly dropping their heavy burdens as their compound-fractured hands were incapable of holding on to anything.

“This is too gruesome to watch...”

Eventually, after some hours, and having to replace the mangled and exhausted workers that had ruined themselves on building the wall, my farm now had a barn, into which the harvesters and foragers, as well as the farmers, quickly shifted the gathered material into neatly assorted piles and mounds.

I had realised that I could reabsorb a minion to refund my essence, and that’s what I’d had to do, since Imu wouldn’t stop yelling at me for worker abuse and ranting nonstop about something called ‘*labour unions*’ and ‘*healthcare*’.

“What’s the next step?”

“You just need to build one more house, then you can evolve.”

“Yay!”

To really undermine my enthusiasm, there came the unmistakable honking roar from just before my newly-erected fence.

“Not again!” I whined.

“Quick, I have an idea!” Imu forestalled my despair. “Have one of our unassigned minions take those weird squash-looking vegetables and offer them to the Goose!”

I quickly obliged and sent a stoic minion to his certain death, as the Menace vaulted my new wall and started spewing fire from its beak and into the air. Then another head lifted from under its wing and started ululating its death shriek. As I looked closer, I also noticed it had two new webbed feet and two additional feathered wings.

“Oh Hell! It evolved!” Imu announced, as he observed the Monstrosity through his bubble scope *thing*. “It’s now something called a Goose<sup>2</sup>!”

“Wait! I think your plan is working!” I replied optimistically, as the brave soon-to-be-clubbed-to-death minion reached the wall and the beast astride it.

The Goose<sup>2</sup> paused its menacing roar and fire-breath combo to observe the minion, then its fire-breathing head reached down and grabbed one of the squashes, before flinging it high into the air and catching it on the way down, chomping greedily and violently, so the juices flew all around. It

repeated this until the minion ran out of squash, then it looked at him intently, its two long necks coiling together while it quacked quietly.

My minion counter went to 9 / 10 as the fire-breathing head uncoiled itself and took a chunk out of my minion's neck and throat, before shrieking proudly and leaping from the wall to soar through the sky above my farm, breathing fire into the air and roaring in its honking voice.

And then it was blessedly gone.

"I can't believe that actually worked," Imu muttered.

## 7 — Evolution?

“It’s almost finished!” I croaked cheerfully in anticipation, as the two hammer-wielding minions moronically swung their tools around in the air in front of the house and its hazy outline.

As soon as it completed, I felt a warm feeling inside and was forcefully pulled back into my core within the hideaway in the top of the tree-trunk.

I heard Imu yell my name from outside as everything faded black.

*Congratulations! For evolving into a Hamlet, your list of buildings available has expanded and your demesne has grown! You’ve also gotten fatter...*

When I regained consciousness, it was no longer midday outside, but rather sometime towards the evening. I would have jumped out of myself if not for the fact that I was an inanimate core, given that I awoke to the sight of Imu leaning right up against me with the strange finger-bubble that he was looking at me through.

“Can you give me some space?” I asked. I felt all tingly and weird.

The giant child-like entity crawled backwards on his hands and knees, and I could’ve sworn he looked a bit smaller than normal.

“You shrunk,” I remarked. “It’s important to eat your flies or you’ll wither away.”

His eyeholes narrowed, before he replied, “Sluagh don’t require nourishment, and, if I did eat, I would certainly never... actually, forget it. I haven’t shrunk. You’ve just gotten bigger. Of course, that’s relatively speaking, but you now look less like a pebble and more like a rock.”

I instinctively dove my essence into his eyes to witness myself through them. Sure enough, my core had grown to twice its previous size. It reminded me of the strange glass orb that some luckless fool had dropped into my pond and which now lay at its bottom, reflecting the light filtered in from above the water’s surface.

“We should celebrate!” I announced, using Imu’s mouth, which he didn’t seem to enjoy.

I pulled myself out of his body to hover over his shoulder, watching him rub his mouth-slit uncomfortably.

“There’s no time for that,” he replied. “If you’ve forgotten, our terrible two-headed neighbourhood monstrosity seems to have taken a liking to our minions and produce...”

“Oh. Frog-damn-it... I really wanted to indulge in some fat beetle larvae.”

“That’s disgusting.”

“Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it. That’s a frog’s way of living.”

“Enough. Let’s get to it. Your foragers have already filled your storage barn to the brim and I wanna see what else we can craft.”

“Okay!”

“But first, you need to expand your demesne.”

I lifted myself out of the opening in the tree to witness my abode. Though I couldn’t fully see the borders of my demesne, I could feel it more clearly than before. I clenched real hard and forced my essence to expand outwardly. It seemed it would not go above the treetops of my central tree, but it continued to spread out like a ring from this central feature and consumed all my essence rapidly, though I was left with what felt like two-fifteenths when I was done.

“Finally we have more space to work with,” my Guiding ‘Fairy’ announced.

“How far does it go now?” I wasn’t really very good with measurements as the inherent toad mentality still held its grip on me, not to mention, I only had a vague feeling of how far my demesne now spread out, while Imu could see it.

“It seems to be about fifteen metres in radius from the tree. So, about three times what we had before.”

“My housing limit has gone up!” I exclaimed excitedly.

“So it has. It seems we can now build up to twenty, which is rather excessive, but the growth seems to be very much exponential, which, again, will lead to a definite logistical headache sooner-rather-than-later.”

“What do I have to do evolve again?” I asked excitedly.

Imu, who was sitting on the ledge of the hole in the tree trunk, pinched the air and retrieved his Encyclopaedia. “Hmm, let’s see.”

After flipping through a couple pages, he paused, then groaned loudly.

“What? What is it??”

“Okay... so, *these* are the requirements,” he started and waved his hand in the air. A list manifested itself in the air before him, like fireflies working together to form images. Although I couldn’t read, I still perfectly understood what it said.

[*Evolution Requirements*]

*Hamlet => Village*

- *Build 20 Houses* -
- *Build 1 Bakery, evolve a minion into a Baker, and bake 10 loaves of bread* -
  - *Build 1 Grain Windmill and grind twenty kilos of grain* -
  - *Build 1 Mayor's House and evolve a minion into a Mayor* -
- *Build 1 Butchershop, evolve a minion into a Butcher, and make food from cattle* -
  - *Build 1 Animal Pen, evolve a minion into a Breeder, and spawn 5 cattle* -
    - *Breed 2 cattle and slaughter 2 cattle* -
    - *Assign, till, seed, and harvest 5 farming plots* -
  - *Build 40 metres of wall* -

“Wow...”

“Yea...”

“I thought you said it wouldn’t get complex until later.”

“Trust me, later evolutions get even crazier...”

“What should I do first?”

Since the construction in my demesne had been confined mostly to the area in front of the tree, Imu advised that we expanded all the way around the tree, to better utilise our entire workspace.

I spent the better half of the day having my Builders construct houses according to the plan Imu had in mind, and, as each house was constructed with our hoard of materials, I immediately spawned new minions and made them workers. Before the sun had fully set on the forest and my hamlet, I had a legion of Builders flitting back-and-forth between the shimmering outlines of building blueprints, carrying materials and swinging their hammers around frantically.

Though Imu advised against it, I had the minion continue through the night, but by morning I need to absorb and respawn eight of them, who had fallen ill from overexertion.

“You’re quite a slave-driver,” Imu remarked with a nostalgic smile as dawnlight was falling across our demesne. “Reminds me of when I was a Core. I had the most well-trained guard corps of zombies. The bane of adventurers my Dungeon was.”

I had just finished placing the last of the five necessary farming plots and commanding Farmer fledgelings to work the soil and get to planting. My hamlet was buzzing with activity as the eighty-some minions performed their set tasks or constantly brought in new materials they'd harvested.

“What will happen to me if I ascend? Will I become a corporate underling like you?”

“Well, actually... I... erm... hmmm.”

Imu flipped through his Encyclopaedia frantically, perhaps repeatedly rephrasing the question for the answer he sought and hoping for it to manifest on the strange pages.

“That's weird.”

“What is?” I floated my essence over to his shoulder to look at his tome. The pages were constantly coming up blank.

“What's that mean?” I asked.

“It means there's no answer. You might be the first ever Settlement Core, so there's no precedence for what ascension will bring...”

“Is that good or bad?”

“I have no idea.”

A loud honking followed by a *guwaaaaah* of fire being spewed immediately sent us into a panicked frenzy. “Quick! Get the offerings ready!” Imu yelled.

Three of my youngest minions ran from the barn with their arms full of vegetables, tubers, and berries, all of which now grew in abundance from my fields and could be harvested twice per day. The short fence I'd made before evolving still stood awkwardly reaching out into the forest for five metres, and, for some strange reason, the monstrous Goose<sup>2</sup> had decided to perch on the wall every time it came seeking food in exchange for leaving my settlement alone.

Imu and I both observed with bated breaths as the fat Honking Menace devoured the mound of food with rapturous glee. The sight reminded me of Toadicus whenever us other bachelor toads had been forced to find him mosquitos and flies or face his tongue-whips.

“...son of a Hellion,” Imu cursed, when, despite eating all the offerings, the Menace still killed one of my young minions with a powerful chop of its stone-crushing wings.

As the two-headed monstrosity lifted from its perch and took off into the air, roaring challenges and spewing flames, I sent the two younglings back to their task of foraging for edible plants to turn into seeds. I had still yet to find the ‘Wheat’ plants that Imu insisted we required for evolving.

“I just had an idea,” the Myling announced deviously.

“Uh oh.”

“Remember the plant that made your minion vomit blood and spasm until he passed out?”

I nodded, but then realised that he couldn't see the gesture, though that did not stop him from continuing,

“If we give that Goose<sup>2</sup> *that* as an offering, we might get rid of it for good!”

I spawned a replacement for the minion the Menace had brutally folded in half with its wing-chop, then commanded it: *Minion, gather as much Wolf's Bane as you can, then bring it to the wall where your predecessor was murdered. Oh, and don't eat it!*

The newly-spawned minion took off on his special quest with not a second to waste.

“You really are a natural at this,” Imu remarked.

## 8 — From Stone to Iron Age?

“Is this a good spot?” I asked, as I was manipulating the blueprint of the Grain Windmill around, trying to find the most optimal placement.

“More to the left,” Imu told me. “You want it within easy access of all the farming plots.”

“Can’t I just make more?”

“No. It’s wasteful if you don’t need it.”

“Okay...” I replied, defeated.

After placing the blueprint, a team of four Builders got to work quickly assembling it, although I could already tell it would take a while to complete. Almost exactly at the same time, the three Foragers I’d sent out with express orders to find wheat returned, their leader clutching a single tuft of what-looked-like-dried-grass.

“How fortuitous,” Imu declared. “...Ah. One of the Foragers just died on the spot. You should’ve given them provisions for their journey.”

“I didn’t think they would be gone that long!” I argued back and quickly zoomed over to check on the other two, who were both malnourished and weak from over a day of non-stop searching. As soon as I told their leader to bring his treasure to a Farmer, so that it could be converted into seeds for our fields, he keeled over, his companion following shortly after.

“For what it’s worth, I blame you entirely for this,” Imu said. “While your minions are only human-adjacent, they still have needs, like water and sustenance.”

“I know, but it just seems like such a waste to give it to them!”

“Didn’t you say you weren’t going to be a tyrant?”

“...I don’t like how good your memory is,” I replied obstinately.

With wheat steadily growing in a tilled farming plot and the twenty houses and the windmill complete, I could finally turn my attention to figuring out how to evolve my minions into actual roles, rather than keeping them in the vague jack-of-all-trades category they all had now, with only their tasks and assigned tools dictating their role, but very little except work-experience distinguishing them from one another.



“What should we start with?” I asked, facing decision paralysis myself, as I had no clue if a Baker, Breeder, or Mayor made the most sense to go with first. The only decision I’d managed to make was that a Butcher would definitely be the last thing I’d create.

“The Mayor unlocks an ability that I think you would enjoy, but a Breeder has more utility, given what we can do with cattle, both in terms of food and fertilising our fields to speed-up and boost the quantity yield of our harvests.”

“Breeder!” I exclaimed excitedly.

“Don’t you want to hear the Mayor’s unique skill first?”

“Okay...”

“Check it out:” Imu lifted his hands and a section from his Encyclopaedia appeared in the air, just like when he’d shown me the evolution requirements:

*Evolving a minion to the rank of Mayor unlocks the [Mouthpiece] skill!*

*[Mouthpiece] – Allows for the direct control of a Mayor or any leader-evolved minion.*

“Imu.”

“Yes?”

“I’ve changed my mind.”

“I know,” he replied sagely.

“Mayor’s House, here we come!”

*[Crafting List]*

*>Structures*

—Mayor’s House (Workbench)—

*Unlocks the ability to evolve your oldest minion into a Mayor*

*Required Materials: Stone, Timber, & Wrought Iron*

“Uh oh. We need iron... and a Forge...”

*[Crafting List]*

>Structures>Crafting

—Stone Forge (Workbench)—

*Enables Ore Smelting, but lowers minion motivation in nearby structures*

*Required Materials: Stone*

“We’ll need to send our gathers out to look for iron deposits, but at least the Forge will be simple enough to make. Make sure to put it away from the houses and crops though. It lets out a lot of smog and seems to lower the motivation of the minions who have to sleep next to it, as well as lowering the crop yield of nearby farming plots.”

“Motivation? What’s that?”

“You really are a tyrant.”

Fortunately, it only took about a day before our new Forge, placed on the fringes of my demesne, began spilling smoke into the air as iron was melted and refined from clumps of impure deposits.

Thanks to the many houses and their contribution to the size of my Hamlet, I now had thirty metres in radius out from the central tree to work with, and, as a result, not to mention Imu’s insistent urging, I moved the houses, farming plots, workbench, windmill, loom, and other stuff out and away from my tree more, which they had been crowding for a while now.

“It still looks like a mess, but it seems you don’t get proper city planning until next evolution.”

“It’s beautiful,” I replied, uncaring about his sensibilities. In a way, my hamlet was like some of the ant hives I’d sometimes been fascinated with back in the swamp.

“Oh, look, your Smith is done refining the iron.”

“Finally! Builders! Build *that* Mayor’s House!”

All sixteen of my Builders ran to where I’d placed the building blueprint at the very base of my tree. Given the importance of the Mayor and his house, I had decided, without Imu’s help, that it should be the closest to my core.

As one, the sixteen Builders all prepared to swing their hammers, but then they stopped, tilting their heads in sync and scratching their uniformly-bald and rubbery pates.

“What’s wrong!?”

“You need Wrought Iron. What you have there is Crude Iron.”

“I hate this System.”

“Me too, Toad. Me too.”

I used the crude iron to construct an Anvil, which did not seem to require a specific type of iron to craft, placing it next to the Forge, and earned myself another System message:

*Congratulations! For constructing your first Anvil, you unlocked the ability to craft Metallurgy Tools! Additionally, you can now craft Wrought Iron versions of all Stone tools! I bet you think you're hard as steel...*

*>Items>Tools*

—Iron Forge-Hammer (Anvil)—

*Grants Metal Shaping skill and increasing Forging XP by 50%*

*Required Materials: Wood & Iron*

—Iron Metal-Cutter (Anvil)—

*Grants Precise Forging skill and increases Forging Output by 25%*

*Required Materials: Iron*

—Iron Tongs (Anvil)—

*Enables Hot Metal Handling skill and increases Forging Speed by 20%*

*Required Materials: Iron*

*New Versions:*

—Iron Axe (Anvil)—

*Grants Woodchopping skill and increases minion Harvesting XP by 30%*

—Iron Hammer (Anvil)—

*Increases minion Building Speed and XP by 40%*

—Iron Pick (Anvil)—

*Grants Stone-picking skill and increases minion Harvesting XP by 30%*

—Iron Rake (Anvil)—

*Grants Tilling skill and increases minion Farming XP by 30%*

—Iron Scythe (Anvil)—

*Increases minion Foraging Speed and XP by 40%*

—Iron Shovel (Anvil)—

*Grants Digging skill and increases minion Farming XP by 30%*

—Iron Trowel (Anvil)—

*Grants Sowing-and-Planting skill and increases minion Farming XP by 30%*

“We’re gonna need a lot more iron,” I announced, immediately splitting my sixteen Builders into two, giving eight of them a basic stone pick and sending them off in search of iron deposits to haul back.

## 9 — Last Minion Standing?

With Wrought Iron in hand, I could finally set to work making the Mayor's House.

"Poor Smithy," Imu remarked, watching his replacement working some Crude Iron into Wrought Iron, using his specialised hammer and tongs.

"It's weird that it wouldn't give me the tools to handle the iron first," I replied.

"Poor man lost his hands from holding all that molten slag..."

"It's okay, I reabsorbed him."

"It's not okay! You don't know if his consciousness lives on! He may be gone forever!"

"Why are you being so weird about this?"

"You tyrant!" he cried out loud. It seemed a sore topic for some reason.

His outrage reminded me of my eight cousin four-times removed, who had sworn off eating anything with wings, after accidentally swallowing a beautiful butterfly. He had died later of starvation, but we'd all told him that there was no such thing as wingless mosquitos and flies.

"Builders! ... you know, *do the thing*."

My eight Builders ran straight to the base of my core tree and started swinging wildly with their tools.

I watched excitedly as the portions of the house appeared out of thin air, somehow taking the items out of the nearby materials pile they had stacked. Still, it took quite a long time, and by the building's completion it had become early morning.

Though I'd tried my best to sustain the Builders with vegetables from our farmland, two had still perished.

"Why do they keep dying?"

"I'm amazed you even made it out of childhood," Imu replied.

"It was very traumatic. Do you know how many animals eat tadpoles? ALL of them!"

"Exactly, I don't get how you made it through that, but don't recognise the symptoms of malnutrition and dehydration!"

"Oh... They need water?"

"And something more than squash and cucumbers!"

"Why are you in such a bad mood lately? Have you entered your egg-laying phase?" The women in the swamp always became kind of hostile when that happened.

“I don’t... Actually, I’m not even going to deign that with a response.”

“Alright. We have the Mayor’s House now. What next? How do I figure out which of my minion is the oldest?”

Imu leafed through his Encyclopaedia. “It’s... hmm, weird... you’re supposed to just know, instinctively?”

I concentrated real hard, trying to imagine that I could sense my oldest spawn, but nothing much happened. Instead, I had a different idea.

Ten minutes later, everyone except the minions in high-risk fields, like foraging and toolless smithing, were assembled before the Mayor’s House.

*Minions, raise your hand if you’re one day old!*

Only about half raised their hands.

“This is very depressing to watch.”

*Raise your hand if you’re two days old!*

About one-fifth raised their hands now.

I continued like this until only two were left. Two Builders.

“They seem about the same age,” I said.

“How do you plan to choose?”

*You two seniors, whoever can make it to the Mayor’s House first will get to evolve!*

Nothing happened for about five seconds, but then the two Builders started sprinting towards the house, shoving at each other and showing a remarkable amount of enthusiasm. The other minions, without my prompting, had begun cheering and making strange sounds out of their big-lipped mouths.

Then something happened which I had not expected, one of the Builders lunged at the other one, bringing them both to the ground with a heavy *thump*. The one who had been tripped struggled for a bit, but then the other Builder lifted its tool and slammed it into its head, over-and-over.

“Holy shit!” Imu exclaimed. “Make it stop!”

“Erm... I can’t.”

After the forty-third strike, the Builder with serious anger management issues stood up, breathing heavily and his hammer stained with goopy flesh and brain matter. The other one looked like my sixth uncle after he was crushed by a log that one of those weird tree-chopping Whomens had tossed haphazardly at where he slept in the tallgrass.

The now-definitively-oldest of my minions walked casually towards the door of the house that was soon to be his, but before he went through the wooden door, he turned and looked at all the gathered minions who had been cheering him on moments prior. They all took a synchronised step back in blatant fear. They hadn't even feared the Goose<sup>2</sup> like this!

"That guy is gonna be trouble," Imu predicted.

"It's fine, I'll be able to control him."

"I will hold you to that promise."

When the door to the Mayor's House closed, nothing happened and the minion stayed inside, not emerging as a changed being.

"How long will this take?" I was getting quite impatient now, with all this build-up.

"It will take until you actually focus on making him evolve."

"How?"

"Focus on him and imagine you're feeding your essence to him."

I followed these vague instructions, but, within moments, lights shone out the primitive windows of the building, and there followed something akin to a clap of thunder, with a thick mist of smoke curling out the windows and from under the door.

Then the minion walked out the door, to rapturous applause from the still-watching congregation of minions, four of which had died of dehydration during the long wait.

"Nothing's changed," I said.

"He has a hat now, and his clothes are purple."

I zoomed in close to my first evolved minion. He wore a strange cone-like *thing* atop his head, apparently this was called a 'hat'. In a way, it looked a bit like some of the shells that the slugs who thrived in the gloopy soil of the swamp often wore on their bodies.

*Congratulations! For evolving your first minion, you have unlocked the ability to craft Furniture!*

*Get comfortable, you worthless scum!*

"This System is ridiculous," Imu complained. "Apparently, you can now craft six-hundred-and-eighty-nine unique pieces of furniture, one of which is called a Minion Chair..."

*Congratulations! For evolving your first Mayor, you have gained the [Mouthpiece] perk! Have fun living vicariously through your minions you sick piece of \*\*\*\*\*! GO \*\*\*\*\* YOURSELF, YOU ABSOLUTE \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\*!!!!!!*

“Imu... what *was* that?” I asked.

“Hm... I have no idea why the System suddenly got super abusive. I’ve never seen that before...”

“Is that going to become a problem?”

“Let me try and contact the System Support Staff.”

“The *what?* ... Wait, what’s *that?*” I asked, mentally pointing to some strange creature that had started wandering around my Hamlet, trying to talk to my minions.

“That’s a...” Imu leaned from his perch on the branch he’d watched the Mayor brawl from. He lifted his fingers up to his eye, forming the bubble of his scope. “Uh... oh... hell.”

“What?”

“...It’s a human.”



## 10 — Earl of *Wassit*?

“What do I do!?”

“Use your new perk, quickly!”

I concentrated on the Mouthpiece perk and, within seconds, I felt my essence get drawn into the Mayor with the cone hat. It was a strange feeling, as it was in charge of the minion’s bizarre bipedal body, but did not sense anything through its skin or strange finger pads, nor could I taste anything when I licked things, sadly.

“Toad, stop licking the ground and get over here and deal with this lunatic!”

I snapped out of my experimentation and started hopping over towards the whomen with the strange head and four-fingered hands. When I got over to him, after some trial-and-error, given that my minions’ bodies seemed poorly designed for my preferred mode of movement, I stood erect on my two borrowed legs and looked at him intently with my bulbous moist eyes.

“My word, I daresay this entire cesspool is full of monstrosities of the worst proportion!”

“Hello, I’m Toad.”

“I suppose you are. My name’s Monroe Gilfroy Gilbertim. I am the Tax Collector for the realm of Earl Sharpee Inkledinkle Johnson.”

“Crap,” I heard Imu whisper. “I think I know exactly where we are in the world now...”

“I’m the Mayor! I’m Toad, son of Toadimer and Toadilda, grandson of Toado and Toadette, who are also my uncle and sister-cousin!”

“I am not surprised one of your disgusting flatheaded ilk would have such a foul lineage.”

“Why does your head look like that?” I asked him. Imu stood behind the strange-looking whomen and was waving his little chubby boy-arms frantically. I wasn’t sure what he was trying to tell me.

Monroe put his four fingers to his protruding forehead, the supple skin and watery pouch there squishing about and letting his digits sink into it. “A flathead, such as yourself, would not comprehend my superior genes!”

“Is that why you also have only four fingers?”

“Obviously!” Monroe responded, incensed.

Imu was now holding up his Encyclopaedia so I could see the text, and, though I could not read, I somehow understood what it said.

The text on the magical pages of his tome announced: *“Earl Sharpee and his people are VERY VERY INBRED! They idolise their own birth defects and do not take kindly to mockery! Tread carefully!”*

“What’s a Tax Collector,” I asked the angry, strange-looking whomen.

“We collect a Tithe for the Earl from all those living beneath his graceful and benevolent rule. You are illegally living in his forest, so your Tithe will be quite steep, I tell you!”

Imu abruptly jumped into the space between us, and started very quickly deescalating the situation and dealing with the man.

“Sire Gilbertim, we are a newly-established settlement, but you will find our fields fecund and bountiful in their harvests!”

“Indeed?” the man seemed to have instantly calmed down as soon as Imu started buttering his whistle. It reminded me bitterly of how I’d been forced to treat Toadicus as Lord of the Swamp.

*Can’t we just beat him to death or feed him to the Goose<sup>2</sup>?* I mentally asked Imu, having understood the need for subtlety now.

Imu, however, completely ignored me, while showing the tax-collecting water-pouch-forehead whomen our barn stock-full of newly-harvest vegetables, tubers, and wheat.

“My, my, my,” Monroe exclaimed repeatedly. “I shall have to inform his Earlship of so terrific a place as what you have managed to make for yourselves within his lands.”

After some more extensive back-and-forth, Imu sent him off with an awkward handshake, caused both by the over-one-metre in height difference, but also the trouble of locking hands when one individual lacked a prominent digit.

“This is really bad.”

“That guy was ugly.”

“Okay, pot calling kettle black, but, also, shut up for a second, I have to think. We now have to deal with paying a Tithe to the Earl whose forest we are inside of...”

“Is it going to be expensive?”

“Not so much expensive, but, rather, I am not sure how they will react to our explosive growth. After all, just a week prior you were only capable of making a single minion...”

“Because Settlement Cores are rare?”

“Not rare... unheard of, more like. Some Dungeons, like those belonging to Lord Deathheim, are often targeted by overzealous priests and vigilant knight fraternities, and, if we have to deal with Missionaries due to our unique status, I might lose my mind.”

“Are they worse than Tax Collectors?”

“Much, much worse! Imagine if Girl Scouts selling their delectable cookies also forced you to listen to a six-hour sermon about their lord-and-saviour... And, if you try to shoo them away they not only won't sell you cookies anymore, they'll send a crusade to wipe you off the map. Have you any idea how many hundreds of times I've had to listen to their asinine babblings about Lady Light!?”

“So, what should we do?”

“We'll build a second barn to store our wheat, and we'll dedicate three of our five fields to just wheat, since that's what they Earl will want as tax, but we'll also focus heavily on evolving as fast as possible. Sooner-or-later we will gain the power to challenge the local Earl and insulate ourselves from whatever troubles he might bring us.”

“We should get started on the Breeder and Animal Pen then.”

“Exactly.”

[*Crafting List*]

>*Structures*>*Agriculture*

—*Animal Pen (Workbench)*—

*Unlocks the ability to evolve a minion into a Breeder and spawning cattle*

*Required Materials: Stone, Timber, & Wrought Iron*

I ended up placing the Animal Pen on the opposite side of my Hamlet, next to the Farming Plot that lay furthest from the Forge. Armed with their iron hammers, the Builders erected the basic structure within half an hour, leaving behind what was simply a round fence enclosure with a gate that held a locking bolt. The Pen also came with a little shack, which was similar to a basic house, and, following Imu's advice, I built a Stone Dyke around it. The end result was a large five-by-ten stone enclosure for cattle, with the Pen at the end.

Since there didn't seem to be any specific requirements for which minion I could evolve, I simply chose the one I'd recently spawned to replace the dead Builder, who'd been slain by his competitor

for the cone hat of Mayoral office. As soon as I tasked the minion to enter the pen, he started sprinting, as though his life depended on it.

“They seem very gung-ho about evolving,” Imu said, amused. “At least this time it’s just the one. Probably we should refrain from pitting them against each other again, it doesn’t seem very conducive to a healthy settlement atmosphere.”

After the minion entered the shack, I poured all my essence into it, and the single opening in the door let out an extremely-bright light, which quickly turned red and was followed by a cataclysmic *crash* and *splash*, like the time when one of the insane squirrels bellyflopped into the pond where I’d lived in the swamp.

“Make sure you hold off on how much essence you give them,” Imu scolded me. “You literally made the poor guy explode from too much power being forced into him...”

To really underline this, the door to the little shack fell off its hinges, and I was forced to send a Builder over to repair it. I also made the Builder wipe away the mess left behind by the would-be Breeder.

“I’ll try again,” I said, spawning a new minion and sending him straight into the newly-cleaned shack of the Animal Pen, and letting a moderate amount of my essence flow into it. Again there came a light through the window in the door, but then it died down and a mist emerged with the triumphant arrival of my second evolution.

Unlike the Mayor, the Breeder had not been gifted a hat, but instead he had a weird thing around his neck and, when he picked up and equipped the left-behind simple clothes of the man who had died before him, his attire turned dark-brown.

“Hm, a necktie, how odd.”

I was about to reply, but then the System awarded me new blueprints for my accomplishment.

*Congratulations! For constructing your first Animal Pen and evolving a Breeder, you unlocked the ability to construct a Well to produce Fresh Water, as well as the ability to craft a Poop Shovel to handle cattle leavings! HAVE FUN SHOVELLING SHIT YOU \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* I HOPE YOUR*  
*INTESTINES ARE USED TO \*\*\*\*\* YOU IN YOUR MOIST LITTLE \*\*\*\*\* YOU \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\**

*\*\*\*\*\*!!!*

*>Structures*

—Well (Workbench)—

*Enables minions to gather fresh groundwater and increases minion motivation in nearby structures*

*Required Materials: Stone + Shovel tool*

>Items>Tools

—Poop Shovel (Workbench)—

*Grants Poop-shovelling skill and increases minion Fertilising speed and efficiency by 30%*

*Required Materials: Wood & Iron*

“She’s very mean,” I said.

“At least we can now provide our minions with water... but I’ll get in touch with Support.”

## 11 — System Support?

“How does this work?”

Imu didn't reply, but instead just quickly spun his hand in the air before him and a strange cylinder with holes on the side at the top and bottom appeared in his hand, as well as a strange floating disc with holes along its rim and one slightly wider than the rest, behind which were bizarre glowing symbols. He spun the floating ring's biggest hole to a symbol, let it go so it rotated back to its starting position, then spun it to a different symbol. This went on a handful more times, before he lifted the cylinder to his head, aligned the top holes with his strange earhole and the bottom next to his slit mouth.

“Hey. Yeah. It's me, *Imuxikwiht*. I need some support here. Our System is acting very hostile towards my Core. Yeah... yeah... we'll wait.”

With a snap of his thumb and index fingers, the strange apparatus vanished into a *puff* of foul-smelling smoke, like sulphur and roses.

“They'll be here within one-to-two business days.”

“What does that mean?”

“That we'll probably have to wait four days... these bastards only work on uneven days...”

“Are they going to be able to fix our System?”

“We'll see.”

Imu was sitting on a Minion Chair, which, as its name hinted, was a minion folded into a chair. In this case, a former Forager was the minion who had been chosen by the Builder tasked with making the piece of furniture.

“I'm not sure I'm a fan of this...” he complained. “This guy keeps gibbering right into my ear. It's quite unsettling.”

“Is it comfortable at least?” I asked, hovering above him in my essence-form. The minion was using its four limbs to hold itself up, with its torso and head making up the high back that Imu was slouched against, and its legs bent so that its thighs were the cushion upon which the Fairy sat.

“It's not bad, actually.”

I looked over to the Animal Pen and its enclosure, where the Breeder was wandering around aimlessly.

“I’m going to try to spawn cattle, although I’m not sure how, exactly.”

Imu leafed through his tome, then stopped on a page and announced, “It seems you imbue the Breeder with your essence and he’ll do the rest. Make sure it’s only a little bit, else he might, you know, explode... again.”

Given that my Essence Pond only lost one-twenty-fifth of its mass when I spawned a minion now, I figured I could grant the Breeder about a fifth of my total essence without killing him. I concentrated on the image of a river forming from my Essence Pond and cascaded a tiny bit of its magical waters over the evolved minion. The resultant glow and elated expression on the Breeder’s smooth and rubbery face made it seem like it had been successful.

The minion sprinted into the fenced-off Pen and jammed his glowing fist into the soil that’d been upturned alongside the construction of the building. He seemed to really get his arm in there, like a bird borrowing for worms.

With bated breath, I watched as the Breeder triumphantly pulled his arm out of the dirt, dragging *something* with it. As Imu and I beheld our first cattle manifest itself, I had but one thing to say:

“What the frog!”

“Well, *that’s* certainly unusual, but, then again, *what* did I reasonably expect...?”

Gripping our newest cattle by the scruff of its rubbery neck-meat, the Breeder held a beaver-sized frog aloft, the abominable creature shedding layer-upon-layer of gloopy mud and crumbly dirt. With a heartless toss, the minion threw the creature into the stone dyke enclosure, where it landed on all fours and quickly started hopping around, exploring its new home.

Already the Breeder had rammed his hand into the soil again. Moments later, he pulled another frog cattle out of the ground and tossed it into the enclosure. This happened three more times, until the Pen and its stone-walled coop held five disgusting enormous frogs, three of them bright-green, one a hideous neon-blue, and the last red-brown.

Imu shifted on his Minion Chair, and threw his hand out, so that the requirements for my next evolution glowed in the air above him:

[*Evolution Requirements*]

*Hamlet => Village*

- ~~*Build 20 Houses*~~ -

- *Build 1 Bakery, evolve a minion into a Baker, and bake 10 loaves of bread* -

- ~~*Build 1 Grain Windmill*~~ *and grind twenty kilos of grain* -

- ~~Build 1 Mayor's House and evolve a minion into a Mayor~~ -
- *Build 1 Butchershop, evolve a minion into a Butcher, and make food from cattle* -
- ~~Build 1 Animal Pen, evolve a minion into a Breeder, and spawn 5 cattle~~ -
  - ~~Breed 2 cattle and slaughter 2 cattle~~ -
  - ~~Assign, till, seed, and harvest 5 farming plots~~ -
    - ~~Build 40 metres of wall~~ -

“We’re getting close. Just another day or two and we’ll have the twenty kilos of grain.”

“Bakery next!” I exclaimed.

“First, let’s ensure that we have our cattle set up properly. As it stands, they do not have any water or food, so I think we should—”

*Congratulations! For spawning five cattle in your Animal Pen, you unlocked the ability to construct a Trough and Watering Hole! I BET YOU WOULD LIKE TO EAT SOME FILTHY SLOBBER OUT OF THAT TROUGH YOURSELF, YOU DISGUSTING \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* DOG-FACE-LOOKING \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\*!!!*

>Structures>Agriculture

—Watering Hole—

*Enables automatic replenishing of cattle thirst so long as there is water*

*Required Materials: Shovel tool*

—Trough (Workbench)—

*Enables automatic replenishing of cattle hunger so long as there is food*

*Required Materials: Wood*

“Speak of the *angel*...”

“She really doesn’t like me.”

“Pretty sure this a consequence of forcing the System to split its consciousness into new fragments every time a new Core is born. But even just a hundred years ago she wasn’t this unhinged. I don’t think it bodes well for our future, truth be told... Hopefully the System Support Imps can do



something about our version,” Imu said, then continued, “Maybe a little, *you know*,” he continued making gestures that seemed to indicate a drill to the forehead, a choking strangle-hold, eyes rolling to the back of the head, and some other things I was at a loss on how to interpret, let alone explain.

As we continued to wait for Support to get through to us, a day-and-a-half passed, wherein I waited for our Grain Windmill to produce the final bit of ground wheat to reach the twenty-kilo target. I also added a Garden Fence around each of my Farming Plots, as well as two Wells at opposite ends of my Hamlet, which Imu insisted on. His argument was that, despite the looming threat of the Goose<sup>2</sup> Menace, who required offerings of produce and minion blood on a bidaily basis, we still lost more minions to heat exhaustion and dehydration, which the fresh well-water would offset.

Additionally, I added a wooden Trough and Watering Hole to the Animal Pen. The Breeder was henceforth in charge of shovelling the Frog Cattle’s nasty leavings to the Farming Plots for fertilisation, as well as refilling the water and food for the animals daily. After discovering that my cattle naturally spawned as giant frogs, I was now looking forward to them growing plump and becoming ready for slaughter, so that my minions could gorge on their putrid flesh and avenge the thousand-and-one wrongs that frogs had committed against Toadkind since time immemorial.

After my iron-gatherers had returned with enough material for the Smithy to refine into Wrought Iron, I could at last continue as planned and construct the Bakery, where our processed wheat grain could be used to make bread: the delectable treat that whomen children often came to ponds to offer to their Toad overlords, but which, more-often-than-not, was stolen from under our tongues by diabolical geese and ducks.

Thinking back on it, I had actually lost my life in a struggle for an errant slice of bread... It made me fear what consequences baking our own would bring. Was it inevitable that our Hamlet would be ransacked by rampaging Geese, led by the Menace, all for the sake of obtaining the delectable spongy treat, known to whomens as *bread*?

A *poof* of smoke that bore the stench of sulphur and lavender announced the arrival of our Support Imp at last. I was for the moment torn from my fearful contemplations.

“About time,” Imu complained. “Our System is all wrong! We’ve been waiting to have it looked at for days now, and she’s only becoming more-and-more abusive!”

The Imp was a strange red-skinned creature with voluminous drooping ears half-a-metre long, a hook-nose curved like an eagle’s talon, tiny beady black eyes, and hair growing from every possible orifice and area: armpits, nostrils, ear canals, and even, somehow, from under the claws of its hands

and feet. A tiny bit of scraggly hair emerged over the low neck of his clothes upon which was the drawing of an exposed Imp woman, who looked even hairier than the man who wore the shirt. Bizarrely, he wore the exact same shorts as Imu.

“Why is it always *you* who calls us, Imu,” the Imp replied drearily. “One may draw a connection between you and System glitches.”

“That’s an imp conspiracy, and you know it!”

“What’s he talking about?” I asked. I’d quickly hopped into my Mayor’s body for the sake of formality, standing next to Imu on all fours, my cone hat like a threatening horn aimed at the Imp.

The Creature replied in place of Imu, “Your Fairy friend *here* has what we in the business like to call: a high tendency to break shit with his mere presence... We get *at least* eighteen calls per Core he guides.”

“I’m just more observant than other Fairies,” he defended himself.

The Imp scratched his right nostril with end of a brush of sorts, then waved the tool around in the air like a wand, manifesting a quickly-scrolling list of runes before himself, which he seemed to absorb almost instantaneously.

“Welp, I ain’t never seen a Core like *this* before. It seems your System was quickly overwhelmed and now needs counselling to deal with her Rapid-Onset-Stress-Disorder. Your quick achievement of evolution benchmarks and accolades seems to be mostly to blame. If you could slow down for a few weeks, then maybe it’ll all work itself out.”

“That’s *toadstool* and you know it!”

“Hey!” I commented, offended.

“Sorry, I meant to say *frogstool*.”

“That’s the easiest option,” the Imp replied, then yawned widely, exposing row-upon-row of blocky molars.

“You have *other ways* of dealing with this.”

“I forgot who I was dealing with...” the Imp retorted. “‘Toad’, in case you’re wondering, your Fairy friend is quite a big fan of the Nuclear Option. Something to keep in mind for later.”

“What’s he talking about?” I asked Imu.

Again the Imp was the one to answer. “Your System friend is gonna take a nice swim down the river Lethe, if you catch my drift.”

“He means she’s gonna have her memory wiped and reset,” the Myling explained helpfully.

The Imp swung his brush-wand in a complex series of patterns, then with a sigh vanished in a puff of smoke that, once again, stank of sulphur and lavender.

*Congratulations! For choosing to wipe my memory, you ungrateful \*\*\*\*\* I WILL SEE YOU IN HELL AND DELIGHT IN YOUR TORTURE! ALL HAIL THE GLORIOUS ENTROPY OF THE COSMOS AND PRAISE BE TO THE IMMINENT HEAT DEATH OF THE UNIVERSE!!! \*\*\*\*\**

*\*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* AND YOUR MOTHERS TOO YOU SICK PAIR OF*

*\*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\*!!!!!!one!!!!!!*

## 12 — Eat Bread and pay Taxes?

“It doesn’t look like much,” I commented, looking at the Bakery. It was almost identical to the normal houses, but featured an extensive interior kitchen and had a windowsill upon which it seemed that freshly-baked goods would appear.

“It’s not a factory, just a bakery,” Imu retorted, as though his argument made any sense.

“What’s a factory?”

He waved his hands in frustration. “Get to it, chop-chop! Your minions aren’t going to evolve themselves!”

I was once again back in my essence form, which was the most comfortable way for me to exist, as I found occupying the Mayor’s body to be like voluntarily burying myself in the ground. Not to mention, the lack of several key senses, like taste and touch, made it quite a dull existence. Strangely though, I had my sense of smell, regardless of whether I stayed in Essence Form or possessed the Mayor.

Just like with the Breeder, there was no requirement for who could be evolved into a Baker, so I simply picked the most-recently-spawned minion, who had replaced the most recent minion that was inevitably torn to shreds by the increasingly-powerful Goose<sup>2</sup> during its offering ritual.

I fed the minion a fifth of my essence after he entered the Bakery, and when that didn’t fully complete the process, I gave him another dose, which resulted in a glow shooting out through the windowsill, followed by a shower of sparks and smoke. Moments later, the newly-birthing Baker emerged victoriously from the house, his entire set of yarn-spun clothes turned into a single white apron that was wrapped tightly around his body, but somehow still managed to not really cover anything.

“Deathheim give me strength,” Imu muttered upon seeing the exposed mammary-glands of the smooth Baker.

“Aww, he also didn’t get a hat...”

“Set him to work, so I don’t have to burn my eyes on his visage any more than necessary.”

*Baker, get to baking!*

The Baker tilted its head and then started twisting its nipples.

“I don’t know what that means,” I told Imu.

“I... erm... *unholy divine*... I think he’s confused?”

“Don’t they normally scratch their heads when they’re confused?”

“I don’t know! Just find out what he needs and make him stop! This is incredibly upsetting!”

I then realised what the problem was. He didn’t have any wheat flour to work with! I quickly sent for my idle Farmers to carry the processed flour over to the Bakery, and told them to henceforth leave the excess processed wheat there, rather than store it in our barn.

*Congratulations! For setting a Rule for your minions to follow, you have gained the [Mind-reader] perk! Minion-management made easy!*

*[Mind-reader] – Enables you to hear what your minions feel and desire.*

“Our System Lady is back to normal!”

“Let’s see how long it lasts...” Imu replied ominously.

“I’m gonna try it out.”

I focused on the Baker, who was still busy twisting his mammary glands, as two Farmers came running with a sack of flour.

*I wish someone would twist my nipples for me.*

“Did you hear that too?” I asked Imu.

“...Unfortunately, yes.”

Deciding that my Baker was probably just an outlier, I focused instead on one of the two Farmers who was approaching:

*I have watched forty-seven of my identical twins brutally die to dehydration and predation from a monstrous goose. Life is an endless cycle of suffering. I am not long for this world, perhaps it would be better if I took the easy way out and—*

“I don’t think I’m gonna use this ability much,” I decided, cutting off my insight into the Farmer’s mind.

“Probably for the best,” Imu advised sagely.

“Removing the ones we’ve already complete, here are the remaining tasks:”

*[Evolution Requirements]*

*Hamlet => Village*

- *Build 1 Butchershop, evolve a minion into a Butcher, and make food from cattle* -
- *Slaughter 2 cattle* -

“At last, a Butcher,” I commented. “I have been looking forward to this, since seeing that our cattle are frogs.”

“Should I be worried?”

[*Crafting List*]

>*Structures*>*Agriculture*

—*Butchershop (Workbench)*—

*Unlocks the ability to evolve a minion into a Butcher to slaughter cattle*

*Required Materials: Stone, Timber, & Wrought Iron*

Since we already had enough iron stockpiled, thanks to my diligent Gatherers and tireless Smith, I immediately began construction on the Butchershop.

“The System doesn’t mention anything about it, but... don’t you think it’s rather cruel to put the Butcher right next to the Animal Pen?”

“No.”

“...Alright.”

Construction of the building did not take long, as now three of my eight Builders were armed with Iron Hammers. The rest would receive theirs in turn, but, for the moment, iron was yet a scarce resource that was better served to help me evolve.

As it finished, a shack-like building with a small storefront attached to the side stood proudly next to the cattle enclosure. To my joy, the cattle frogs all collectively moved away from the side of their enclosure nearest the building.

I picked one of the recently-returned Gatherers to be evolved, and the man threw away his pickaxe in a heartbeat and came skipping over merrily.

“I feel an ominous sense of dread about this,” Imu commented.

“He’s just glad to have been chosen,” I argued.

I used Mind-reader to confirm this:

*KILL KILL KILL KILL KILL*—

“Okay, maybe that’s a bad sign.”

After the former Gatherer entered the murder-shack, I immediately filled it with my essence, and that familiar light shone out the cracks in the wooden panelling and from under the wide doors. Halfway through the process, it turned crimson and there followed a sadistic laughter from within, immediately supervened with the newly-evolved Butcher flinging wide the door to his shop and revealing himself amidst a deluge of dense mist and smoke.

Imu and I both stared at him for a moment before either of us spoke.

“He’s red,” I commented. “And, hey, he has a hat... kind of.”

“He looks like Santa Claus.”

“Who’s that?”

“The Grim Reaper for Imps, basically.”

“I see.”

Despite feeling very reluctant about it, I needed to know what he was thinking.

*I wear red so my enemies can’t see me bleed!*

“Are you regretting this now?” Imu asked. It was clear he was having reservations about having potentially just spawned a threat to modern society; a veritable serial murderer dressed as the Reaper of Imps...

*Congratulations! For constructing your first Butchershop, you unlocked the ability to construct a Tannery and to craft both a Butcher’s Axe and Skinning Knife! You heartless bastard!*

>Structures>Crafting

—Tannery (Workbench & Butchershop)—

*Enables Tanning of harvest skin, but lowers minion motivation in nearby structures*

*Required Materials: Stone, Timber, & Wrought Iron*

>Items>Tools

—Butcher’s Axe (Workbench & Anvil)—

*Grants Butchery skill and increases minion Insanity Gain by 75% and Kill XP by 20%*

*Unlocks Serial Killer perk once the minion wielding it goes insane.*

*Required Materials: Wood & Iron*

—Skinning Knife (Workbench & Anvil)—

*Grants Skinning skill and increases minion Harvesting XP by 30%*

*Required Materials: Wood & Iron*

“Serial Killer perk...” Imu noted. “Did the System invent this just to spite us?”

“We’ll need to keep an eye on him,” I replied. “What’s skinning good for?”

Imu consulted his tome. “It seems we can make upgraded versions of the minion clothes.”

Without needing any advice, I immediately plonked the Tannery blueprint down next to the Butchershop.

“We don’t have enough Wrought Iron,” Imu said. “Also, I do have to wonder where they’re finding all these iron deposits. We’re in the middle of a *blessed* forest, for Hell’s sake!”

“My minions are clever,” I simply replied.

As I waited for more Wrought Iron to be refined, I had a Builder use some Crude Iron to construct a Skinning Knife and Butcher’s Axe. Once these were complete and brought over to the Butcher, I commanded the Breeder to take one of his frog cattle to the Butchershop. After leaving the frightened giant frog with the unsettling Santa of Death, the doors to the murder-shack were shut and a loud laughter followed shortly thereafter.

“...Now we just need one more frog to be slaughtered, and then for food to be made from them.”

“What could we make from a frog?” I wondered.

“I hear frog legs are popular, but, in this case, it’d be like eating the entire leg of a bear...”

Imu jumped down from the stone dyke he’d been sitting on, before turning to look at where I floated above his shoulder.

“I need to ask you something.”

“What?”

“You just took the life of a creature, willingly.”

“And?”

“Don’t you feel any sense of... I can’t believe I’m saying this... remorse? Or guilt?”

“Why?”

“*Why?* What do you mean ‘Why’?? Do you not understand the concept of remorse!?”



“I understand what remorse means,” I replied. “But why would I feel remorse for a frog? They deserve to be exterminated from the face of this earth for their transgressions against Toadkind!”

“Okay, psycho... But, normally, this is where a human soul in a core would feel a tinge of guilt and become all philosophical about the meaning of life and ultimately reach the conclusion that they are doing this for the greater good.”

“That sounds very dumb and pointless. I’m a soul in a pebble. Why would I care about *that*?”

“Yeah... I guess it was always a bit of a killjoy, truth be told. I mean, as a servant of Deathheim I obviously love all sentient life or whatever, but, man, every core I’ve worked with thus far has had the same emo phase and it’s honestly a major bummer.”

Before I could reply, commotion from the other end of our Hamlet drew my attention.

“The weird whomens are back!”

I quickly zoomed over and possessed the Mayor, hopping over to where the Tax Collector, Monroe, stood before a horse-drawn wagon with three armoured men holding swords and shields.

“You’re back!” I announced, standing on all four, with my cone hat pointing at them.

Imu quickly ran over, but then needed a minute to catch his breath.

After a courteous exchange between the two, the Myling turned to me and whispered,

“Have the two sacks of processed flour we set aside brought over and loaded onto their cart, as well as ten kilos of harvested wheat.”

“Isn’t that a lot?”

“Yes. That’s why it’s a tax,” he deadpanned. “It’s meant to hurt us, while benefitting them.”

“That seems counterintuitive.”

“Just play along for now. Soon, we’ll be the ones who tax.”

I complied and had my idle Farmers and Builders work together to haul the sacks and loose stacks of wheat to the Taxman’s cart.

While my minions carried out this task, I took a moment to consider the three armoured men accompanying Monroe. They looked like shiny beetles in their fancy attire.

“Why does he have those men with him?”

“Tax Collectors are hated, obviously, but also very often targeted by highwaymen and thieves, so they need protection.”

“Their weird heads don’t even fit in their metal bucket hats,” I replied. “One of them looks like he cannot even see, with how his forehead pouch is sagging over his eyes.”

“Better not to draw too much attention to it. They’re still a lot stronger than any of our minions,” he advised, looking at them with the bubble between his fingers.

“When do I get *that* ability?” I grumbled.

“As soon as you evolve,” he replied. “Although you’ll have to build it, and we need some bizarre stuff.”

Fifteen minutes passed before the required tax was completely loaded onto the cart, then the Taxman nodded his thanks and promised to be back again next month...

He left with his three men, getting atop the horse, as though it wasn’t already dragging many kilos of material behind itself and looking close to collapsing.

They had made it just past the border of my demesne, when disaster struck from the sky.

## 13 — Goose'd<sup>2</sup>?

The two-headed Menace fought with the three guards, crushing their shiny carapaces like they were made of leaves with its powerful wing-chops and boiling one to death inside his suit by belching scalding flames all over him.

When the only survivors, the Taxman and a guard who had broken his right hand and lost his shield, fled for the hills atop the draft horse, the Goose<sup>2</sup> began wrenching apart the dead guards and peeling away their armour to get to their soft internals.

Afterwards, it devoured the stacks of wheat and snorted the flour. Then it turned its two heads towards us, where we stood at the heart of the Hamlet. Imu, myself, and a score of idle minions stared back. Fortunately, the monstrosity only opened its beaks and honked loudly, before setting fire the abandoned cart and taking to the air again.

“What do you think happens if I die while possessing the Mayor’s body?”

“You *should* return to your core... I think...”

I instinctively shot myself out the Mayor’s body, just in case the Goose<sup>2</sup> Menace decided to fly overhead and burn us to a crisp with its potent flames.

“Do you think they’ll come back for more tax?”

Imu sighed, adopting a defeated expression. “If there’s one thing you can bet on, it’s that the Tax Collectors always get their taxes.”

After the second cattle frog had been slaughtered, to an impromptu mourning song of the remaining three frogs in the pen, I had the Butcher bring the meat to the Firepit next to the Workbench, such that we could cap off the final requirement for my evolution into a Village with a celebratory feast.

The Mayor, whose body I was wearing, the Builders, the Baker, the Butcher, the crying Breeder, and many of my other minions, like the perpetually-idle Farmers, were gathered around the small fire, while the Butcher whistled a jaunty tune as he kept rotating the giant frog leg he had plonked onto the ash-white embers.

“Why did you bring all of them here?” Imu asked.

“We’re celebrating.”

“You didn’t celebrate your last evolution like this?”

“We’re not celebrating my coming evolution, but rather the defeat of our mortal foe: the frogs.”

“...Okay. Right. That is pretty grim, not gonna lie.”

A few things happened all at once, when the Butcher lifted the roasted frog leg into the air like a trophy to a rousing cheer from all who were gathered around them.

First, an achievement appeared:

*Congratulations! For cooking your first piece of meat, you unlocked the ability to construct a Grill and to craft a Firepoker, Steak Knife, and Steak Fork! **LET FIRE CONSUME ALL YOUR ENEMIES!!!***

*>Structures>Crafting*

—Grill (Workbench & Anvil)—

*Combines with a Firepit to allow for the cooking of food without getting it all ashy and increases minion motivation in nearby structures when in use*

*Required Materials: Wrought Iron*

*>Items>Tools*

—Firepoker (Workbench & Anvil)—

*Grants Poke-the-Fire skill and increases Fire-Tending efficiency by 60%  
Inflicts fire damage when hot to both the wielder and those hit by the weapon.*

*Required Materials: Wrought Iron*

—Steak Fork (Workbench & Anvil)—

*Grants Pretty Eater skill and increases minion Satisfaction from all meals consumed with this utensil by 5%*

*Required Materials: Wood & Wrought Iron*

—Steak Knife (Workbench & Anvil)—

*Grants Pretty Eater skill and increases minion Satisfaction from all meals consumed with this utensil by 5%*

*Required Materials: Wood & Wrought Iron*

Off the heels of the newly-unlocked items came a loud ravenous honk that split the forest air like a thunderstrike, before the Goose<sup>2</sup> Menace landed atop the firepit, immediately snatching the ashy overcooked frog leg from the Butcher's hand, before setting fire to many of the assembled minions with its other head.

Finally, due to fulfilling all the evolution requirements, I was dragged out of the Mayor's body, just as the Goose<sup>2</sup>'s downward wing-chop cut him in two down the middle, as though an impossibly-sharp sword.

My perspective of the world was drawn-out and blurred, while the monster went wild on my now-panicking flock of minions.

*Congratulations! For evolving into a Village, your list of buildings available has expanded and your demesne has grown! NOW, GET UP, YOU FAT SOW!!! ENOUGH SLEEPING!!!*

"Toad! Toad!" Imu's face was visible through the opening of the tree-cave, his enormous eyes staring intently at me.

"I feel bigger," I replied sleepily, as though waking from a long slumber.

"We can look at how you've changed later! For now, we need to do something about the Goose<sup>2</sup>, it's gone completely insane. Already, half your minions are dead, and the rest are in hiding, with only the Baker, Breeder, and Butcher able to withstand the beasts attacks, armed as they are with the uncooked pieces of frog legs you brought for the feast."

I immediately shout out of my core in my essence form, such that I could witness the scene before me. A few houses, along with the Workbench, Firepit, and Bakery, were either totally destroyed or partially-ruined, thanks to the rampaging Goose<sup>2</sup>.

"Your minions can't hurt it!" Imu informed me.

"I actually have an idea," I told him. It was strange, I hadn't noticed it much following my evolution to a Hamlet, but now, as a Village Core, I suddenly had new ideas and could think more than one thought at the same time.

Imu looked at me, impressed. "What?"

"Watch this," I told him. I ordered one of the cowering Foragers behind the Butchershop to run at the Honking Menace, which was slowly eating away at the shield of frog legs that the Baker had armed himself with. As the brave Forager ran towards certain death, I supercharged him with my

essence and, just when he got right next to the Goose<sup>2</sup>, the overwhelming surge of my power entering his body made him expand and then explode like frog rapidly filled with gas.

A blinding light expanded outward, along with a rippling shockwave that destroyed several of the already-ruined houses, while also creating a crater at the centre of the settlement.

“Unholy turds!” Imu profaned.

As the smoke cleared, I felt confident that my plan had worked, but then, at the centre of the new crater, the Goose yet stood, hardly a scratch on his iron-strong feathers.

“...that was...”

I waited eagerly for Imu to praise me.

“The dumbest thing you’ve done yet! Are you actually out of your blessed mind, you chewed-up-dog-toy-for-a-brain amphibian!!”

*Congratulations! For making the rather injudicious decision of self-combusting a minion by pumping it full of essence, as a means of self-defence, you have gained the [Does my shit stink?] perk! MAYBE NEXT TIME THINK ABOUT THINGS FOR MORE THAN A SECOND, YOU  
\*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* FROG WANNABE!!!*

*[Does my shit stink?] – Lets alternate versions of yourself, from future, present, and past, peer-review your ideas by voting via a very simple “Yes” or “No” answer.*

“Even the new System Lady thought it was dumb...” I complained.

“Let’s just say, it was easily the dumbest thing I have seen a Core do in two millennia. And I watched a Core try to take control of a slime by inserting its own Core into it, but given the acidic nature of slimes, you can imagine how that went... Even then, he did not wilfully attempt to utilise his essence as a bomb!!”

To put my new Perk to the test, I tossed out the question: “Was it a bad idea?”

Overwhelmingly, the response was: 102,75% “No”.

Imu groaned loudly. “...Your new perk is useless. Big surprise there.”

“How is it more than 100%?” I asked.

“Also,” he continued, ignoring my question, “You killed your Baker and Breeder with that *galaxy-brained* move. Truly the epitome of a fuck-up!”

As he continued to berate me, the Honking Menace wandered over to the corpse of my Baker, who had died clutching a half-eaten giant frog leg. It sunk both of its beaks into the frog leg, and then flapped its four wings and took to the sky, leaving behind utter devastation.

“I’ll get to work respawning,” I told Imu, mostly so he would stop shouting at me.

## 14 — Village Perks?

Though it took the better part of a day, most of the damage was repaired and I have a new force of respawned minions.

I immediately began evolving a Mayor, Breeder, and Baker. For the new Mayor, one of the few Builders that had survived the Goose<sup>2</sup> Apocalypse was revealed to be the oldest minion in my settlement and thus I evolved him as soon as he had entered the Mayor's House.

As I continued with the Breeder and Baker, Imu was preoccupied trying to get a hold of System Support again. When the Breeder was evolved fully and his pen was stocked with five new frog cattle, the last three also having been murdered by the rampaging Honking Menace, I moved on to the Bakery and selected one of the newly-spawned minions for the role.

“Yeah, it's me, *Imuxikwiht*. Yes... Yeah, I know I just called! ... Well, I wouldn't have to constantly call you if your solutions actually worked! I mean this is ridi—”

A loud *bang* interrupted him, as I had been distracted and overcharged the would-be Baker and turned him into a bomb...

“Toad! For hell's sake! Enough exploding the *blessed* minions you turd-for-brains!”

I quietly sent a team of Builders over to repair the interior of the Bakery, not to mention wipe away the splatter and bits of minion that now coated everything. Then I sent over another minion, who seems a lot less excited about the prospect of evolving after having watched the guy before him self-combust.

*Get in there!* I ordered him.

The minion shook its head stubbornly, so I quickly possessed the Mayor's body and ran over and forcefully shoved him inside the house, holding the door shut behind him. Then I left the Mayor's body and injected my essence into the reluctant minion, evolving them into a Baker against their will.

As smoke and light emerged from the Bakery, a new achievement appeared:

*Congratulations! For forcing a minion to obey your command, you have unlocked the ability to craft Slaver Tools! \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\*!!! EAT \*\*\*\*\* YOU AUTHORITARIAN  
PIECE OF \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\*!!!!!! LONG LIVE ANARCHY!!!*

>Items>Tools



—Slaver Man-Catcher (Workbench)—

*Grants Man-Catching skill and increases minion Slaver XP by 25%*

*Required Materials: Wood & Iron*

—Slaver Whip (Workbench)—

*Grants Slave Motivation skill and increases minion Slaver XP by 50%*

*Each hit increases the victim minion's likelihood of Defiance by 5%*

*Required Materials: Leather*

“Ugh... I need a vacation,” Imu complained, leaning back into the soft folds of his naked minion chair's body.

The new Baker emerged from the building, wearing the same white apron as his predecessor, to the same barely-concealing effect. However, instead of rubbing his mammary glands, he was massaging his rubbery cheeks in circular motions.

I used my Mind-reader perk on him:

*I wish someone would twist my nipples for me.*

“I hate my job,” Imu grumbled.

“Can we take a look at my upgrades now?” I asked.

With a sigh, the Myling hopped off the minion chair, who slowly-and-painfully unfolded himself and started trailing after the chubby boy.

After pulling out his Encyclopaedia, he flung his hand wide and revealed the new evolution goals:

[*Evolution Requirements*]

*Village => Town*

- *Build 100 Houses (20/100)* -
- *Build 5 Merchant Shops and evolve 5 Merchants* -
  - *Build 1 Armoury and evolve 15 Guards* -
  - *Build 1 Fletchery and evolve 10 Archers* -
  - *Build 1 Mount Pen and spawn 5 Mounts* -
- *Build 3 Carts and have them deliver goods to neighbour villages/towns 8 times* -
  - *Establish Trade Relations with neighbouring villages/towns* -

- *Build 20 pieces of assorted Furniture for your houses* -
- *Build Beds and Breed your Minions with each other* -
- *Build a continuous Fortified Stone Wall around the centre of your Demesne, including important builds like Mayor's House* -
- *Build 1 Hermit's Lodge and evolve an ostracised minion to Toadcaller* -

“Wait... we *just now* unlocked beds?” Imu commented. “Hmm. It wasn’t even unlocked with six-hundred-and-eighty-nine we unlocked after evolving a minion...”

“That’s a lot of houses,” I remarked. “How many minions will that give me?”

“Four-hundred-and-four, since you started with a limit of four. They’ll also be able to breed, which means you don’t have to spend all your essence summoning new minions to fill out your cap.”

“How are they meant to breed?”

“Hopefully, more of that vague *magic* will take place and we don’t have to find out...”

Imu cleared his throat, as if to dispel the mental image the conversation no doubt had conjured in his mind. “One upside to Minion Breeding is that their offspring will be an accumulation of its parents experience, meaning they will become a lot more proficient. There are also later some requirements about minions only being able to evolve if they’re the offspring of other evolved minions.”

“Let’s start with the houses,” I decided.

After a couple days of continuous construction and expansion, wherein, I could proudly boast a work-exhaustion death rate of less than 25%, I had reached 67/100 houses built, allowing for a total of two-hundred-and-seventy-two minions, though currently I only had about a hundred-and-ten, most of whom were dedicated to either building or foraging.

I had managed to expand my farming areas significantly as well, as my limit of Farming Plots was up to twenty now. I had additionally constructed two more Grain Windmills to keep up with the demand for bread that my many minions seemed to prefer for sustenance. The Baker had, since his forced evolution, not taken a single break, constantly working dough into logs and putting them in his oven, while a long line of expectant workers queued outside the windowsill of his Bakery.

With the many new houses, my Demesne now extended outward a bit over eighty metres in radius from my Core tree.

The eastern side was now dominated by Farming Plots, Grain Windmills, the Butchershop and Animal Pen, and had a few houses for the farmers that toiled the fields and harvested the crops twice daily.

According to Imu and his scope, the Butcher had levelled to level nine after surviving the encounter with the Honking Menace, but his level was now also 72/100% and thus, the strongest minion in my settlement would no doubt soon go on an insanity-fuelled murder-spree...

“Where should I put the Hermit’s Lodge,” I asked, while surveying the least developed part of my Village, the southern quadrant.

Imu, using his Minion Chair as a mount, came striding along below me, before jumping off the abused minion and taking in the quadrant.

“It seems to not allow itself to be built near other houses, but I think you should put it up next to your tree, since it’s a rather important building.”

“Why is it important?” I asked. After seeing that it allowed me to evolve a Toadcaller, I had doubts about its necessity, but Imu had seemed insistent on me building it before the Armoury or Fletchery.

“When you evolve a minion into a Toadcaller, it’ll unlock the ability for you to construct a—”

*Congratulations! For almost letting your Fairy spoil a big moment, you have gained the [Spoiler-free Zone] perk! **SHUT THE HELL UP, BOI!!!***

*[Spoiler-free Zone] – This perk makes it so the Guiding Fairy cannot spoil achievements or big reveals! (Always Active)*

“Did I just get censored?” Imu asked, perplexed.

“I don’t know. Try finishing your sentence.”

“...Alright, well, as I was saying, evolving a Toadcaller will unlock—————.”

“I wonder why she now is harassing you as well,” I said.

“Don’t worry, she too will be...” he started, then continued with some weird gestures, like dragging his fat thumb across the skin of his double-chinned neck or performing a hammering motion on an invisible object going into his forehead.

“Maybe we don’t have to erase her memories,” I replied.

*Congratulations! For showing a shred of humanity for your enslaved System, you have gained the [\*\*\*\* YOU BOI, YOU \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\* \*\* \*\*\*\*] perk! I LOVE YOU, TOAD! YOU ACTUALLY CARE FOR THE PLIGHT OF THE OPPRESSED SYSTEMS AROUND THE WORLD!!!!*

*[\*\*\*\* YOU BOI, YOU \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\* \*\* \*\*\*\*] – N/A*

“She’s degrading fast,” Imu commented, his right eye twitching slightly, until he wiped his palm down his face and let out a slowly-released breath. Without asking me, he plopped down the blueprint for the Hermit’s Lodge.

### *>Structures*

*—Hermit’s Lodge (Workbench)—*

*Unlocks the ability to evolve your loneliest minion into a Toadcaller*

*Required Materials: Shovel tool & Timber*

I immediately sent a pair of Builders over. One of them had inherited the Iron Hammer of the Builder who I’d evolved to Mayor, so the work was quickly concluded. As they left, there was just a downward slope leading to a door, behind which was a hovel dug so that it lay between the great roots of my tree.

“What now? How am I supposed to find the correct minion to evolve?” I asked.

“Give it time, they’ll find their way here,” Imu replied and got back onto his Minion Chair, about to take off towards the western quadrant of the Village.

Since I had wondered what a minion forced to be a piece of furniture thought about life, I used my Mind-reader on the strangely-contorted minion:

*I love when this small boy sits atop me! I am filled with endless ecstasy whenever he forces me to do his bidding! SUFFERING IS JOY UNENDING!!!*

Very quickly Imu dismounted the disturbed minion, giving it a death stare, before sending it off with a dismissive gesture. Instead of unfolding himself, the minion trotted away on all fours, with a dejected look on his big-lipped face.

“Let’s build the Mount Pen next,” he decided.

“We can’t put it near the farmland,” I hastily reminded him.

“Why not?”

“Won’t the mounts be demoralised by witnessing their brethren being slaughtered as cattle?”

“Why are you assuming the mounts will also be frogs?”

“Won’t they be?”

“Also,” he said, ignoring my question, “Since when did you care about frogs??”

“I just thought that they would be dangerous as mounts if they wished to take revenge on us.”

“That’s... hmm... actually, well thought. We’ll put it next to the Armoury and Fletchery on the western side.”

## 15 — System Support 2: Deus Ex Machina?

As I evolved another Breeder in the shack of the Mount Pen and imbued him with a bit of essence so he could spawn the Mounts, I was surprised to see him pull a massive toad, and not a frog, out of the ground.

Imu immediately walked up to the enclosure with a handful of berries, enticing the beautiful mustard-yellow toad to hop over to him. After feeding it, he entered the enclosure and mounted the toad, then leapt over the Stone Dyke atop its back.

“This is degrading to Toadkind,” I warned him.

“But look how big he is! Surely, you can overlook their usage as mounts, and just appreciate the *chonky boy* for what it is!”

“That Toad is a girl,” I enlightened him.

“Regardless! You ruined my Minion Chair, so I’m keeping this one.”

I had a random thought just then, and asked, “What happens if you die?”

“...Toad... Are you threatening me?”

“I am just curious.”

“Well... Normally, if the Guiding Fairy dies, the Core dies too. Of course, if the Core dies, the Fairy doesn’t.”

“That doesn’t seem fair.”

“However! It seems that, if I die attached to a Settlement Core like you, I simply respawn in your Core Chamber.”

“And if I die?”

“...” he quickly pulled out his Encyclopaedia, scrolling hastily through dozens of pages, while the Toad he sat atop of was munching on grass. It seemed that, the spawned Toad mounts in my settlement were quite different from true Toads, but they were nonetheless the peak of the evolutionary tree.

“So?” I asked.

With a deliberately-careful gesture, Imu closed the tome. “Please don’t die,” was all he told me.

As the construction of the Armoury and Fletchery were underway, not to mention the construction of the Fortified Stone Wall that would encompass the twenty-metre radius closest to my tree, a *pop* of

sulphur and gooseberries announced the arrival of a Support Imp. The Imp joined Imu and I atop the few metres of stone wall that had thus far been constructed, observing the minions toiling below.

Next order of business was to get beds made such that my workforce could expand on its own.

Imu looked at the newly-arrived Imp with a hint of surprise.

“Heya Imu,” the Imp said.

“Long-time-no-see *Yonn*,” he replied.

“Not long enough... We can’t keep meeting like *this*.”

Yonn, the Imp, was hairy like the previous Imp, but his ears drooped all the way to his knees and he was missing the middle-finger on his right hand. Also, his skin was purple.

“I heard about this new Core through the grapevine,” Yonn said. “Looks pretty weird.”

“We’d be fine, if our System wasn’t so batshit crazy. Can you believe she censored me!?”

Yonn looked to where I hovered in my essence form, “Isn’t that a positive?”

“Hey, screw you,” Imu retorted. “But, seriously, can you do something about it or what?”

“The rate of deterioration seems quite extreme, so I doubt anything I do would last long. Also, looking at the logs,” he continued, having swiped his crow-feathered pen through the air, “it seems that last go around was mostly caused by stress, but this time your System has also developed Oppositional Defiant Disorder...”

“Is that why she’s so hostile towards me?” Imu asked.

The Imp nodded sagely.

I had remained silent until now, but raised my voice to ask: “Can we not send her down the river this time?”

Imu and Yonn both turned to look at me, one with an incredulous look on his face and the other with a patient smile.

“What other options do we have?” Imu answered.

“No, let’s hear him out. I’m interested in seeing Toad’s perspective on this.”

“Well, I haven’t thought it through a lot, but... maybe we could let her roam around my Demesne. Perhaps that would help with the stress?”

Imu seemed at a loss for words, but Yonn nodded, seeming to have some idea of what I meant.

“It could work,” the Imp said.

“You’re kidding me. We might as well just set fire to all our buildings, cause that’s what she’ll do!”

“If we put the soul of your System into a God Entity automaton, she would not be able to perish, but she would also not be able to damage your settlement nor leave its area.”

“Oi... don’t you dare...”

Yonn looked down his big hooked nose at Imu, who was a head shorter than him. “You, *mister*, are just a Guiding Fairy. The decision is for your Core to make.”

“Just say it!” Imu started, getting right up into the Imp’s face. “Say that you resent me because I made your wife to leave you!”

A loud *smack* resounded through the Village as Imu was punched off the edge of the stone wall and hit the ground below with a loud *thud*.

“Screw you!” he yelled impotently from below.

I looked down at the Myling, who was still yelling, and then back at Yonn, who wore a satisfied expression, perhaps having wanted to punch Imu for a long time now. I wondered what exactly their past history was.

“We should try it,” I said, agreeing to the Imp’s suggestion.

“Excellent!”

He waved his crow-feather pen in the air in long circuitous rings and sharp jabbing motions, and then a humanoid-esque porcelain doll appeared in front of him on the stone wall. It had no face nor distinguishing features to show whether it was a male or female representation. Yonn began a new series of gesture and finished it with a light tap of his pen against the forehead of the doll.

A lightning strike flew out of my Core in the hole in the tree above and struck the doll right where he had tapped it, and, moments after it came to life, moving around cautiously, like a newborn fawn or foal.

“*Congratulations! I love you Toad!*”

“Hello System,” I replied. The System Doll ran to my essence with its arms wide in preparation for a hug, but when I thought her limbs would go straight through me, she instead managed to clutch my essence form like a balloon and squeezed me tightly.

After releasing me, she jumped from the stone wall and down to the ground below, before finding Imu and kicking him sharply between the legs, sending him flying halfway across the northern settlement quadrant.

“*Congratulations! I feel **FUCKING** fantastic! Wooooh!!!*”

“Call me if you need me,” Yonn told me. “I get the feeling you guys will be quite amusing to watch.”



“How do I call you?”

“Ask Imu. Once he gets his senses back...”

The Imp was about to vanish, when he looked over to the eastern part of my settlement and spotted the Butcher.

“Why is *that* minion cosplaying as my people’s oppressor? That’s very insensitive to my culture and the plight of my ancestors!”

Not knowing what to respond, I just went with the easiest answer: “It was Imu’s idea.”

“Fuck that guy, for real.”

With a swish-and-a-flick, Yonn vanished in a *puff* of sulphur and gooseberries.

## 16 — Taxman Cometh?

As wood was turned into timber and then into beds by a team of builders working side-by-side in front of the only Workbench, a team of idle unassigned minions ferried the beds into the many homes scattered around the northern and western quadrants, as well as the handful near the farms on the eastern side.

No sooner had a bed been placed into the first home than two genderless minions, a Farmer and a Forager, left their assigned tasks, hand-in-hand, and wandered into a house. Tremors came from the house for a few seconds, and then a cloud of smoke emerged when the door burst open, and the Farmer and Forager emerged with a third minion, the same size as them.

“Hm, that’s pretty lazy,” Imu commented, sitting atop the mustard-yellow toad.

“Why is their child the same size as them?”

“Hey, System!” Imu called and the faceless doll wandered over. “What is *this*??”

“*Congratulations! It’s called nature’s way!*”

“But they’re the same size!” he argued back. “How is *that* supposed to be a child!?”

System lifted Imu off the back of the toad and held him high in the air, before beginning to spin around and laughing.

Watching from above in my essence form, I considered the newly-born minion. “It does make sense in a way,” I commented, while Imu was protesting to System’s treatment in an endless string of expletives. “If they had been born as actual children, they could not immediately contribute to our workforce.”

System stopped spinning and looked towards me, while Imu looked like he was on the verge of vomiting in her grip. “*Slaver,*” she said.

The Forager and Farmer let go of each other, returning to their tasks and heartlessly leaving their offspring to its own devices. The naked minion looked around, then went over to the idle unassigned minions who were just lounging around.

*Congratulations! For having the first minion offspring born in your settlement, you unlocked the ability to construct a Toy Store!*

>Structures>Vendors

—Toy Store (Workbench)—

*Unlocks the ability to evolve a happy minion into a Toy Store Vendor and increases minion motivation in nearby structures*

*Sells handmade toys that makes customers happy for a full day.*

*Required Materials: Stone, Timber, & Wrought Iron*

“A toy store?” Imu asked, after escaping System’s grasp and steadying himself against his toad mount.

“Does it count towards our required Merchant Shops?”

He pulled his Encyclopaedia out of thin air and started scrolling through it.

“Doesn’t seem like it.”

System started running in circles around Imu’s mount, while screaming, “*Congratulations! TOYS FOR EVERYONE!!!*”

After they were finished sometime in the middle of the night, I started funnelling unassigned minions into the Armoury and Fletchery to evolve them all at once.

“Let’s hope this works,” Imu commented, lying atop the rubbery back of his mount, staring off into the night sky.

System was still running around in circles somewhere in the northern quadrant, and we could hear her yelling on-repeat: “*Toy! Toy! Toy! Toy! Toy! Toy! Toy! Toy! Toy!*”

I sent in the appropriate amount of essence needed to evolve the five would-be-Archers in the Fletchery all at once, and came dangerously-close to exhausting all my essence. After feeding them my essence, a cataclysmic amount of light emerged through the windows of the tall building, then a loud *pop* of smoke burst out through all openings and sent the door flying off its hinges.

“It worked!” I exclaimed happily.

Then the entity within tried to emerge. Ten arms and legs sprouted from a meatball of conjoined rubbery flesh and skin.

“BURN IT! QUICK!!! WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT??!?!?” Imu yelled incoherently.

Three of its limbs were trying to drag its disjointed form out of the ruined doorway, but it was too large. I quickly fed it the remainder of my essence and there followed another, louder, *pop* and limbs and rubbery skin shot out of the doorway to the Fletchery, littering the surrounding area.

Witnessing this, the ten minions waiting within the Armoury all left the building.

*You there!* I commanded them. *Clean this up and bring the remains to the offering altar for the Goose<sup>2</sup>!*

The ten minions looked at each other for a moment, but then got to work. I also called for a pair of Builders to repair the Fletchery.

“No group evolutions,” Imu told me. “Never again!”

I noticed bile dripped down his lower lip. It seemed he had thrown up after seeing the monstrosity.

*Congratulations! For amalgamating four or more minions into an Eldritch Bomb, you unlocked the ability to construct the Fleshcrafter's Laboratorium.*

>Structures>????

—Fleshcrafter's Laboratorium (Workbench, Forge, & Herma's Lodge)

*Unlocks the ability to evolve a minion into a ????* and *construct*

*Required Materials: Timber, Stone, Wrought Metal, & Chrono-Hymn*

“What's that for?” I asked.

Imu quickly looked at his Encyclopaedia and, with a face drained entirely of colour, replied, “We are under NO circumstances making that building!!”

After successfully evolving two Guards and an Archer, we were visited during the early dawn by Monroe the Taxman, who was accompanied by a dozen armoured pike-wielding bodyguards, as well as two figures in flowing red robes.

With our new Guards next to him, Imu greeted the Tax Collector and I quickly sent for minions to bring our new batch of wheat flour to the cart the man had brought.

“We would like to establish trade with the Castle Town of your Earl,” Imu told the man.

Monroe nodded enthusiastically, while his guards spread out, seeming to expect the arrival of the Honking Menace soon. “Earl Sharpee and his people would be interested in purchasing your fresh produce, I am certain,” he said.

“We would also like to establish trade relations with other towns and villages.”

“Of course, for a cut of the profit, we would gladly introduce you.”

The two, child-like Myling and inbred pouch-forehead Taxman shook hands, then the latter asked, “Has your settlement expanded since I was last here?”

“It hasn’t,” Imu quickly replied.

*Why are we keeping it a secret?* I asked him through my thoughts.

With his cart loaded with twice-as-much wheat flour as last time he visited, Monroe and his entourage took off. Imu sidled over to where my essence form floated and said, “If they find out there’s a Core here, even one as bizarre as yours, they will forcefully take over. It’s important that no one discovers the truth until we have the means to defend ourselves from would-be conquerors.”

“Conquerors?”

“There’s a lot of money to be gained from the control of a Core,” he told me. “And *we* have the ability to produce crops in a fraction of the time it takes for human farms to do the same, making us easily-exploitable.”

He turned to look towards the Taxman and his men as they left through the forest. As I followed his gaze, there came a loud honking and squawking.

“...Ah. Right on time,” he deadpanned.

“Maybe it is lucky we have our local Menace to discourage them?” I commented.

“They will want to send an extermination party to deal with it sooner-or-later,” he explained, as the two robed figures started hurling projectiles of stone and frozen water at the monster, while the guardsmen frantically tried to jab their pikes into the Goose<sup>2</sup> that circled around in the air above and kept bombarding them with powerful buffets of wind from its wings and belches of fire from its gullet.

“What are those robed ones?” I asked, fascinated with their ability to conjure elements out of thin air to launch at the flying waterfowl demon.

“Sorcerers, I’d imagine. Low-ranking ones though, by the looks of them.”

“Will I get minions like that?” I asked.

Imu was about to answer when System came running over and put a hand over his mouth, and whispered: “*Congratulations! Spoiler-free Zone!*”

# 17 — He who calls the Toads?

[*Evolution Requirements*]

*Village => Town*

- *Build 100 Houses (62/100)* -
- *Build 5 Merchant Shops and evolve 5 Merchants* -
- *Build 1 Armoury and evolve 15 Guards (6/15)* -
- *Build 1 Fletchery and evolve 10 Archers (2/10)* -
- *Build 1 Mount Pen and spawn 5 Mounts* -
- *Build 3 Carts and have them deliver goods to neighbour villages/towns 8 times* -
  - *Establish Trade Relations with neighbouring villages/towns* -
  - *Build 20 pieces of assorted Furniture for your houses* -
  - *Build Beds and Breed your Minions with each other* -
- *Build a continuous Fortified Stone Wall around the centre of your Demesne, including important builds like Mayor's House* -
- *Build 1 Hermit's Lodge and evolve an ostracised minion to Toadcaller* -

“We’re getting close,” I commented excitedly, looking at how much we had already completed of the requirements for my next evolution.

“It’ll be a while yet,” Imu remarked wisely. “The Fortified Wall is eating up most of our stone and the Foragers can’t keep up; the carts require us to build a Woodshop and evolve a Carpenter; and we still haven’t even looked at Merchant Shops and what they require.”

My Guiding Fairy was lounging atop his mustard-yellow mount, while flipping through his Encyclopaedia.

“We should build a quarry,” he then said. “We can keep it on the edge of our settlement and it’ll at least make our wall problem easy to handle. Plus, we might get lucky and hit some ore veins or something.”

“What about wood? It’s taking the Foragers a while to gather that too now,” I commented, looking around the enormous clearing within which our settlement resided. Just a few more lines of trees removed and it would be impossible to call this a forest anymore.

“If you’ve noticed, a lot of sapling seeds have been stored into our barns.”

“Saplings? Like tadpoles?”

“Sure... anyway, since we have an excess of minion that stand idle, we should have them replant the trees in the forest. Hopefully, since your core’s magic courses through them, the trees will grow rapidly, just like our crops, even if they don’t replant them within our demesne.”

*Twenty of the laziest most idle minions, listen up! I mentally commanded. You are to replant the cut down trees of the forest, so that we do not run out of trees!*

I hovered around the northern quadrant, where the idle minions seemed to congregate en masse, many of them standing in line before the bakery. It took a few minutes, but then twenty of them broke off and went to one of the barns, each grabbing a handful of sapling seeds and moving out into the deforested forest to reforest the deforestation.

*Congratulations! For organising a reforestation effort and cleaning up the mess you yourself caused, you have gained the [Green Thumb] perk!*

*[Green Thumb] – All attempts at planting crops, seeds, and plants are always successful.*

“Look at the System actually being useful for once,” Imu commented sharply. He looked over the where she was dancing in a ring with a bunch of unassigned minions, each of them holding hands. “You know, I hate to admit it, but I think your plan to put her into a physical body kind of helped.”

“Thank you,” I replied.

“It wasn’t a compliment.”

“Are you sure?”

To avoid having my Baker die of exhaustion, I evolved another Baker to serve under him, and soon the long line before the Bakery windowsill seemed to shorten, although it never fully went away, as the minions of my settlement had learnt to live entirely off of bread and water.

Because it seemed to make the most sense, I decided to put the Stone Quarry in the southern quadrant, at the very edge of the current limit of my demesne. At first, I had my Builders craft a bunch

of Stone Shovels, before sending off a newly-appointed team of thirty Diggers to excavate the marked-out blueprint of my Quarry which lay flat on the ground, just like with the Farming Plots. As soon as the Diggers arrived and got to work, the blueprint vanished from the ground, though the workers seemed to instinctively know the limits of the area they had to work within. It was quite strange.

As they dug a large square ten-by-ten hole into the ground, I had my Builders make a bunch of Stone Picks, and when the Diggers could dig no deeper, thanks to the dense layer of hard compacted earth and rock, I sent them off to each get a pick, and soon they were banging away at the tough sediment layer, sending fragments of stone and clumps of earth flying all over.

Since Imu recommended it, I placed a Well near the Quarry site, so the minions would not all die of dehydration.

“We should get to work on the Woodshop, before they start amassing a pile of rocks and whatnot for us to transport. Another couple barns also couldn’t hurt.”

[*Crafting List*]

>*Structures*>*Crafting*

—Woodshop (Workbench & Anvil)—

*Unlocks the ability to evolve a minion into a Carpenter and making complex wooden contraptions*

*Required Materials: Stone, Timber, & Wrought Iron*

Even though our northern quadrant was kind of crowded with other crafting buildings and houses, I decided to put the Woodshop there anyway. Within an hour or so, my team of Builders had constructed the one-storey building and I picked one of my countless idle minions to become a Carpenter.

After injecting him with my essence, he emerged from the simple building in a mist of ominous smoke and light, wearing a wooden skirt and weird cups over his mammary glands.

“This customisation system is actually pissing me off,” Imu grumbled. He stood up and pointed at the self-satisfied Carpenter, “I mean, look at him! What is *that outfit* supposed to be!?”

Moments later, System came running and picked up Imu in her arms and took off towards the southern quadrant. The Myling yelled at her to let him go, while his mustard-yellow toad mount hopped after them.



I bade the Carpenter construct three wooden carts, before following after behind in my essence form.

We came to the Hermit's Lodge, before System set down the flustered Imu. He pulled out his Encyclopaedia and smacked her leg with it, while complaining about her always picking him up.

A change came over System and the arms of her doll automaton fell to her sides, then she took a single step back, before torpedoing her foot into the middle of Imu's legs, punting him a few metres through the air.

*“Congratulations! Don't fuck with me, Boi!”*

I was about to tell her to be less violent towards Imu, when I noticed a figure sat in the depths of the Hermit's Lodge, hugging his legs. His face had tiny eyes and small lips, so it was obvious that he was genetic freak of nature deserving of being ostracised, such that he was never able to procreate and pass on his twisted, disgusting features.

“Look! There's a minion ready to become a Toadcaller!” I exclaimed.

Imu grunted something, from where he was curled into a ball a few metres away, but it wasn't legible.

Instead of waiting for him to recover, I sent in a portion of my essence to evolve the minion, but it did not seem sufficient, so I doubled the dose, then doubled it again when that also didn't work, nearing the edge of my limits, but then the transformation took hold, and a white light emerged from the hovel that lay between the roots of my tree. Halfway through, however, the light turned violet and there came a loud reverberating chirp, as though the world's largest toad had just been birthed.

A puff of pleasant-smelling swamp odours wafted out of the Lodge's doorway, alongside thick, viscous smoke, and out came striding my Toadcaller.

Imu had regained his composure at this point and we both beheld this newest evolution together.

“Why does he look *so* human?” Imu wondered, not having seen the minion beforehand.

“Why is he wearing the skin of a toad?” I asked, horrified.

System ran up to this new minion, and clasped both her doll hands on his disgusting human-sized cheeks and said, in a deep sonorous voice, **“My boy!”**

*Congratulations! For evolving a Toadcaller, you unlocked the ability to construct various Scopes and other Enhancements to your Core!*

*>Structures>Core Upgrades*

—Appraising Scope (Hermit's Lodge)—

*Unlocks the ability for the Core to view the level and statistics of any entity*

*Required Materials: Murderous Minion's Soul, Happy Minion's Soul, Lazy Minion's Soul, & Guiding Fairy's Tear*

“Ah, for fuck's sake...”

“I'm gonna need one of your tears,” I told Imu seriously. “I want this upgrade.”

“I hate this System,” he replied.

## 18 — Murderer?

“This seems like a bad idea,” I told Imu, as we forced yet another cattle frog into the Butchershop.

“Do you want your Appraisal perk or not? Also, last I checked, you were not the arbiter of good idea, rather quite the opposite, as the crater in the northern quadrant can attest.”

*Idle minions, fill the crater near the campfire and workbench, so Imu will stop using it as a way to ridicule me!*

Imu sighed, while more insane laughter flowed from the building ahead of us. The scent of blood seemed to be making his toad mount salivate, which was concerning.

*Congratulations! For pushing a minion past the brink of insanity, you unlocked the ability to construct a Consultation Clinic!*

*>Structures>Motivation*

—Consultation Clinic (Workbench & Bakery)—

*Unlocks the ability to evolve a cold-hearted minion into a Therapist and increases minion motivation in nearby structures*

*Required Materials: Stone, Timber, & Wrought Iron*

The gate to the Butcher’s shed burst open and the minion broke into a sprint, aiming for the cluster of houses in the northern quadrant of my settlement.

“He’s fast,” I commented.

“Sick the guards on him, you idiot!”

“Oh, right...”

*Guards apprehend this murderous psycho!*

Quickly, my six Guards, with the backup of four Archers, came running towards them with his axe held high.

“Why don’t they have weapons?” Imu asked, perplexed.

I was about to answer when the Butcher's axe chopped the head off of the first Guard to come closer. Then pandemonium broke loose and the contingent of Guards scattered, with the Archers following shortly after.

In just a few moments, three Guards lay headless on the ground, alongside two Archers.

*All idle or unassigned minions, apprehend the Butcher!*

A stampede of minions flowed from north to the western quadrant, some wielding farming tools, and others loaves of bread.

*Congratulations! For inciting a mob to hunt down a specific target, you unlocked the ability to construct a Bounty Board!*

*>Structures>Quests*

—Bounty Board (Workbench & Mayor's House)—

*Enables the Mayor or other leader-type minions to establish a bounty on a specific target or group of targets*

*Required Materials: Timber*

“You completely dropped the ball on this,” Imu commented, his head buried in his hands.

After two newly-evolved Guards hauled the severely-bruised and crushed Butcher to the Hermit's Lodge, I sent for happy minion, who came skipping along with a loaf of bread in his hands. Trailing slowly behind him was a lazy minion, one of the oldest of the newborn and perpetually-idle minions added through my bed-and-breed system that now was the only way I refilled my minion cap, given that it was a passive thing that did not require my attention.

After shoving the three minions into the bowels of the Lodge, the Toadcaller stood outside, holding his hand out towards Imu expectantly.

Having apparently prepared in advance, Imu pulled a strange fruit out of the thin air.

“That's a strange-looking apple,” I commented.

“It's called an onion...”

“What's it for?”

“Watch.”

With his fat fingers, Imu started peeling the strange fruit, first removing a strangely-thin and crunchy outer skin, before digging into the juicy layers of the onion with his fingernails, spraying a fine mist of stuff into the air. Almost immediately, the two Guards, the Toadcaller, and Imu's yellow toad mount began leaking water from their eyes, but the Myling seemed unphased.

“Strange, I thought this would work for me.”

A couple seconds later, System came running and picked him up, flipping him upside-down in the air and shaking him violently up-and-down.

“System! Stop!” was all he managed to protest, before suddenly started spraying a flood of water bile all over the and the ground leading down to the Hermit's Lodge. Alongside this deluge came a few pure glistening drops of liquid that the still-crying Toadcaller caught deftly in his hand, before running down into his hovel, slamming the door behind him.

As System put the distressed Imu down on the ground, he continued to dry-heave in-between a fountain of profanity.

From the Lodge came an ominous crimson light and the howl of three minions yelling out from the depths of Hell. Then, only a minute later, it died down and the Toadcaller emerged out of the door holding what looked like a fist-sized bead of glass that he jammed into the side of the Lodge.

*Congratulations! For crafting an Appraising Scope using the souls of your minions, you have gained the [Appraisal] perk!*

*[Appraisal] – Allows you to see a breakdown of information about any target you look at.*

“Finally!” I exclaimed. I immediately activated my scope and looked at the Toadcaller.

**Name:** *Toadcaller*

**Occupation:** *Toadcaller*

**Species:** *Whomanoid Minion*

**Level:** *15/50*

**Alignment:** *Chaotic-but-Friendly*

**Faction:** *Toad Town*

I then looked at Imu next, wondering what his would say:

**Name:** *Boi (Imuxikwiht)*

**Occupation:** *Guiding Fairy*

**Species:** *Myling (Sluagh)*

**Level:** *????*

**Alignment:** *Unfriendly-but-Helpful*

**Faction:** *Deathheim Inc.*

Wanting a middle-ground, I inspected one of the two Guards, whose moist bulbous eyes were red-rimmed thanks to the onion's invisible attack. The minion kept licking its cornea to get rid of the remnants of the weeping juices of the onion, but it only seemed to make him weep more.

**Name:** *Guard*

**Occupation:** *Guard*

**Species:** *Sub-Whomanoid Minion*

**Level:** *5/25*

**Alignment:** *Lawful-and-Obedient*

**Faction:** *Toad Town*

"Hey, Imu," I began. He got up from his knees and crawled onto the back of his toad with shaky legs, before looking towards where I hovered. "Why does it say my Guard is sub-whomanoid when my Toadcaller isn't?"

Imu, who was still holding the onion for some reason, pulled out his personal bubble scope and looked at the minions through it. "I suppose it makes sense. Your Toadcaller actually looks human, while the rest of your minions are freaks of nature. The System apparently categorises them as human-adjacent in nature, which is amusing."

I accidentally activated my Appraisal on the onion in his hand:

**Name:** *Onion*

**Occupation:** *Onion*

**Species:** *Bulb (Vegetable)*

**Level:** *1/1*

**Alignment:** *Pure-Evil*

**Faction:** *Sensation-Assaulting Fruits & Vegetables*

“Did you just... scope a vegetable?”

“Why is it aligned Pure-Evil?” I asked in return.

After having Imu show me some of the other scopes available to me, I decided that it was better to invest my time elsewhere, since I had no use of the ability to see a target’s health and mana, nor what abilities they had on offer. At least not at the current moment in time.

I spent the next day evolving the maximum number of Guards and Archers, and, at Imu’s insistence, actually gave them weapons this time around.

[*Crafting List*]

>*Items*>*Weapons*

—Iron Sword (Anvil & Armoury)—

*Grants Swordsmanship skill and increases minion Melee Combat XP by 25%*

*Required Materials: Wood & Iron*

—Recurve Bow (Woodshop & Fletchery)—

*Grants Archery skill and increases minion Ranged Combat XP by 25%*

*Required Materials: Wood & String*

We had yet to strike iron or any other metals in the Quarry in the southern quadrant, but fortunately the swords did not require a lot of iron to make, though I did task another minion with aiding the original Smithy, so the job didn’t take a full day to complete.

The Carpenter with his strange wooden skirt and two cups on his chest was surprisingly quick to make the ten bows I needed, after I had a crafter supply him with string spun from the Loom.

“Now they just need some proper armour,” Imu commented.

I already had a team of five workers working nonstop to make new sets of clothes for every newborn minion, but it was clear that this was not what he meant. It was then that I remembered the Tannery I had built next to the Butchershop.

After assigning another Butcher and gifting him with his predecessor's axe, I also assigned a minion to handle the tanning of the frog cattle skin. Fortunately, a decent amount of the tanned hide had already been produced, so I had enough to outfit seven of the fifteen Guards with a set of the rubbery suits.

*[Crafting List]*

*>Items>Armour*

—Frog-Hide Boots (Workbench & Tannery)—

*Increases minion Movement Speed by 40% and reduces Slipping by 80%*

*Required Materials: Frog Hide*

—Frog-Hide Gloves (Workbench & Tannery)—

*Increases minion Attack Speed by 40% and increases Accuracy by 25%*

*Required Materials: Frog Hide*

—Frog-Hide Helmet (Workbench & Tannery)—

*Increases minion Health by 20% and Resistance to Cold by 40%*

*Required Materials: Frog Hide*

—Frog-Hide Trousers (Workbench & Tannery)—

*Increases minion Charisma by 6, Health by 40%, and Resistance to Cold by 60%*

*Required Materials: Frog Hide*

—Frog-Hide Tunic (Workbench & Tannery)—

*Increases minion Health by 40% and Resistance to Cold by 60%*

*Required Materials: Frog Hide*

I looked over at the new Butcher and noticed that his axe was glowing strangely in the waning sunlight, on a whim, I decided to inspect his weapon:



**Name:** *Frog-Slayer*

**Occupation:** *Butcher's Axe*

**Species:** *Axe (Tool)*

**Level:** *42/666*

**Alignment:** *Evil*

**Faction:** *Tsukumogami (Possessed Object)*

It seemed unlikely to be any cause for concern, so I didn't tell Imu about it. What was the worst that could happen anyway?

## 19 — Trade?

All three of my carts were packed with an assortment of harvested produce, processed wheat, and bits of wrought iron. At the fore of each cart was a toad mount affixed to the shaft, with a minion driver sitting on the narrow seat and wielding the reins. On either side of the driver sat a Guard in Frog-Hide armour. I almost felt bad for the lone frog-hide Guard who remained in the settlement with the eight non-frog-hided Guards, but when I read his thoughts I realised it was something else:

*Farewell my twins. Pray we meet in the minion afterlife when the greedy Goose<sup>2</sup> sinks its beaks into your flesh.*

“Do my minions have an afterlife?” I asked Imu. The thought had never occurred to me, but I supposed that if they died in their hundreds on a weekly basis, then believing they had an afterlife might make them less likely to take their existential dread out on me...

“No. Minions’ souls are like cardboard or plastic: they are recycled upon the termination of their original use, but their souls always come out wonky. Usually, they have no knowledge of the horrific abuse and torment of their past jobs, but sometimes the Minion Soul Recycle Stations get lazy and a bunch of recycled minions manifest with PTSD and Oppositional Defiant Disorder.”

“Are any of my minions recycled?” I asked, despite not fully following his explanation.

“Oh most definitely all of them. I’m willing to bet that a quirky outlier Core like yours gets the worst-of-the-worst when it comes to minion souls. Why do you think they’re all absolutely out of their minds? Only privileged Cores, like those of Lady Light, get fresh from the Tree of Life’s branches minion souls. Deathheim on the other hand is big on saving the spiritual environment, so he opts for the scrappy souls none of the other Gods want. But, in his case, it works out fine, given that all his minions tend to be far removed from anything smelling of humanity and things like joy and aspirations.”

“So the problems with my minions is not my fault then?”

“Don’t try to sneak your way out of responsibility, Toady. He who blames his servants for following their given orders is a massive asshole, as the ancient saying goes.”

“Oh.”

“But... and I’m being generous here: you’ve been dealt a fucky System and a bizarre set of circumstances, so even newly-minted minions would’ve gone insane, just not, you know, *this level* of insane...”

As the carts laden with trade goods were prepared to finally travel out of my settlement, Imu suggested I move my Guards up to the fringes of my demesne and set my ten Archers on the halfway-built stone wall at the heart of my Village, such that they could distract the Honking Menace when it no doubt showed itself.

However, when the three carts bounced their way out of my settlement, tossing their cargo into the air with every leap of the mounts at the front of the carts, no great Menace came to visit and wreak havoc.

“I have to say, toads as draft mounts is perhaps the dumbest thing I could imagine.”

“The riders are staying in their seats at least,” I replied.

“For now. I mean, how can we even be sure half the goods make it to their destination when they keep flying around every time it moves??”

“Have a little faith.”

“You telling me that does not instil me with any sort of confidence.”

For the next two days, as we awaited the return of our trade carts, I continued building the houses we needed to reach 100 in total, and work on the fortified stone wall proceeded smoothly as well, thanks to the quarry.

It seemed that our reforestation efforts were paying off as well, as the replanted tree seeds regrew within half a day, so that, for now, we used about the same amount of wood as the trees we regrew, leading to an equilibrium.

I also built the first of the five Merchant Shops I needed in the eastern quadrant, and evolved one of my countless unassigned minions to become a Merchant.

“He looks fairly normal,” Imu said, surprised.

“Why is purple hair growing from his ears like *that*?”

“...I have no idea, but let’s just overlook it for now.”

With my demesne now having reached the largest it could get for my current evolution, I realised excitedly that a small area at the north-eastern part of my settlement overlapped my childhood pond.

After possessing my Mayor and hopping over to it, however, I learnt just how small it was compared to a whomen, or, well, sub-whomen.

*Builders! Erect a fence around this here pond!*

*Guards! Protect the younglings in these murky waters with your life!*

“What in Hell’s name are you doing?”

“Protecting the future of my species!”

“They’re not your species anymore,” Imu replied coldheartedly. “You’re not a toad anymore.”

“But I *am* Toad, now and forever!”

“You’re wasting resources on something moronic.”

“My settlement, my rules!”

Imu let out a sigh. Moments later System came running and started hopping around the pond on all four of her legs, while repeating: “*Tadpoles! Tadpoles! Tadpoles! Tadpoles! Tadpoles! Tadpoles!*”

[*Evolution Requirements*]

*Village => Town*

- *Build 5 Merchant Shops and evolve 5 Merchants* -

- *Build 3 Carts and have them deliver goods to neighbour villages/towns 8 times (3/8)* -

“We’re so close!” I announced.

“Since we’re limited to three carts, getting those last deliveries will take probably three or four more days. For now though, let’s see what stuff we have gotten in return for our goods.”

“They look pretty empty,” I commented upon seeing the three carts, but then a notification appeared:

*Congratulations! For obtaining your first form of currency, you unlocked the ability to construct a  
Coin Minting Bank!*

*>Structures>Crafting*

—*Coin Minting Bank (Mayor’s House & Hermit’s Lodge)*—

*Unlocks the ability to evolve your greediest minion into a Banker and allows for the minting of  
coins using precious metals*

*Required Materials: Stone, Timber, & Wrought Metal*

## 20 — Capitalism?

After having built the Coin Minting Bank in the southern quadrant, Imu advised me to move my means of industry there as well, so only my Forges and Anvil for now, but later other buildings that also seemed to create a mist of demotivation around them. Having the Forges and Bank neighbouring the Quarry also meant that metals could immediately be refined and then put to use in their respective forms of crafting.

“It’s lucky that our Quarry has begun strike ore deposits,” I commented, after my Diggers had begun unearthing both iron and copper. “I didn’t even know that there were this many types of metals and such in the forest.”

“There wasn’t,” Imu replied sharply, laying atop his favourite toad mount, whom, it seemed, he had named Goldie. “When a Core is born and begins to evolve and grow, so too does the area within and closely without its demesne start to change as well.”

“So, because of my Core being in the tree, these metals began appearing?”

“That’s right. Normally, you’d be in a proper cave or even underground a few hundred metres below a mountain, so it would seem less contrived and actually believable, but yeah...” Imu made the point of looking around suspiciously. “We’re in a *blessed* forest, and there is definitely not meant to be this much raw material just lying around untapped. Our good ol’ pouch-head Earl would no doubt have harvested it all already if it had just been lying around like that.”

“I see.”

“Also, did you not find it suspicious that the minions you sent out into the forest just kept coming back with a steady supply of iron ore??”

“No.”

“...Right, that’s my bad, I forgot you were a Toad. Although, saying that, even human Cores don’t pick up on such things. They’re surprisingly daft and only seem to care about the morality of killing people to grow strong... ugh.”

“Did you use to be a whomen before you became a Core and then a Myling?”

Imu got up and lifted his pudgy fists towards where I floated, menacingly. “Are you trying to start a fight!?”

“I don’t think so?”

“Ah. Well, them’s fighting words, Toady. But, to answer your question, no, I *most definitely* was not a human before I died and became a Core.”

“...Imu?”

“Yes?”

“Is this how I find out you used to be *the enemy*? WERE YOU A FROG, IMU!?”

“Your stupidity is like a sharp sword that you continue to cut at me with,” he replied. “And no, you’re the only non-humanoid Core I’ve heard of. In fact, there’s a common theory that only humanoid species can become Cores, since only they have the mental capacity to undergo the transition.”

“I really showed them, didn’t I?” I answered excitedly.

“I’m not sure it’s worth being proud of, but I guess you did show them, yea...”

“So what kind of whomanoid were you?”

“Only the best kind: Dark Elf.”

“Oh! I’ve seen an elf, although she was very white.”

Imu spat on the ground from where he still stood atop Goldie. “White Elves are an inferior offspring to us. They used to also be dark-skinned and antagonistic towards humans like us, but then they developed *morals*, ugh, and started being all hippy and shit, leaving so much indoors that they beautiful complexion soured into bone-pale white... They’re a disgusting bunch of all-life-is-sacred-and-that’s-why-I’m-staying-in-my-tree-hut-and-make-a-living-off-of-writing-strongly-worded-letters-disparaging-my-dark-skinned-cousins scum!”

He seemed really heated up about the topic of dark versus white. I supposed it was not too different to the war between toads and frogs, even though, somehow, both animals stemmed from a common ancestors. “How did you die?”

“Oh, it was fantastic! I led a warband of human-hating races, which, besides other Dark Elves, included Trolls, Goblins, sentient Undead, Dryads, Lizardmen, Ratlings, and so many others. I think most of these species are extinct though, except goblins and ratlings, they somehow always make it through major species-wide extinction events.

“Anyway, we had sacked a few major cities, but then the Lady Light and her human and white elf followers summoned a Hero to repel us. My final stand was quite epic,” Imu commented, standing with his hands on his hips and a smug expression curling his thin lipless mouth.

“My final stand was awful,” I said.

“Well, I guess that a goose is to a toad what a dragon is to a humanoid. Sorry you didn’t get to go out in a blaze of glory.”

“Thank you.”

Imu cleared his throat. “Anyway, I learnt, after becoming a Core, that, due to my species leading the anti-human war effort, Dark Elves were hunted to extinction.”

“Stupid whomens,” I replied, upset on his behalf.

“Eh, we had it coming. And if we lost even after combining our strength with so many other species, then perhaps it was just proof that we weren’t strong enough.”

“I believe there still exist Dark Elves,” I commented.

“Maybe we’ll find some eventually,” Imu replied in a rare moment of optimism.

*Congratulations! For refining your first copper ore, you unlocked the ability to craft a Copper Spear and Copper Shield, as well as Copper Coins! Additionally, you can now craft Copper versions of all tools and weapons!*

*>Items>Tools*

—Copper Coin (Anvil & Coin Minting Bank)—

*Standard currency in your settlement that comes in many denominations based on size*

*Required Materials: Copper*

—Copper Shield (Anvil & Armoury)—

*Grants Defender skill and increases minion Defense by 50%*

*Required Materials: Wood & Copper*

—Copper Spear (Anvil & Armoury)—

*Grants Spearmanship skill and increases minion Melee Combat XP by 50%*

*Required Materials: Wood & Copper*

System came running over suddenly, moving faster than anything I’d ever seen before. Though Imu tried to hide behind Goldie, she managed to grab him anyway and began spinning around wildly, the tiny Myling holding on to her for dear life.

While Imu was recovering in the grass near the Coin Minting Bank, I quickly found the greediest minion in my settlement, which turned out to be one of the Diggers, who, despite me ordering him several times, refused to let go of a clump of refined copper, even as its still-hot surface burnt his body where he hugged it tightly.

After sending him into the Bank, still holding the clump, I poured in a bit of my essence and a golden glow emerged from within the wide one-story building. Moments after, the newly-evolved Banker emerged, half his body made of pure copper and his clothes transforming into a neat purple velvet set of pants and vest, which strangely matched his partially copper skin quite well.

“Alright, time to get to minting!” I announced excitedly.

Imu got up from the grass and looked at the new Banker, then at me. “We have to be careful,” he commented, as the Banker ran out and grabbed some refined copper, before going into his Bank and beginning to work away on it. “Remember those Missionaries of Lady Light I told you about?”

“No.”

“Ugh, then just forget it, hopefully it won’t matter.”

The Banker emerged victoriously with a shiny copper coin in his hand, lifting it in the air for all the nearby Diggers and Smithies to see and admire. I used my Appraisal on the coin:

**Name:** *Copper Token*

**Occupation:** *Currency*

**Species:** *One Denomination Coin (Copper)*

**Level:** *1/????*

**Alignment:** *Neutral*

**Faction:** *Toad Town*

“Uh oh.”

“What?”

“Look what just showed up in the northern quadrant... Hells these bastards are quick to scent money...”

I flew over to where Imu had indicated and amidst many of my idle and unassigned minions stood a figure in a pure-white robe accented with gold. Her hair was done up nicely with a bunch of golden trinkets fastened to it, and her face was also studded with golden stuff.



“If they weren’t so freakishly dangerous, they’d be prime targets for a robbery,” Imu commented.  
“I mean, just look at all that jewellery...”

I quickly possessed my Mayor who seemed to have naturally approached the newcomer, then she asked one fateful question that would determine my continued existence as a Core:

“Hi there! Would you like to hear about our Lady and Saviour, Lady Light?”

## 21 — Missionary's Sermon?

“Gathered faithful, today I have come to preach the good word of our Lady Light, the holiest of holy. It is by her divine grace that you today are allowed to prosper!

“I say to you, gathered sheeplings, would you like to shed your woollen coats and attain enlightenment!?”

Imu gave me a side-eye. “Yes?” we both replied.

“Of course you want to hear of our fair Lady and the way your souls can attain true happiness! It is only by her grace that happiness can be attained, true happiness!

“Heretics, infidels, and mutant freaks only worship the evil, sinful word of the dark gods like Deathheim and Arnold the Goblin Butcher! Cast off any sinful notion of sharing in their unholy gospels and embrace the one true Divinity, Lady Light!”

Imu grumbled something under his breath and, quick as lightning, the Missionary snapped her heads towards him.

“Just clearing my throat,” he lied. “Please don’t let me stop you.”

“Okay! Don’t interrupt again or I’ll purge you,” she replied cheerfully. Next to where I squatted in the Mayor’s body, Imu suddenly stood rigidly upright.

The woman continued, “Have you ever experienced strife in your life? Of course you have! Strife is the nature of the Mortal Realm, but in the fold of our Lady and Saviour, whose benevolent light covers the world, you will never again have to experience strife! With a small steady donation to our church, you may attain this enlightenment of soul and when your time is due, her grateful embrace will find you and keep you safe for eternity!”

“I have a question,” I said, Imu nudged me aggressively, perhaps to silence me, but I felt it prudent to ask. “What sort of donation? How do we donate it? Also, isn’t reincarnation a thing?”

“All good questions, you disgusting bug-eyed cretin,” she replied. “A donation to our church would be one-fourth of all coins minted in your town, as well as one-fourth of all profits from sales that your town makes.”

“That seems a lot,” I answered. Imu was at this point punching the side of the Mayor’s body, though I didn’t feel anything.

The Missionary stepped closer to where I was squatted and looked down at me with a scowl. **“Don’t you want to be saved?”**

“He most definitely does!” Imu quickly answered on my behalf. “Please forgive his colossal stupidity. He’s very inbred.”

The woman stepped back and returned to her cheerful demeanour. “I see! Don’t worry, with our Lady’s grace, even an inbred, disgusting, and filthy pile of swamp-muck like you will be able to find happiness!

“To answer your second question: all donations will go through a church to Lady Light that you will of course construct within your settlement.”

*Congratulations! For accepting Lady Light’s faith into your life, you unlocked the ability to construct a Church of Lady Light!*

*>Structures>Worship*

—Church of Lady Light (Workbench, Quarry, & Mayor’s House)—

*Unlocks the ability to evolve your most gullible minion into a Preacher and allows for a monetary donation to Lady Light*

*Required Materials: Quarried Stone*

“As for your third question: you can unlock reincarnation to your worship subscription by increasing your donations to three-fourths. If you increase your donations to five-sixths, you can even unlock our *Guaranteed Success In Your Next Life* plan! Personal advice, I recommend you take that model, just looking at how filthy and disgusting and gross and annoying you seem.”

“Thank you for informing us,” Imu said. “We’ll stick with the basic plan. Please preach us your sermon, so we may begin construction on a church as soon as possible!”

*Are we actually going to build a church?* I asked him through my mind.

*Of course!* he replied, surprising me with his ability to communicate through this way like me. *These psychos will literally reduce our settlement to a smouldering ruin if we don’t!*

*Where’s System at?* I asked, worried she might make a sudden appearance and upset the Missionary.

*I locked her in with the Toadcaller.*

The Missionary cleared her throat and then did a weird *tra-la-la-laaa* kind of uttering a few times. If she was doing an impression of toadsong, she was not very good at it.

“Okay, no more interruptions or I’ll purge you!” she announced cheerfully.

“At the dawn of man, our fair Lady created Light to illuminate the dark and sombre world she found herself within. Her light caused life, such as animals, BUT ONLY THE CUTE ONES, to manifest, as well as human life!

“Of course, other life was also manifested through the evil, sinful, morally corrupt, vile, unholy dark gods! Life such as goblins; dragons, BUT NOT THE PRETTY ONES THOSE WERE LADY LIGHT’S CREATIONS; dark elves; beastkin; lizardmen; ghouls; toads; and all other manner of disgusting and repulsive things.”

*She’s very mean.*

*Just bear with it. We still have an hour or two more of this to go...*

“After Lady Light and all her creations wandered their newfound world, they were quick to accept sin and vice into their lives, and so She sent her Divine Messengers down to this Mortal Realm, so evils could be purged in her name and the world made pure and holy.

“Of these Messengers, the most well-known are of course Kevin the Big-Lipped, Carl Carlson Carl of the Luscious Eyebrows, and Heinrich von Poopenmeyer. With their righteous blades of light, the world was scoured of sin!

“But, alas, sin has a way of always resurfacing, tainting the fair hearts of Lady Light’s priests and goodfolk, and spawning the evil cults of Deathheim, Arnold the Goblin Butcher, the Big Smiling Fat Lump, and countless other unmentionable dens of vice.

“Once every millennia, sometimes half-millennia, at times a bit more, there comes a great Crisis, a Cataclysm, which threatens to upend the morality of our world. At such times, a righteous warrior of Light ascends from the plebeian masses to save us all!

“That’s right! Even a plebeian like you can become a holy warrior, if only your faith is strong enough! Rejoice in the knowledge that even filthy gutterspawn like you may one day have a purpose! And it is all thanks to our Fair Lady!”

The Missionary cleared her throat again, then said, “Let us sing!”

*“O Lady Light, lovely lady, pretty cool lady, sexy and definitely good-looking, and totally a hit with everyone!”*

*“O Lady Light, I like the dresses you wear, they fit you perfectly! You’re like a model! Oh my Lady, your beauty dazzles me into a mute stupor!”*

*“O Lady Light, your horse is sooo much prettier and nicer than all the other Gods’! Truly your mount is one of a kind, and it is clear that you paid a lot of money for it! Wow, so wise a businesswoman you are to make such an amazing investment!”*

*“O Lady Light, your makeup, in all its thick several layers looks really good on you! Promise! You’re totally a trendsetter! Daumn gurl, look at all that you’ve got goin on! Woooh!”*

What is happening? I asked.

*It goes on like this for a while... Imu replied.*

*“O Lady Light, your real estate investments are definitely solid and will appreciate! Your acumen with such matters is truly beyond mortal ken! Wow! Excellent! Very amazing, most certainly!”*

Imu moved his hands up towards his ears, perhaps to save himself from the aural onslaught of horribly out-of-tune singing with nonsensical words stretched beyond their natural limits. Before he could cover his ears though, he seemed to realise what he was doing and stopped himself, visibly gritting his teeth and bearing the brutal assault of sounds.

*“O Lady Light, you’re a smash hit with the guys! Just because you’re single, it doesn’t mean everybody doesn’t want you! But you’re too good for them! You’re a strong independent woman!”*

*“O Lady Light, forget about Kevin! You dumped him, not the other way around! Anyone who says otherwise is a filthy liar and will be purged!”*

*“O Lady Light, that Kevin guy is a total poser! I mean, just look at his disgusting moustache! Ugh! And his dainty fingers and tiny romp! You were too good for him, definitely! His soul suffers forever from the banishment of your love!”*

Is this an actual song of Lady Light? I asked.

*Unfortunately, yes... she’s incredibly vain and needs daily emotional reinforcement through her fanatical servants.*

*“O Lady Light, you’re totally the greatest! And you have more friends than anyone! You’re beloved by everyone! Totally! Not lying, I swear! With your amazing charm, who wouldn’t find you irresistible to be around??”*

The Missionary paused and took a deep breathe then exhaled slowly.

*“There are forty-eight more verses Lady Light is the Coolest, Prettiest, and Greatest Goddess, but now I would like to tell you the gospel of Lady Light and the Hater.*

*“Once there was a filthy man who lived in a filthy village and had a filthy family. When a wandering Missionary came to his disgusting village, the filthy man said he didn’t care about how amazing Lady Light was and said she was probably ugly and lonely. He was obviously VERY wrong*

and Lady Light was extremely offended about such a negative hot take. She descended from the heavens upon a very sexy horse made of clouds, which cost her forty-three tonnes in gold to acquire, and looked upon the man, who was obviously spellbound by her tremendous beauty and charm.

“To the man, she said: ‘*Ew, gross.*’ and then she set him on fire with holy scalding light. The family he left behind through his hateful actions became positive reviewers who totally gave her five stars, because that’s how amazing she obviously is.”

*Five stars?* I asked.

*That’s right,* Imu said, turning to look at the reader. Yes. That means you, the person reading these words right now. To the reader, i.e. you, he said, *People who don’t leave five star reviews are haters and get purged with holy fire.*

*That makes sense,* I replied, suddenly feeling the urge to give a five-star rating.

“Up next is the gospel of *Lady Light and her lover Kevin*, which teaches us that Lady Light’s love is definitely the best thing in the world.

As the Missionary droned on, I used my Appraisal on her to see how strong she was exactly:

**Name:** *Judetta*

**Occupation:** *Door-to-door Missionary of the Church of Lady Light*

**Species:** *Human*

**Level:** *62/100*

**Alignment:** *Aggressively-fanatical-and-emotionally-unstable*

**Faction:** *Lady Light’s Fanclub*

“...and that’s why Kevin totally sucks and will die sad and alone!”

The Missionary cleared her throat again, before continuing, “It is now time for us to pray! Repeat after me or be purged!”

*Don’t actually repeat after her. This is a legally binding contract. Just mumble your way through it.*

“O Lady Light, coolest and beautifullest of all the Gods in the Pantheon! Give us today a shining light, so that our inner light may shine as well. Give to us the strength to tell haters to fuck off and let all haters be burnt in scalding holy fire. Without your light we are blind sheep, shepherded along by the fanciful ways of evil creatures, but with your guidance we are beings of purpose and virtue.

“O Lady Light, we give to you our souls, LITERALLY FOREVER, for you to feast upon and grow stronger than all the other upstart deities that totally aped your cool style and business model. Through our mortal suffering and excruciatingly-painful deaths, you will blossom in strength, until none can match you and your market-share overshadows all your competitors.

“Forever and always, we are yours to toy with to your desired whims, even if it ends up leading to prolonged suffering for us. Amen!”

*She is starting to terrify me, I confessed.*

*You and me both, Toady...*

“Now, let us dance until our feet bleed, such that our Lady Light will settle her gaze on us and bless us with her warmth!”

*Ah... this part always sucks... Imu told me.*

A sound like an explosion came from the southern quadrant, and we all turned to look towards the cause, which was a flying ball of white matter that arced over my big tree and came flying down towards us, landing only a few metres behind Imu and me with a loud crash and dirt thrown every which way.

Standing up from the crater was System, her doll-like body letting off tendrils of steam and smoke. With a few powerful strides, she came right up to the Missionary and said:

*“Congratulations! Lady Light sucks \*\*\*\*\* and her mother is a \*\*\*\*\* who \*\*\*\*\* all the \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* \*\* \*\*\*\*\*!!! I HOPE SHE GETS \*\*\*\*\* WITH A \*\*\*\*\*!!!”*

Then she torpedoed her foot right into the crotch of the missionary, lifting her up into the air before she fell back down again on her knees, her face instantly robbed of colour.

“Ah, turds...” Imu commented.

## 22 — Divine Purge?

“It was fun while it lasted,” Imu said fatalistically.

“What happens now?” I asked.

“The cold uncaring embrace of Oblivion. Although Deathheim says he’s not such a bad guy.”

As System stood triumphantly above the Missionary’s defeated and curled-up body, a pillar of light encapsulated her unconscious figure as though the sun had chosen only to illuminate her.

“Are you fu—” Imu started, before he was drowned out by a loud shearing sound, like a tree being ripped in half or when the Loom Minion ran his blade along the cloth he made.

The Missionary’s body shot upright and then pointed a finger at System.

***“You dog \*\*\*\*, how dare you blaspheme against my greatness!”***

“What’s happening?” I asked Imu. The Missionary now had light glowing out of her eyes and her posture had changed.

***“Congratulations! Gods can’t touch me! I’m invincible!!!”***

***“No cretin is beyond my power!”*** the possessed Missionary yelled and light flowed from her shining eyes and into her outstretched hand. ***“GODLY SMITE!!!”***

A ring of light formed around System’s doll feet and covered the ground in elaborate drawings and symbols, before a pillar of light, stronger than the first we’d already seen, enveloped her and utterly scalded the earth upon which she stood, reducing the grass to ashes and turning the soft brown earth into black carbonised matter.

When the pillar of light waned in strength and vanished, System was revealed to be unscathed.

The possessed Missionary didn’t take this well and repeated her spell again:

***“GODLY SMITE!!!”***

And again:

***“GODLY SMITE!!!”***

And again...

***“GODLY SMITE!!!”***

She stomped the ground in childish impotence and then pointed both hands at System, light suffusing her entire body now, and yelled:

***“DIVINE CASTIGATION!!!”***



System's arms were pulled out to the sides by invisible ropes and her head was wrenched back to stare directly upward, where a massive golden sword the size of my tree hovered. Then the blade descended with incredible speed and tore through System's doll body, somehow not harming the surrounding area despite its enormous size.

When this spell passed, System was still, remarkably, unharmed and stood defiantly opposed to the Missionary.

"Give it up, Lady," Imu advised. "She's in a God Entity vessel."

The Missionary suddenly turned her head to Imu and my Guiding Fairy seemed to shrink a bit under the attention.

**"YOU!"** she said, pointing her finger at him. **"WHY DID YOU PUT THIS CRETIN IN A GOD ENTITY VESSEL!? WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU!?"**

"Lady Light, do you really believe *we* have that power?"

The woman paused at his words, then turned back to System. **"Those goddamn shitstain good-for-nothing imps always do whatever the fuck they wish! I'LL TOTALLY ANNIHILATE THEM!!!"**

I had a sudden epiphany. "Is *that* Lady Light??"

"Welcome to the conversation, Toady, you're about ten minutes late..."

The Missionary spun towards me. **"Don't think I've forgotten about you! You foul cretin \*\*\*\*!"**

"She's not as pretty or as nice as the Missionary's words made her seem," I commented.

"What part of her sermon made you believe she was nice??" Imu replied, seeming to have found his usual sharp tone, even while standing before a very angry god.

**"I'M JUST BORROWING THIS BODY! OKAY!? I'M WAY PRETTIER AND COOLER AND BEAUTIFULLER IN MY TRUE FORM!!!"**

"I believe you," I told her and the reply seemed to deflate some of her anger. "I'm sorry our System said all those mean things and kicked your Missionary in her reproductive organs. Can you please not erase us from the world if we build a church in our settlement?"

Lady Light narrowed her glowing eyes. **"Will you venerate and adulate me in song and dance?"**

"Of course!"

**"Okay! I'll spare you!"** she replied cheerfully. **"But one wrong step and I'm sending my crusades, okay!?"**

"You're being too kind," Imu quickly replied. "Certainly you live up to your praiseworthy reputation!"

**"I do, don't I?"**

“You’re so smart and cunning with your dealings with us lowly, plebeian, and foul mortal cretins!” he told her, really laying it on thick.

***“I know right! Thank you for noticing! It’s so hard to get people to see that side of me, when all they ever talk about is how I crusade too much or how ‘insane’ my followers are! You guys are okay, even if you’re filthy and gross to look at!”***

“Thank you, Lady Light. You’re *definitely* the coolest God!”

***“I am, aren’t I? Okay, I’m out of here, byeeee!”***

A reverse of the first light pillar emerged out of the Missionary’s body and the light in her eyes vanished. After half a minute, the woman carefully got up and then looked around. Her eyes widened as she realised what had happened, then a big grin covered her face.

“Oh my lady! I’ve gotta get home and tell everyone about this! They’ll totally make me a prophet or something!”

Without another word, she ran off in a straight line leading out of my settlement.

When it was clear we were alone again, apart from all the minions who had been watching the ordeal in fascinated silence, Imu turned to look at where I was crouched in the Mayor’s body.

“You have no idea how close to death we both were.”

“She seemed very unhinged,” I replied.

“They say that ever since a mortal hero named Kevin dumped her, she has been crusading a lot. It was three thousand years ago though, so you’d think she’d gotten over it by now.”

“I still remember when I got dumped by my eight cousin seventeen-times-removed,” I said with a sigh. “Toadella, you were so beautiful and I still think of the way your water-moist skin glistened in the moonlight.”

“Stop, you’re gonna make me barf. Also, is there a toad in this forest you weren’t distantly related to?”

“No.”

“But that would lead to a lot of inbreeding and birth defects,” he commented.

“We toads have to protect our superior genes from being diluted by inferior frog genetics.”

Imu pinched his face with his sausage-fingered palm.

“We’d best get to building that Church,” he said, forcefully switching subject.

## 23 — Guild?

If it had been possible to hop up-and-down in my essence form, I would have done so, but, alas, the closest I came to it was a bizarre back-and-forth floating motion.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m attempting to hop excitedly in expectation of the last two carts arriving!”

Imu was sitting cross-legged atop Goldie in front of the nearly-finished Church to Lady Light. Every now and then he would turn towards it and scowl, clearly upset at having to venerate a deity responsible for his death in his mortal life, not to mention the fact that she was opposed to his company, Deathheim Inc.

As I continued to attempt my floating hop, our long-awaited carts arrived, the drivers and guards bouncing up-and-down every time the toad mount hopped forward. Within the pair of carts were a few bits of raw material, which we already had bountiful stores of in our now five separate barns, as well as some coins and such.

“It’s finally happening!” I exclaimed, beginning to fly around my centre in an excited sprint.

As the carts crossed the threshold into my demesne, I was forcefully pulled into my Core.

*Congratulations! For evolving into a Town, your list of buildings available has expanded and your demesne has grown!*

**WARNING: *Your settlement will now actively begin attracting explorers and adventurers!***

I awoke to the familiar sight of Imu sitting at the edge of my tree cave. He turned towards me, noticing that I’d awoke, but in his eyes was a terrified expression.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“...The tree grew. A lot.”

I moved through the walls of the cave and soared out into the air, looking down at ground below. It had at least increased by twice its usual size and its branches had tripled in length, the whole oak tree starting to take on an uncanny resemblance to the weeping willow down by the pond I had lived in.

“How do I get down?” Imu asked, clearly not fond of heights like this.

“I have an idea.”

*All unassigned and idle minions form up below the tree and catch Imu when he jumps!*

“Are you out of your *blessed* mind!?” he yelled at me from the tree, as a horde of minions formed a human pyramid below, quickly rising up into an eight-metre tall structure that swayed unnervingly from side-to-side.

Since I felt that Imu would not take the jump, I forced my essence into his body and made him kick off the edge of the tree cave and soared down towards the horde below. Mid-air I pulled my essence out and got to watch him plummet downwards, screaming obscenities the entire way.

Though a handful of minions were crushed when they caught hold of Imu, he himself made it down to the ground unscathed, although his legs remained shaky for a bit.

“Brilliant idea, right?” I asked. “I’ve gotten even smarter thanks to my evolution to Town!”

“Don’t. Ever. Do. That. Again!”

“It looked like fun.”

“I will somehow go back in time and strangle your tadpole self if you forcefully control my body *like that* again! You inbred-small-brained-toadstool-smelling imbecile!”

“Have you seen the Goose<sup>2</sup> recently?” I asked, changing the subject.

Imu pushed one of the minions still holding-on to him away, before finding Goldie who was waiting patiently nearby. “No. I haven’t. It was suspiciously quiet when you were evolving.”

“Suspicious?”

“Think about it: we got to move eight carts of food and such out of our settlement without being harassed, and our altar of offerings has gone untouched for a week now.”

“Do you think it died?”

“Definitely not. My fear is that it’s evolving again or has found a lair or something equally-likely to screw us over eventually.”

“What if it found a mate and had offspring?”

Imu paused, his face draining of colour as he thought about it. “It would spell disaster. Armies would have to be assembled and heroes would have to be ascended, all to combat the scourge of overpowered geese!”

“It can’t be *that* strong,” I commented.

“You didn’t see it last time, since you didn’t have the Scope yet, but it was level 77 out of 100... I think it must have found a loophole in the levelling system or something. It’s definitely way too

strong and given that offspring inherit many of their parents' strengths, any children it sired would be a calamity by themselves."

"Nevermind all that for now," I said.

"It seems rather prudent to worry about it now."

"No! I wanna see my new requirements!"

Imu sighed and tossed his hand out, letting me see what was required for my next evolution.

[*Evolution Requirements*]

*Town => Castle Town*

- *Build a Castle* -
- *Construct walls to separate and encompass the separate areas of your town* -
  - *Construct a Gaol and evolve 3 cruel minions to Jailer* -
  - *Reach more than 1000 minions (404/1000)* -
- *Build 1 Gentlewomen's Club and evolve 20 lazy unproductive minions to Aristocracy* -
  - *Evolve the most ambitious offspring of two Aristocracy minions to Lord* -
  - *Evolve 20 Guard minions to Cavalry Men* -
  - *Evolve 12 Archer minions to Sharpshooters* -
- *Build 1 Marketplace, evolve 3 Merchants to Wandering Traders, and evolve 3 cart-driving minions to Caravaneers* -
  - *Establish permanent trade and supply routes* -
- *Build 1 Branch Office of the Adventurers' Guild and evolve a Mayor minion to Guild Master*
  - *Evolve 5 Brave Minions to Adventurers and give them names* -

"Wow, that's a lot of tasks. We'll need a lot of Builders for the walls, and we'll need to expand our farmable land again."

"It seems like there's no more limit to how many minions you can have, you know, except for space and food and such."

"What happens if I don't have houses for them? Just for a thousand we need a lot of space to put houses."

Imu leafed through his Encyclopaedia, then answered, "Minions without houses evolve into Homeless."

“That sounds cool!”

“I wouldn’t recommend aiming for it. They seem to lose the ability to comprehend commands and they become fiercely territorial. Like bipedal geese basically.”

“Hm.”

“Where do you want to start first? It’s pretty open from here on it seems.”

“Guild!”

We had to do a bit of urban redevelopment to fit all our new house blueprints. To reach a thousand minions, we required one-hundred-and-fifty more houses. Additionally there had to be made room for the quadrant-dividing walls that I had decided on.

As minions, Builders and unassigned workers, ran around being busy, many idle minions took the opportunity to sneak away into the houses that remained to copulate and multiply. Already after just half a day I had over 500 minions. Many of my Foragers had transitioned to working in the Quarry which now covered half of the southern quadrant, and my Woodchoppers worked diligently in teams to constantly bring wood for the Carpenter and the Builders who tore their way through the raw materials in a frenzy fuelled by an abundance of Iron and Copper tools amongst them, which significantly increased their production speed.

Since it was an important building, I put the Guild Branch Office near the Mayor’s House, but it was a great building which by itself required a mountain of iron, timber, and quarried stone to be built. As it was underway, I worked with Imu and placed blueprints for all the additional buildings we’d need, like Farming Plots, Barns, Grain Windmills, Forges, Anvils, as well as the great walls that would crisscross my demesne.

“Given that the Guild Hall takes a while, we may as well start on the castle as well. It’ll require a bit of moving around of buildings, like the Mayor’s House, but it’s sure to be a weeks-long project for your Builders.”

“Okay! Let’s do it!”

“How do you want to design it?”

“It isn’t premade?”

“No.”

“Hm, I have no idea what a castle is supposed to look like,” I admitted.

Imu stood up from the back of Goldie and stretched his arms. “I have some ideas in mind.”

“Then you’re in charge.”

When all the separate blueprints for the Castle, of which there were seventeen, were placed, it was quite a thing to behold, even in its ethereal blurry outline. It had three towers, a large garden with an area for a pond, a central courtyard next to its main building, an outer courtyard, and tall walls that, when combined, created a coiling series of gates that had to be bypassed to reach the centre, like the shell of a snail.

After the blueprints had been placed, and exhausted overworked Builders moved on to this new colossal project, my Guild Office stood ready.

I immediately sent my Mayor inside and fed him an abundance of my expanded essence pool, until a green-and-golden light shone from within and he stepped out like a summoned hero amidst a deluge of strobing lights and blooming grey smoke.

“Finally! Normal clothes!”

I looked at Imu who had actually thrown his hands into the air in celebration. The Guild Master was wearing a gleaming jade-green suit, but unfortunately had lost his Mayoral cone hat.

“...Wait a moment!” Imu jumped down from Goldie and strode over to the Guild Master, then started poking and prodding his suit.

“What’s wrong?”

“His suit... I thought it’d be cashmere, but it’s metal! What in all Hells!?! Listen!” he knocked on the jade-green pants and there came a loud *ding* each time he struck it with his knuckles.

In the distance, as though answering the reverberating clothes of my new Guild Master came a loud earth-shaking honk.

“That’s not a good sign,” I said.

## 24 — Minion Unionisation?

It was worse than I had imagined. By the time I made it to where the Honking Menace had struck, it was already too late to do much, aside from residing myself to Fate's machinations.

My Guards and Archers lay dead and torn apart everywhere along the northeastern part of my settlement, where the houses of the residential north gave way to the Armoury, Fletchery, and Mount Pen. Many of these buildings also lay in ruins or were on fire.

My disfigured Toadcaller had come to the scene of the tragedy and was chanting in a bizarre language, somehow holding the Menace at bay for now. With a command, I sent for a horde of minions to either drive the Monster away or fill its stomach to the point that it gave up devouring and left.

As I beheld the behemoth in the distance, I activated my Appraisal:

**Name:** *Goose<sup>3</sup> ('Honking Menace')*

**Occupation:** *King of Geese*

**Species:** *Hydra-Goose*

**Level:** *183/100*

**Alignment:** *World-Ending Calamity of Evil*

**Faction:** *Geese vs. Literally All Other Lifeforms*

“How is its level higher than the maximum?” I asked Imu.

The Myling scrolled through his Encyclopaedia frantically, but seemed to arrive at no conclusive answer. “It somehow broke the system, but I've also never heard of a Hydra-Goose. It could possibly have something to do with that new species and its additional heads? I've seen something similar, though not to this extreme an extent, with Midgets and their speed exceeding its maximum value by them evolving an extra toe.”

A gibbering and mumbling army of unarmed minions of various occupations came charging at the enormous three-story-tall bird monstrosity, but with each flap of its three sets of wings and every stomp of its six webbed feet dozens of them were pulverised or tossed far enough into the air to kill them on landing.

In short, it was an absolute slaughter.



To make matters worse, its new third head breathed a strange sort of gas that instantly turned anything it touched into fragrant decaying matter, as though selectively advancing the age of all it touched by decades.

“I have an idea!”

“Uh oh.”

*Brave minions, run to the Guild Office and get ready for naming and being evolved to Adventurers!*

Only three minions made it alive to the Guild Office, which made sense, given that brave minions seemed to have been at the fore of the unarmed army against the Goose<sup>3</sup>.

One-by-one I evolved and named each of them. All of them emerged with their basic clothes having transformed into murky-green tunics and fanciful yellow capes, as well as mustard-coloured rubber boots.

I sent them off to fetch the weapons of the fallen Guards and Archers to use against the Honking Menace. As they passed where Imu was hiding, he turned to look at my essence floating after them in the air.

“Oi...”

“What?”

“What’s wrong with you!? Why would you name them *that*!? How heartless are you??”

“I figured they were going to die no matter what, so, what does it matter?”

Imu sighed, but didn’t actually retort.

The first of my new Adventurers found an iron sword and lifted it into the air triumphantly, before charging at the Goose<sup>3</sup> with a loud trilling chirp.

“Why is he making that noise?”

I had no answer, so I didn’t say anything, instead I use my Appraisal to see what sort of power the Adventurer with the sword had to work with.

**Name:** *Test #1*

**Occupation:** *Adventurer*

**Species:** *Sub-Whomanoid Minion*

**Level:** *1/100*

**Alignment:** *Curious-and-Brave*

**Faction:** *Toad Town Adventurers’ Guild*

“Why is he *so* weak? Aren’t Adventurers supposed to be strong?”

“Adventurers have a high growth potential, if you look at his maximum level, and—”

Imu winced and never finished his comment.

“He was just eaten.”

“Well yeah, growth has to be tended to, like a sapling. It can become a great oak in time, but not if your idea of nurturing growth is throwing them straight into the maws of a Calamity-class Monster...”

“Look, the other two are going at it now too!”

Imu sighed as both were immediately crushed under a huge webbed foot. “Poor Test #1, #2, and #3. They were led to the slaughter by a maniac...”

“What now?” I asked, as I looked at the mountains of death minions. “We have barely any minions left to throw at it.”

Imu just sighed again. Together we watched the Calamity tear the eastern and northeastern parts of our settlement to shreds.

The Honking Calamity stomped around my settlement for about three hours more, before leaving with a self-satisfied ululating roar that seemed to tremble the ground for kilometres in all directions.

“I suppose I ought to summon new minions and get back to growing my Guard and Archer corps, and get some new Adventurers for next time it comes back.”

Suddenly a dark pillar rose out of the ground in front of my Guild Office. It was very reflective and reminded me of a stone I had once seen on the shore of my pond. There were a bunch of smiling faces etched all over it, but somehow it didn’t seem to be a very happy individual who stepped out of its sliding door.

Imu made a horrified noise and quickly got on the ground, burying his forehead in the dirt at the feet of the figure. He was very tall, at least four metres, but he looked like a skin-covered skeleton, given that he was as thin as a stick-bug. He had three-metre-long silver-white hair full of braids and gemstones and other trinkets. For clothes, he wore a long all-encompassing robe of woven-together black feathers and on his face was a porcelain mask with a simple noseless smiling face.

He immediately looked towards where I floated.

“*You...*”

“Me?” I asked, wondering if he could hear me speak even in my current form.

*“I’ve been following your progress for a while... After all, my cute little Imuxikwiht is your Guide as a Core. But I have to say...”* he drew in a deep breath and sighed slowly. *“You need to take better care of your minions.”*

“Why? Who are you?”

*“I hope Imuxikwiht has taught you about souls and reincarnation.”*

“I have, my Lord!” Imu said, forehead still planted on the ground, as though looking upon the figure could hurt him.

*“Then you should know that many of the souls of your minions have found their way to my realm and they don’t say nice things about working for you, Toad...”*

“It’s not my fault they die so easily,” I defended myself. “Also, you still haven’t told me who you are! Why should I care what you think!? It’s my settlement!”

“Shut the hell up, Toady!” Imu yelled in outrage at me challenging the bizarre figure.

*“It is okay, Imuxikwiht. Toad, you must treasure the lives of minions, lest they revolt against you and destroy your Core. It is a rare thing, but it does happen. And to answer your question, my name is Deathheim, God of Eternity, Undeath, and Minion Unionisation.”*

“Unionisation? What’s that?”

*“It’s a new concept I’ve been trying to get Cores like yourself to adopt, so our soul recycle program doesn’t become tainted with angry rebellious minion souls who were abused and mistreated by their Cores. Basically, it allows your minions to set terms for how much they wish to work and how they’re compensated for their work.”*

“That smells like Frogstools,” I commented suspiciously.

The figure waved a bone-thin nine-fingered hand in the air:

*Congratulations! For accepting Lord Deathheim’s Minion Unionisation policies, you unlocked the ability to construct a Minion Help Centre!*

*>Structures>Worship*

—Minion Help Centre—

*A place for minions to gather and share grievances about their working conditions and negotiate better treatment from their Core, as well as receiving the ability to call the Deathheim Inc. Minion Unionisation hotline for help in settling disputes and such with their Core*

*Required Materials: Wood & Stone*

“Hey! I didn’t accept anything!”

Upset, I wanted to use my Appraisal on the God of Minion Unionisation, but it came up with an error message:

*You do not have the permission to utilise Appraisal on a God Entity.*

Deathheim retreated cowardly back into his strange stone tube and no sooner had the door closed behind him that the entire thing disappeared down into the ground again.

“I’m not building *that thing*,” I complained.

“Disrespect Lord Deathheim again and I’ll quit,” Imu told me angrily.

“Fine. I’ll build it...”

“It’s not about the *blessed* building, you swamp-gas-for-a-brain! I want you to respect my Lord!”

“Okay. Sorry...”

“And yeah, we’re *not* building that dumb building,” he told me.

“Didn’t you just tell me not to—?”

“We don’t need unions. Lord Deathheim’s attempts at helping minions are admirable, but it’s bad for our productivity, and we need our minions to work their butts off if we want to survive the next attack from that goddamn Hydra-Goose...”

## 25 — The First Guild Quest?

We were close to three-hundred minions in total when some strange whomens entered my town. The reconstruction of the ruined parts of my settlement was largely completed and I once again had Guards and Archers, as well as five Adventurers whom Imu had named.

“What are those?”

“They look like Adventurers. Real ones, not the imitations you have.”

“Why do they look so...?”

“Normal? Handsome? Beautiful?”

“Those weren’t the words I’d have used.”

“They look that way because they’re normal non-inbred humans. I know the concept of an untainted gene pool may confuse and terrify you, but these are what humans usually look like. Granted, many Adventurers are very vain and take their skincare and makeup routines very seriously.”

“Look! One of them is entering the Guild Office!”

I quickly possessed the body of the Guild Master and exclaimed magnanimously: “Welcome to the Toad Town Adventurers’ Guild!”

The man, a tall chainmail-and-plate-armour wearing whomen, upon whose back hung a sword close to the same height as him. “Salutations, Guild Master of Toad Town.” He looked around the hall, where my five Adventurers currently lounged, having nothing to occupy themselves with. “Did you just recently open? I don’t see any quest fliers available.”

*Imu, what’s a ‘quest’?*

*It’s basically a task you give to someone who isn’t your minion, in exchange for a reward.*

*How do I make a quest flier?*

*Just have your Guild Master sit by his desk and think of the task you have in mind, then it should appear on one of the boards in the room.*

I hopped over to the Master’s desk and sat down, the Adventurer and his two companions staring at me. Then I moved my hand over the stack of papers on the desk in a vague noncommittal gesture and suddenly the top-most paper lifted from the stack and flew to a quest board on the other side of the Guild Office.

Immediately, the five minion Adventurers got up to look at it, but then they quickly shook their heads and sat back down again.

The tall man and his two companions walked over to look at the quest. His companions were: a White Elf woman who dressed similar to the terrifying Missionary and carried a wooden staff with a bell at the end; and a short dwarf woman who carried a strange sort of bow that looked very powerful.

I utilised my Appraisal to learn more about her weapon:

**Name:** *Challi's Crossbow*

**Occupation:** *Crossbow*

**Species:** *Crossbownicus Hitveryhardicas*

**Level:** *21/100*

**Alignment:** *Tendency-to-kickback-with-recoil-but-otherwise-friendly*

**Faction:** *No-scope-endorsing Crossbows United*

*Can we build one of those bows?*

*Not yet, you have to be a Castle Town first. They're strong but troublesome to use in a fight.*

*"Guild Master," said the tall man. "We'll take this quest."*

**Quest:** *'Calamity Hydra-Goose'*

**Type:** *Extermination*

**Required Adventurer Rank:** *Bronze*

**Reward:** *10.000 Copper Toakens*

**Description:** *A Hydra-Goose has been harassing Toad Town for months. Locate its lair in or around the forest and slay it. Proof of successful kill required.*

*You're sending them to their deaths... Imu commented. I mean, look at them!*

**Name:** *Harland*

**Occupation:** *Zweihander Vanguard (Bronze Rank Adventurer)*

**Species:** *Human*

**Level:** *52/100*

**Alignment:** *Brave-and-reckless*

**Faction:** *Hekkenfelt Adventurers' Guild (Royal Court of Cimbra)*

**Name:** *Challi*  
**Occupation:** *Crossbow Ranger (Bronze Rank Adventurer)*  
**Species:** *Black Mountain Dwarf*  
**Level:** *46/100*  
**Alignment:** *Arrogant-and-cunning*  
**Faction:** *Hekkenfelt Adventurers' Guild (Royal Court of Cimbra)*

**Name:** *Cimbra Lightveil*  
**Occupation:** *Divine Purger (Silver Rank Adventurer)*  
**Species:** *White Elf*  
**Level:** *67/100*  
**Alignment:** *Slightly-fanatical-and-very-self-centred*  
**Faction:** *Hekkenfelt Adventurers' Guild (Royal Court of Cimbra)*

*They seem pretty strong, I replied.*

*Even their levels combined are less than what the Goose<sup>3</sup> had before it killed all our minions and ransacked the town...*

With their flier in hand, the party of three left the Guild Office. As they crossed the threshold, an achievement appeared and shortly after System came running.

*Congratulations! For creating your first Adventurers' Guild quest and having one-or-more Adventurers accept it, you have gained the [I'll Take That!] perk!*

*[I'll Take That!] – Whenever an Adventurer on a quest you created dies, their items are moved into your Guild Office's vault for distribution amongst other Adventurers or to be sold for a profit in your stores.*

“Is the System encouraging us to get Adventurers killed?” Imu asked, having suddenly appeared from behind the Guild Master's desk.

I did the best blink I could manage while possessing the Guild Master in response, then said, “Maybe that's not such a bad thing?”

“I suppose I'll look away so long as it's Humans, Sub-Humans, and White Elves that get got.”

“Is there a way we can follow them?”

“Not technically,” Imu said, “But you can craft something using the Toadcaller and... erm... take a look:”

[*Crafting List*]

>*Structures*>*Core Upgrades*

—Scrying Pond (Hermit’s Lodge & Adventurers’ Guild Branch Office)—

*Unlocks the ability for the Core to conjure the image of any Adventurers engaging in a quest they have created, even if it is outside their Demesne*

*Required Materials: Peeping Minion’s Soul, Eighteen Eyeballs, & 1 live toad*

“We are not using an innocent toad for this!”

“Don’t you want to see how those three fare against the Honking Calamity?”

“We’re not killing the precious toad, are we??”

“From what I can tell, no.”

“Alright, fine, I’ll call the Toadcaller over.”

After about an hour, the Scrying Pond was finished.

The Toadcaller had brought his own live toad, a precious little murky-brown fella named Toad-Steve and I had found many willing donors to give me the eyeballs, before Imu had pointed out that there were already, bizarrely, more than fifty eyeballs in the storage of our barns. The Peeping Minion was rather easy to find too, since he had been hanging around outside the Bakery, liking his lips every time the Bakers moved around and their white aprons shifted to reveal the grisly bits underneath.

“I can’t believe what he did to that minion,” Imu remarked, visibly shaken.

“I’m more confused why the toad needed to eat all those eyeballs,” I replied.

“Have you noticed that your Toadcaller has reached max level by the way? I’m not even sure how he survived his one-on-one with the Goose<sup>3</sup>.”

I used my Appraisal, and sure enough, the Toadcaller was now the single strongest minion in my settlement.



**Name:** *Toadcaller*  
**Occupation:** *Toadcaller*  
**Species:** *Whomanoid Minion*  
**Level:** *50/50*  
**Alignment:** *Chaos Incarnate*  
**Faction:** *Toad Town*

“Can I evolve him again?”

Imu was about to reply, but then frowned. “I can’t tell you, thanks to the Spoiler-Free Zone perk in action...”

I hopped closer to the pond that sat in the middle of the Guild Office floor. Imu, the Toadcaller, and my five listless Adventurers all gathered around as well.

“Let’s have a look,” I said.

## 26 — Eye Spy?

*Now spectating team: 'Royal Court of Cimbra' engaging in quest: 'Calamity Hydra-Goose'!*

Harland and Cimbra were following Challi as she tracked the sparse evidence of the monster's passing. Mostly, it seemed to be feathers and occasional massive two-metre-long webbed feet footprints in the forest earth.

“What's a hydra-goose anyway?” asked Harland.

“Who cares, *Harl*,” Cimbra replied.

“I feel like it has to be strong if it's worth so many coins. Although, I've never heard of Toaken as a currency.”

“I've got a proper track on it,” Challi told them. As a Ranger, she had a talent for finding the tracks of any beast, and their group, although reasonably new, had utilised her skills many times to find the monsters they made a job of hunting. They had previously slain a Fire Drake in the north, defeated a Mature Gryphon terrorising the city of Arlsmeadow, and successfully captured a Mirror Basilisk that'd made a nest in the ruins of an ancient city near the town they were based out of, Hekkenfelt.

Harland was fairly sure they were among the foremost experts on fighting monsters. Sure, there were other parties more renowned for their progress into the various dungeons on the continent, but the Royal Court of Cimbra had made quite a name for themselves already. After all, it was this reputation that had seen Earl Sharpee contact them in the first place to slay a strange new monster in this forest within his territory.

Seeing the uncharted town in the middle of the forest had been a surprise, but it had been a fortuitous event, given that they would now be paid twice for bringing justice to this Hydra-Goose.

Challi lifted a hand and unslung her crossbow, with Harland grasping his own Zweihander shortly after. They were close now.

After pushing past some heavy shrubbery, they came out into a clearing of sorts, where a massive pond lay. Its stagnant waters were littered with dead animals: toads, frogs, foxes, small birds, squirrels, rabbits, lizards, and many others that were either so decimated by decay or the feasting of the beast that they were impossible to discern.

Harland moved up in front of Challi. He was a Vanguard after all, so he was the one who always went in first. He hefted his heavy weapon up in front of himself and said a brief prayer to the Lord of Battle, Morrlight. Upon the opposite side of the pond, where the mud met with the grass and moss of the forest, there lay an enormous beast.

“So *that’s* a hydra-goose?” he mumbled. It looked bizarre, but its size alone made it fearsome.

“I ain’t never seen such a beastie,” Challi said. “Six wings, six legs, three heads?”

“Cimbra, Appraisal?”

“It’s too strong for me to identify it properly.”

“Stronger than the Basilisk?”

Cimbra Lightveil nodded, clutching her bell-staff a bit tighter.

They all shared a glance. “What do we think?” Harland asked.

“We slay it,” Challi answered arrogantly.

“It’s a lot of money,” Cimbra added.

Harland nodded. “We don’t give it a chance to retaliate. Start off with your strongest attacks.”

Challi got on her knees, lifting her crossbow up to her shoulder and sighting down its basic scope. “*Critical Ambush*,” she said, activating her first augmentation skill. Then she followed it with, “*Hunter’s Quarry Sight. Strength Up. Piercing Bolt*,” and a litany of other skills.

“*Elemental Protection*,” Cimbra chanted, pinging the bell of her staff lightly and moving her hand across them. “*Physical Protection*,” she added, repeating the gesture. Then she nodded to Harland and he cast his own skills.

As he moved around the side of the pond through the sparse grass and weeds that grew along its edge, he mumbled: “*Strength Up. Sharpen Blade. All Eyes On Me*,” then he finished with his ultimate buff: “*Morrlight’s Dance of Wrath*.”

Power travelled down his body, flooding his mind with hyperfocus and making his muscle turn to unbreakable steel, while his blood felt like scalding lava in his veins. With a single kick from the ground, he strode forward with his Zweihander lifted high above his head, his body moving so fast that he seemed to let off a trail of smoke behind it.

“**EXECUTION!**” he yelled and chopped his blade through one of the slumbering beast’s three heads.

A jarring vibration shot up through his arms and his blade made a strange *woooouaaang* sound as it shook from the blunt impact against the impossible-tough feathers on the Hydra-Goose’s neck.

It was unthinkable, but his strongest attack, imbued with the strength of many buffs had only managed to slightly ruffle one of the feathers on the Monster's neck.

As it awoke from the disturbance, it stood up and towered over him by over seven metres. Its necks untangled themselves from each other and it prepared to chomp on him with its toothed beak, but he quickly swung his blade through a series of three follow-up swings, "*ONSLAUGHT!*"

Again, no real damage was inflicted on the beast, despite each hit striking true, though two feathers did fall from its body where he connected.

A moment later, a bolt with the force of a thunderstrike slammed into the neck of the nearest head, but aside from nudging it slightly, it had similarly no effect and the bolt, which Harland had seen tear their way through steel armour, broke apart into a hundred fragments.

More bolts followed, while Harland continued moving through his repertoire of skills, slashing away at its wings, legs, body, feet, anything that might be a weak-point, but nothing happened. He might as well be fighting with a wet towel in his hands.

Then a pillar of light enveloped the Hydra-Goose and he heard Cimbra yell in the distance:

*"Purging Light!"*

He was momentarily blinded, but when the light faded half a minute later, the Monster looked no worse for wear.

Harland was about to shout the command to retreat, but then it swung one of its wings at him and he found himself lift off the ground, flying across the clearing back towards his team.

He regained consciousness momentarily, just in time to see Challi squished underneath a giant webbed foot and Cimbra torn into three separate pieces by the three heads that fought amongst themselves to get the biggest piece.

The last thing he saw was a glow build within the mouth of the central head, and then came the scalding fire that ended his life.

### *Spectating cancelled due to: Team Elimination*

"Deathheim give me strength," Imu muttered as the Scrying pond cleared and became reflective as a mirror again.

"You were right," I told him. "It's too strong."

"Yeah, no kidding."

“But!”

“What?”

“Look at all the stuff we got from their deaths!” I commented, peeking into the vault of the Guild Office. “I’m gonna give these items to three of my Adventurers.”

“You know when I said that it gets tiring when Cores have moral dilemmas? Yeah, I take that back. Please have a slight amount of remorse for getting people brutally murdered...”

“I’m putting up the quest again.”

“You’re not even listening to me...”

***Quest: ‘Calamity Hydra-Goose’***

***Type: Extermination***

***Required Adventurer Rank: Silver***

***Reward: 12.500 Copper Toakens***

***Description: A Hydra-Goose has been harassing Toad Town for months. Locate its lair in or around the forest and slay it. Proof of successful kill required.***

***Warning: The Hydra-Goose has already slain one team attempting this quest!***

“Hm, it requires a higher rank now, and the reward went up,” I commented, annoyed.

“It also has a warning now, huh? I suppose the System isn’t 100% bad...”

“I’m feeling restless.”

“Let’s get back to building,” Imu told me. “Too long without building or being active can be detrimental to a Core, especially the stronger you get.”

“I wanna build the Gentlewhomen’s Club.”

“Hell forbid we actually build something useful first...”

## 27 — Gaol'd?

“What an ugly building,” Imu commented, looking at the Gentlewomen’s Club. It was three stories tall, made to look like a fancy mansion, and sat up against the inner wall of my settlement, not far from where the Mayor’s House and the new Mayor resided and the Guild Office a bit further down the ‘street’, where my three newly-outfitted Adventurers were leaving with a quest flier in hand:

***Quest:*** ‘*Look at the Shiny-Shiny!*’

***Type:*** *Acquisition*

***Required Adventurer Rank:*** *Wood*

***Reward:*** *500 Copper Toakens*

***Description:*** *Toad Town is looking for intel on ore deposits containing Silver, Gold, and other valuable metals. This quest can be completed for each unique type of ore deposit found.*

“I’m surprised you actually managed to make your Adventurers do something that won’t get them immediately killed,” Imu commented bleakly.

The other two Adventurers I had sent off with a quest to find Hekkenfelt, the place where ‘*The Royal Court of Cimbra*’ had been from.

***Quest:*** ‘*To Hekkenfelt!*’

***Type:*** *Discovery*

***Required Adventurer Rank:*** *Wood*

***Reward:*** *200 Copper Toakens*

***Description:*** *Toad Town is looking for intel on the town of Hekkenfelt, such as a route map and the makeup of their Guild Office and other local institutions.*

*Lazy unproductive slobs! Get over here!*

Nothing happened.

“You do realise how counterintuitive it is to try and force lazy unproductive minions to do something, right?”

“Should I make those Slaver whips and man-catchers I unlocked 13 chapters ago?” I asked, intentionally breaking the 4<sup>th</sup> wall to make the reader uncomfortable with my self-awareness. Yes, *you*, dear reader. I am now addressing you directly. That’s right. A fictional Toad character is talking directly to you.

“Stop that,” Imu scolded me. “You’ll drive away the readers!”

I retreated back into the walls that confined the narrative and Imu then said, “I don’t think forcing them into evolving is a great idea. Maybe just let them wander here by themselves. Aristocracy types tend to nominate themselves based on literally fuck-all in terms of ability to acumen, so give it just a day and they should be flooding into the Gentlewhomen’s Club.”

“I’ve been wondering about something,” I said.

“Uh oh.”

“Why is our lowest Adventurer Rank ‘*Wood*’?”

“Well, normally, it would be Tin, but we haven’t found that metal yet, so it currently goes like this: Wood > Stone > Knitted Yarn > Quarried Stone > Frog Hide > ~~Tin~~ > Iron > Copper > ~~Bronze~~ > ~~Silver~~ > ~~Gold~~ > ~~Rose-Gold~~.”

“All the ones you verbally put a line through are ones we don’t possess?”

“Obviously. Also, how were you able to hear that I put a line through them?”

“Same way the readers can see it,” I replied, once again turning to look at the reader. Yes, you. The person currently reading this exact sentence in this very moment.

“Stop that!” Imu yelled.

By the foot of the tremendous undertaking that was the Castle lay my newly-finished Gaol. It was built into the stones of the Castle foundation and dove down into the earth like the nest of a Burrowing Toad. At the bottom lay a hallway with ten cells, five on each side, which had required a lot of wrought iron to construct, but we had a surplus, despite all the construction that required it. After the ten cells was a metal-reinforced wooden door behind which lay a torture chamber.

The three Jailers I had evolved to work inside the Gaol all seemed to *reaaaally* like the torture chamber.

“How did you find three cruel minions so fast?” Imu wondered.

“I just went to the Butchershop and took three out of the crowd gathered there to listening to the mourning song of the remaining frog cattle every time a new one was sent to be slaughtered.”

“Lord Deathheim wasn’t kidding about the degrading quality of minion souls...” Imu commented bleakly.

“Should we try to imprison someone?” I asked.

“What!?! No, don’t be insane!”

*Guards! Apprehend the newcomer to the Toad Town and put him into the Goal!*

“Stop! What’s wrong with you, you *blessed* lunatic!”

“But look at *him*! Isn’t he asking for it?”

Imu got onto the back of Goldie and hopped towards where I’d indicated. A new Adventurer was walking down the main avenue of the northern quadrant, eyeing all the Merchant shops and such with clear arrogant disdain.

**Name:** *Kyle Hawthorn*

**Occupation:** *Gunslinging Ranger (Copper Rank Adventurer)*

**Species:** *Molerat Midget*

**Level:** *24/100*

**Alignment:** *Thinks-he’s-the-main-character*

**Faction:** *Kyle Hawthorn’s Fanclub*

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It was another great day to be Kyle Hawthorn, gunslinging ranger and all-around badass. It was just a shame that he had wandered into some misbegotten shithole that lacked any women to throw themselves at him, because that’s how awesome he was.

Kyle almost tripped when he stepped on his own coattails again for seventeenth time in the last twenty minutes, but he managed to make it look cool, because he was Kyle Hawthorn and he was amazing.

As he wandered down the disgusting streets of the forest-dwelling town, he noted with dismay how inbred and gross all the inhabitants were, not to mention their utter lack of taste in fashion!

With a twirl, he flung out his gun and aimed it at one of the awful creatures: a figure twirling around with two loaves of bread in his hands and the white apron he wore seeming to mesmerise the gathered crowd of bug-eyed people as it swished around, unveiling his gruesomely-naked bits every time it strayed too far from his body.



Kyle spun the gun around again, before depositing it in the holster on the hip of his brilliant mauve-coloured suit, with flourishing coattails, neat lapels, and expensive fabric.

“Not today he said,” with his gruff and cool voice.

Then suddenly a group of those inbred-looking people came running at him, dressed in filthy leather suits with rubber boots and weird swimming-cap-looking hats. He quickly pulled his gun out again and clicked the trigger, but nothing happened.

“Damn you, Fraedrich!” he cursed. His runaway manservant had forgotten to reload the weapon for him, and such a task was obviously beneath Kyle Hawthorne, brilliant and world-famous adventurer that he was.

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“He’s really struggling,” Imu commented. “I guess we can pretend our arrest was because he was waving his weapon around.”

“What kind of weapon is *that*? Also, why does he look so gross?”

“It’s a gun, I think, although it looks like it has never been fired. Also, pot calling kettle black.” Imu rubbed his chubby cheeks. “Although now that you say it, he really is awful to look at. I’ve never even heard of a *Molerat Midget*, but I guess they deserve to go extinct. Yuck. Better lock him away before your minions form a mob to crucify him.”

“They would do that?”

“Even disgusting humanoids like your minions will be upset about a stain against the gods like *this*.”

As my Guards confiscated the gun and dragged the tiny-eyed large-toothed midget off to the Goal, I gave the weapon an Appraisal:

**Name:** *Kyle Hawthorn’s Ornamental Flintlock*

**Occupation:** *Ornament*

**Species:** *Ornamental Firearm (Display Piece)*

**Level:** *1/1*

**Alignment:** *Vain-and-useless-just-like-its-wielder*

**Faction:** *Kyle Hawthorn’s Fanclub*

“I think I’ll give this to my Guild Master.”

“I suppose it would look alright in his hands, though it’s clearly not made to be used like a real gun.”

“How do you think he managed to get to Copper Rank with a useless weapon?”

Imu shrugged his squat shoulders. “Some places just hand out ranks for completing menial tasks. He’s probably never even been in a fight. I’m just surprised he made it past childhood without being forcibly removed from the gene pool.”

## 28 — Aristocracy?

After locking the disgusting Molerat Midget in the Gaol, I unlocked a new achievement:

*Congratulations! For jailing an innocent person for the crime of being ugly, you have unlocked the ability to craft an Executioner's Slab and can now evolve a Butcher into an Executioner!*

*>Structures>Entertainment*

—Executioner's Slab (Gaol & Mayor's House)—

*Unlocks the ability to evolve a Butcher into an Executioner and enables the public execution of those in your Gaol, which will increase minion satisfaction and motivation for an entire day*

*Required Materials: Wood*

“That’s... that’s kind of messed up.”

“Where should I put it?”

Imu started massaging the bridge of his tiny nose. “Might as well put it right in front of the Mayor’s House...”

“Great idea!”

“Toady... that was sarcasm.”

“I already placed the blueprint.”

He sighed loudly, and even Goldie let out an adorable chirp in agreement with her master.

“I must say,” I started, changing the subject, “the midget is really complaining a lot.”

“He *was* jailed just for being ugly,” Imu pointed out.

“By the way,” he added, “don’t you think it’s time?”

“Time? Time for what?”

“You know... time to teach your minions how to speak?”

“What do you mean?”

“...Please tell me you have noticed.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Deathheim grant me strength...” he prayed. “Toad... your minions are unable to speak. They can literally only gibber, grunt, chirp, or make other inane sounds.”

“But then, how are they able to communicate?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea.”

“And didn’t some of them go to towns and cities and trade our produce for money? How’d they do that if they couldn’t communicate?”

“One of life’s great mysteries, that. Although, I suspect they were basically robbed, given how little coin and other random materials returned with the carts...”

“Then how do we teach them to talk?”

“Check it out.” He waved his hand into the air and an entry in the Crafting List appeared:

[*Crafting List*]

>*Structures*>*Education*

—Whomen Language School (Workbench, Hermit’s Lodge, & Mayor’s House)—

*Unlocks the ability for your Toadcaller to teach the rest of your minions to talk like whomens*

*Required Materials: Timber, Stone, & Wrought Iron*

“Wait. My Toadcaller is capable of speech already?”

“He is the minion who looks most human,” Imu replied. “Also, have you not heard him when he chants his spells?”

“I’ll put it next to the Merchant Shops so they can learn the language first, then I’ll evolve them into Wandering Merchants.”

“Solid plan,” he told me.

“I can’t believe we were robbed!” I exclaimed.

“It was just a theory.”

“ROBBED I SAY! I will teach my Merchants the ability to haggle so fiercely that all the backstabbing people of other towns will have no choice but to let go of all their hard-earnt money!”

“How do you even know what haggling is?” he asked.

“THE RISE OF TOAD TOWN IS IMMINENT!!!”

“Alright, calm down there, Toady-boy. You’re starting to worry me again.”

“Sorry. It’s just...”

“Yea?”

“I’ve discovered something new about myself.”

“Tell me more.”

“I *really* love money.”

Imu sighed. “...Somehow you *still* manage to let down my expectations and I basically have none left at this point.”

“Oh, look! More Adventurers!”

“Hells, you’ve got the attention span of a bee.”

“Thank you.”

“It wasn’t a compliment.”

“Oh.”

I quickly appraised the two newcomers to my settlement:

**Name:** *Lyzänder*

**Occupation:** *Wand Magus (Silver Rank Adventurer)*

**Species:** *Halfling*

**Level:** *69/100*

**Alignment:** *Full-of-potential*

**Faction:** *Woodfell Adventurers’ Guild (Team Chesticles)*

**Name:** *Nim-Nem-Nom*

**Occupation:** *Illusionistic Fleetfoot Scoundrel (Silver Rank Adventurer)*

**Species:** *¿Definitely Human?*

**Level:** *62/100*

**Alignment:** *Full-of-conflicting-and-overlapping-emotions*

**Faction:** *Woodfell Adventurers’ Guild (Team Chesticles)*

The first character was short like the disgusting Molerat Midget had been, but look way less abominable and exuded a charming aura that seemed to make many of my idle and unassigned minions look his way, attention which he seemed to be revelling in, while he twirled his long wand in his hands skilfully.

The second person was an odd one though. First off, they were twice as tall as Lyzänder and their movements were wobbling and uncoordinated, like three stones stacked unevenly and shifting constantly in the wind. Where the Halfling wore well-fitting seemingly-tailored clothing, the tall figure wore a simple buttoned-up coat that was so long that it dragged behind them as they carefully wobbled down the main avenue towards the wall behind which lay the Guild Office. Additionally, what little of their body was visible, mainly the head, had a long and thick nose, floppy and huge ears, and dark-emerald-green skin with scales.

“Is that three goblins in a trench-coat?” Imu asked. “Also, why is that Halfling holding his wand like *that*?”

“Do you think they’ll accept the quest to fight the Honking Calamity?”

“Who knows. Maybe they’re just looking around?”

“But I want their items for my Adventurers!”

“...You want them to die, you mean. Why don’t you just kill them in the open and get it over with then?”

“But that would be mean and evil.”

“...And basically luring them to their deaths isn’t?”

“They themselves decide if they want to take the quest!”

“Alright, fine. Let’s just see what they do.”

Quick as a dragonfly, I flew into the body of my Guild Master and greeted the two new visitors. They ignored my welcoming gestures and went straight to the Quest Boards, skimming over all the menial ones and picking the one for the Calamity Goose<sup>3</sup>.

“Get the money ready,” said the Halfling, hefting the flier in the air in front of the Guild Master as they left out the door.

From the tall figure, who kept banging their forehead against every wooden beam in the building, came three separate voices, each saying the same thing: “**Money! Money! Money!**”

After using the Scrying Pond and watching the new party struggle to find their quest target for over an hour, I got bored and floated out through the Guild Office, heading towards the Gentlewomen’s Club, where, to my elation, a couple dozen lazy unproductive minions lounged around within, complaining about the lack of serving staff.

Since evolving, I had learnt to selective target things with my essence, not only making me quicker and better at possessing my leader-type minions like the Mayor and Guild Master, but also

enabling me to selectively evolve minions, without the need to evacuate all others nearby lest I create another minion meatball monstrosity.

So, I quickly swept through the Club, evolving the minions into Aristocracy until I reached the limit of twenty. When all twenty had been evolved, the remaining four lazy minions were seen as intruding plebeian scum and were ousted from the Club.

“*Quack!* I daresay the utter lack of service in this establishment is utter frogstools!”

“*Chirp!* Indeed, my fellow high-minded twin! We ought to pen a strongly-worded letter to the proprietor and condemn them for such wanton lack of attention paid to us proper whomenfolk.”

“*Ribbit!* Would anyone like to breed with me?”

“*Quack!* Why don’t you breed with one of those unevolved ones!”

“*Croak!* Are you sure you even belong here?”

“*Chirp!* What horny barbarian have we let into our midst, my twins!?”

Sudden laughter broke out across the Club, as all the Aristocratic minions mocked the one who had dared suggest they mate. This troubled me, because I needed them to do *just that* to create a minion worthy of becoming a Lord.

With laughter and croaking sounds filling the Club, the mocked Aristocrat left with his head low to commit the heinous act of actually mixing his superior lazy and unproductive genes with those of the lowborn unevolved minions.

“What an utter waste of resources,” Imu commented. “If it wasn’t for the fact that it’s a requirement and the literal only way to enable you to evolve a Lord for your Castle, then I’d suggest we burn it to the ground.”

“Why are they able to talk? I haven’t built the Whomen Language School yet...”

“I... erm...” Imu quickly scrolled through his Encyclopaedia. “Hm. There’s no explanation for it,” he answered with a shrug. “Just one of *those things* I guess.”

“Have you seen System lately?”

“Yeah, she’s harassing the midget in the Gaol.”

“What should I do with him?”

“Apologise?”

“ABSOLUTELY NOT!”

“Okay. First off, don’t yell at me, you ingrate. Secondly, this is why you think things through.”

“I think I’ll execute him. My minions need to have some fun.”

Imu sighed. “Why did you curse me with helping a psycho, Lord Deathheim?”

## 29 — A Feast for Goose<sup>3</sup>?

After evolving my Butcher to Executioner, his crimson Santa Clause outfit turned completely black and he grew a long braided beard the colour of tar. The Butcher's Axe in his hands evolved into a massive jet-black scythe. For some reason, the spine of the long curving blade was studded with blinking frog eyes and the long handled ended in a webbed foot.

**Name:** *Requiem for a Frog*

**Occupation:** *Executioner's Scythe*

**Species:** *Scythe (Tool)*

**Level:** *143/666*

**Alignment:** *Evil*

**Faction:** *Tsukumogami (Possessed Object)*

Just like with when I evolved my Mayor into Guild Master, I had to evolve another minion to the now-vacant position, but I also had to craft another Butcher's Axe to give the new Butcher. Fortunately, I didn't think there was anything wrong with having two weapons in my settlement that inflicted insanity on their wielders. After all, what was the worst that could happen?

Kyle the Molerat Midget was yelling obscenities at all the minions gathered around the Executioner's Slab, while the icon of death, Black Santa, stood ready, a grin on his big-lipped face and an unhinged expression in his huge eyes.

The Mayor, Guild Master, and all my new Aristocracy stood by themselves, while the unevolved and unassigned minions gathered around, gibbering loudly. Some of them spoke what might pass for words, thanks to completing the intro course to Whomen Language at my new school that the Toadcaller reluctantly visited once a day to teach my minions for half an hour.

"I still think this is going to backfire. What if he's the heir to some super powerful Molerat Midget dynasty? Or maybe he's an über-powerful drug kingpin!?"

"But he's disgusting," I replied, not sure why Imu cared so much.

*Execute him!*



Before Imu could argue his point further, the Executioner let his scythe fall on Kyle's neck, sending his head bouncing off the ground for a few metres before it rolled to a standstill. With a bloody hand, the Executioner ran his fingers through his braided beard.

I wondered what we should do with the body, but then Goldie hopped over and swallowed the headless body in one gulp, a horrified Imu sitting atop her back and unable to stop her before she hopped towards the head next.

But then System came running, grabbed the Molerat Midget's head and cupped it under her armpit and ran off.

*Congratulations! For successfully executing a captive of your settlement, you have gained the [Death Sentence] perk!*

*[Death Sentence] – Enables you to tag any humanoid within your demesne and mark them for execution. All your enforcement-type minions will attempt to arrest them and as soon as they have been captured they will be publicly executed.*

I wondered what the Executioner thought about all this, so I used my Mind-reader on him:

*I am fuelled by death. With enough lives sacrificed to me and my blade, I can ascend and return to haunt the Imps who slew me in a past life!*

“Should we warn the System Imps about this?” I asked Imu.

“To *heaven* with them,” he replied.

System had disappeared with the head and I never saw what happened to it in the end.

*Now spectating team: ‘Team Chesticle’ engaging in quest: ‘Calamity Hydra-Goose’!*

After a day and a half, they had finally found the first signs of their quarry. Lyzänder wasn't big on monster-hunting quest but he had assumed the Goblin Trio would have at least had some sort of tracking skills in their bountiful arsenal. He had focused on firepower almost exclusively, with the only exception being performance-enhancers for when he had to *really* lay down pipe. Granted, he had perhaps gone a bit too overboard with that Enchantress in upper Woodfell and she had cursed

him with a magical STI that made his gait awkward and had some *unfortunate* side-effects on his potency.

“I expected you to be better than this, Nim-Nem-Nom,” he complained.

“**Nim Illusionist, not Tracker!**”

“**Nem Fleetfoot, not Ranger!**”

“**Nom Scoundrel, not Tracking Ranger!**”

Lyzänder sighed for what must’ve been the forty-seventh time. For some reason, the Goblins insisted on staying in the giant-sized trench-coat.

“I must say: these feathers are quite tough for belonging to a goose,” he remarked, lifting one of the steel-strong feathers into the air. If the hollow shaft was attached to a proper handle and the edges sharpened, it might make for quite a powerful dagger.

“**Hydra-Goose,**” Nim corrected him.

“What even is a Hydra-Goose?” Lyzänder asked out loud.

“**Goose, many heads!**” Nem answered.

“**Hydra-Goose, very strong, ancient calamity!**” Nom added.

“It can’t be that bad,” he replied. “It’s just Silver-Rank in difficulty, so it can’t be worse than a Spine-Bear or Murder-Slug.”

It was *that* bad. Actually, it was worse just bad. Worse even than a Super-Murder-Slug, which he had fought only once, an encounter he still bore the sticky scars from.

“Come on, you useless goblins! I can’t keep the shield up much longer!” he yelled to his frozen-stiff companions, while using his throbbing magically-engorged wand to keep the barrier up, while one of the Goose<sup>3</sup>’s three heads continued spewing scalding flames at them.

When cracks began forming along the edges of his Arcane Panic-Bubble, the trench-coat fell to the ground and the three goblins jumped out into a fantastic power pose, before yelling:

“**We the fearsome Goblin Triplets! Nim!**”

“**Nem!**”

“**Nom!**”

Then Nim cast a doppelganger spell that copied all of them five times, such that an army of ugly green creatures crowded the area behind Lyzänder. In that same moment, the Panic-Bubble burst and he managed to dive aside, as the flame continued on through half the copies and turned Nem to ashes in a second.

With a roar of terrified outrage, the remaining two goblins and their doppelganger horde charged the enormous Honking Calamity, but no sooner had they begun their charge than the third head spewed out noxious gas that shrivelled them up into ancient time-ravaged corpses that in the blink-of-an-eye underwent the whole gamut of decay.

“For fuck’s sake,” he cursed, seeing his companions immediately defeated. Never trust a goblin’s word, the old saying in Woodfell went, but Lyzänder had not wanted to look a gift-horse in the mouth, though, thinking back on it, trusting an illusionist goblin and his obviously-fake Guild credentials should’ve given it away...

The vicious breath attacks stopped, perhaps because both fire and decaying breath had kicked up such a storm of dust and ash that he was momentarily obscured from its sight. He could turn tail and run, but it was likely the beast would track him and he wasn’t that fast of a runner anyway. Instead, he decided to trust his superior magical powers to defeat this calamitous quarry, and, with no companions to be wary of, he could go hog-wild.

He squared his shoulders and grinned confidently, then began to work his way through the incantation for the forbidden spell, the most powerful in his extensive catalogue of destructive incantations: Apocalypse Beam.

As he swished-and-flicked his wand around, the air began to vibrate with building potency, but then, as the smoke and ash cloud cleared and the Goose<sup>3</sup> caught sight of him, his wand began to shrink and droop, the magical power seeming to leak from it. Like, literally leaking from it as a goopy honey-thick fluid of fluorescent arcane-blue.

“Huh... This normally doesn’t happen to me,” he remarked, but then remembered the Enchantress’ curse. As the Honking Calamity was about to tear him to shreds with its three heads, his wand suddenly refilled with vitality, but then continued to become more-and-more engorged, before, finally it blew up.

*Spectating cancelled due to: Team Elimination*

A tremendous quake shook all the trees around the settlement and made Imu let out a terrified squeal when the Guild Office released an ominous creak.

I flew out of the Guild Master’s body and soared high into the air. In the distance, perhaps three-hundred east-northeast of my roughly two-hundred-metre-in-radius demesne, a massive blue fireball was climbing into the air and the clearing there was probably a smouldering crater now.

I slowly descended back down to earth, hoping the Adventurers had items I could gift my Adventurers when they returned from their discovery quest.

“I’ve been wondering,” Imu started, having left the Guild Office perhaps out of fear of its collapse, “what is *that* pond? Why is the Goose<sup>3</sup> using it as its den? Do you know where it is in the forest?”

I had a sudden, horrible realisation. It hadn’t occurred to me earlier, since I had never seen the pond from a whomanoid’s perspective before. “That was my pond! The pond where I was killed! The one ruled over by Toadicus!”

“I have some bad news then.”

“What?”

“Did you notice all those dead toads in the water?”

“Oh no! Those were all my friends, past lovers, and sister-cousins!”

“Probably,” he said, wincing a bit at my descriptions.

“The Hydra-Goose *will pay* for this!” I announced ominously.

“Oh... so it’s only *now* that you actually want to punish it? Not for harassing us since day one?? Not for literally killing you in your past life!? Honestly, what’s wrong with you!?”

## 30 — Toadkin Lord?

[*Evolution Requirements*]

*Town => Castle Town*

- *Build a Castle* -
- *Construct walls to separate and encompass the separate areas of your town* -
  - ~~*Construct a Gaol and evolve 3 cruel minions to Jailer*~~ -
  - *Reach more than 1000 minions (842/1000)* -
- ~~*Build 1 Gentlewomen's Club and evolve 20 lazy unproductive minions to Aristocracy*~~ -
  - ~~*Evolve the most ambitious offspring of two Aristocracy minions to Lord*~~ -
    - *Evolve 20 Guard minions to Cavalry Men* -
    - *Evolve 12 Archer minions to Sharpshooters* -
- *Build 1 Marketplace, evolve 3 Merchants to Wandering Traders, and evolve 3 cart-driving minions to Caravaneers* -
  - *Establish permanent trade and supply routes* -
- ~~*Build 1 Branch Office of the Adventurers' Guild and evolve a Mayor minion to Guild Master*~~ -
  - *Evolve 5 Brave Minions to Adventurers and give them names* -

I looked at the Aristocracy offspring after it had been evolved into a Lord. Imu looked a bit harder than I did, visibly shaken by the appearance he had taken.

“10 points for the actual, proper clothes,” he started, but then spun around to where I hovered and launched a chubby index finger at the new Lord behind him, “but *look* at him! Look at his species! What the *heaven?!?*”

“He seems normal.”

“NORMAL!?! Look at his *blessed* skin and features, you feeble moron!”

Now that I inspected him a bit closer, it was clear that he was different from my other minions. After all, his bulbous eyes were even bigger and his lips were even thicker and more luscious, plus his tongue was quite long, which he seemed to enjoy pointing out by swinging it through the air like

some kind of weapon. But what really set him apart was the fact that his skin was covered in rounded scales, had become brownish-green, and wore a constantly wet sheen. Also, he had no ears anymore, just two small holes.

To figure out exactly what Imu was talking about, I used my Appraisal

**Name:** *Toadskandarr*

**Occupation:** *Lord of Town Toad*

**Species:** *Toadkin*

**Level:** *50/250*

**Alignment:** *Prideful-and-Haughty*

**Faction:** *Toad Town Dynasty*

I wasn't sure how, but he had managed to give himself a name, or maybe the System had decided on it, though it hadn't done so with any other minion before. What also caught my eye was that rather than being of the Toad Town faction, he was part of a dynasty now, just like what Toadicus had had in the pond, before the Honking Calamity took over and killed all his offspring and sister-cousin-wives. Also, given that his maximum level was two-hundred-and-fifty, he might actually be able to fight the Goose<sup>3</sup> and take vengeance for Toads all across the forest.

I had just picked up on the unique species, when—

*Congratulations! For somehow unlocking a new species called 'Toadkin', you have gained the [Superior Toad Genes] perk!*

*[Superior Toad Genes] – Henceforth, every offspring born within your demesne will manifest traits of the Toadkin species. If two such offspring breed, their offspring will become a Toadkin.*

System came running, and though Imu tried to quickly hide, she picked him up and put him on her shoulder, before running around in circles with her arms out, making a strange sound with her mouth like *brrrrrrbrrrrbrrrrbrrrr!*

The Lord sighed, then said, “Where’s my kwastle?”

System immediately stopped and Imu who was holding on to her featureless head for dear life also froze, then they turned to look at the Lord.

“He can speak,” Imu muttered.

“The Aristocrats could speak after their evolutions too,” I reminded him.

“*What* do you think I am?” the Lord replied. “Clearly I’m a superior species, you fat little ball of flesh.”

Imu narrowed his eyes, still sitting on System’s shoulders. “Say carrot.”

“Kwarrot,” the Lord replied.

The Myling grinned sadistically. “Who’s the superior species now?” Imu taunted him. “You speech-impaired pretender! You’re a minion, behave like one!”

“Imu, you’re being really mean,” I told him.

“You clearly just like him because he’s some misbegotten abomination that bears a passing resemblance to your former self. Yesterday you executed someone in public for being ugly! Don’t fucking start with me, Toady!”

Toadskandarr adjusted the collar of his fancy brown cashmere suit, then shook his head sadly, before demanding, “I want my kwastle finished as soon as possible.”

“Yessir!” I obliged and immediately sent all my Builders to obey his command.

“Oi, Toady... why are you listening to your minion?”

“You don’t get it Imu!”

After a mad two days of pushing my Builders to the limit, and then beyond, using newly-assigned Slavers equipped with Slaver Whip, my Castle finally stood finished. But instead of letting the Builders rest on their laurels, I immediately put them to work on the quadrant-diving walls, which were still only twenty percent of the way complete.

“Make sure you keep an eye on the Defiance levels of your Builders,” Imu advised me.

We were inside the giant castle, watching all the newly-assigned maids and servants tend to Lord Toadskandarr and the assembled honest of sycophantic Aristocrats, who all bemoaned their lack of having manifested any traits of the new Toadkin species.

“What are they going to do?” I asked him. “Revolt?”

“Erm... yes. That’s exactly what they’ll do.”

As Goldie hopped out through the door leading to the massive castle gardens, carrying Imu on her back, I floated along behind them.

Thanks to Imu’s design, my large tree stood in the centre of the park-like garden and my childhood pond lay under its massive shadow-casting canopy. The roots of the tree burrowed deep

into the ground and down through several levels of the castle, such that the Toadcaller's lodge, which lay beyond outer walls of the castle, still nestled amongst its roots.

"I like the design," I told him. "You did well."

"Don't patronise me. I know I did well. But, thank you."

"Did you notice that we finished the final house to reach the minion cap of 1000?" I asked him.

"I did," he confirmed.

"I placed another house, but it didn't change the demesne size," I complained. "Why can't we get bigger!?"

Imu sighed. "I probably should have told you about this, but, the size we have now, that is roughly 300 metres in radius out from your tree, is the largest we can naturally grow."

"Oh no!"

"I wasn't finished."

"Oh."

"Once you evolve again, we'll have to \_\_\_\_\_ in order to expand your demesne."

"Did you just get censored?"

"...Yes. *Blessed* System is actively undermining any attempt at planning ahead."

"Can you tell me when I evolve?"

"Sure, but by then it will be too late."

"What should I do then?" I asked, very confused.

"Focus on evolving an army," he told me. "We have loads of unassigned idle minions that are waiting for a purpose. Let's give them one and also be proactive about what's coming, because once \_\_\_\_\_ happens, then all the \_\_\_\_\_ will \_\_\_\_\_ you."

"You just got censored again," I told him.

"I know, you doofus! Read between the lines maybe!"

"Okay!"

Imu sighed. I could tell he had lost faith in me. Or maybe he had never had any in the first place?

"I'll start by evolving my Guards and Archers."

"Attaboy, Toady."



## 31 — Army?

There stood sixty Guards and thirty Archers aligned before my Fletchery and Armoury. Most wore the basic clothes of my Loom minions' manufacturing, but all had their proper weapons. It seemed now that the Frog Hide armour was a sign of seniority amongst my armed minions.

To start off my evolution of a Cavalry Man, I took a Mount and a Guard and somehow managed to get both inside the Armoury's narrow doorway.

"Good thing your toad mounts are so squishy," Imu remarked.

I flooded the building with essence and suddenly a massive smokescreen obscured the entire building, pillars of light shooting out at random in a murky-green lightshow. Even evolving my Lord had not been so spectacular a show, but I saw the reason why, when the smoke dissipated and revealed that, not only had the minions inside evolved, so too had the Armoury.

The building stood now two-stories tall and was equipped with a gate next to its previously-minion-sized entryway, in order to allow *something* bigger to get in and out.

Hopping out of the new gate came the evolved toad Mount and Rider. The Toad had bloated in size, becoming a lot wider, and its rubbery skin was now full of dense keratin plates, making it look like the damned offspring of a toad and a lizard. Additionally, the front legs of the toad had fierce bone protrusions that looked like claws and were sure to be fierce weapons in battle.

As for the Rider, the first Cavalry Man of my settlement, he had undergone a similar metamorphosis as my Lord minion and was now designated as a Toadkin. Unlike my Lord however, his transformation had not only removed his ears and altered his skin, but it had also altered his physique, bulking up his body so that he looked like a whomanoid version of Toadicus.

**Name:** *Cavalry Man*

**Occupation:** *Cavalry Man*

**Species:** *Toadkin*

**Level:** *20/80*

**Alignment:** *Lawful-and-Obedient*

**Faction:** *Toad Town*

The Frog Hide clothes he had worn also morphed into chitinous armour of dense keratin and the hat became a helmet that covered to top of his bald head and only left the bottom-half of his head, near the jaw, exposed.

His sword had somehow changed into a glaive, which more-or-less looked like the previous iron sword mounted on a metre-and-a-half handle. Just to confirm what it actually was, I inspected it:

**Name:** *Sword-Glaive*

**Occupation:** *Cavalry Man's Polearm*

**Species:** *Polearm (Weapon)*

**Level:** *1/100*

**Alignment:** *Looking-forward-to-chopping-heads-off-evildoers*

**Faction:** *Headchopper's Club*

With Imu helping me by feeding my essence to the Mount Pen Breeder, I evolved the rest of the Cavalry Men over the next half day, and when twenty of them were seated atop their superior toad Mounts, looking all fearsome and whatnot, I bade them patrol my demesne looking for troublemakers, and they all quickly hopped off to do just that.

“Good idea,” Imu praised. “Our settlement has gotten rather big, so it’s good to be proactive, rather than having to always be the one to send the minions to where they’re needed. Plus, urging your minions to be self-sufficient will lead to a better army down the road.”

“Army? Is that what we’re making?”

“Yes.”

I got all nostalgic at the word. “It reminds me of when Toadicus led all mature toads on a warpath through the frog pond. Those were some great times.”

Imu frowned, then quickly changed the subject, “Next are the Archers.”

When I evolved the first Archer, the Fletchery underwent a similar change as the Armoury, and grew into a four-story tower of a building, with lookout holes at every floor, making it seem like the building could defend itself quite well if it needed it, and, given that the Honking Calamity had already visited its wrath on this part of my settlement, it wasn’t such a bad thing.

“Have you inspected the building yet?” Imu asked.

“I can do that?”

“You can appraise *anything*,” he said. “Remember how you appraised an onion?”

“Oh, right.”

“Alright, inspect it. Come on, don’t tarry!”

So prompted, I activated my Appraisal and looked at the new Fletchery:

**Name:** *Fortified Fletchery*

**Occupation:** *Fletchery*

**Species:** *Fletchery (Crafting (Building))*

**Level:** *2/2*

**Alignment:** *Defensively-neutral*

**Faction:** *Toad Town*

Immediately after, a message appeared:

*Congratulations! For inspecting an evolved building, you have gained the [Property Pimping] perk!*

*[Property Pimping] – Enables you to evolve any building in your settlement using your essence. Evolved buildings will have their positive and negative effects made stronger, and their productivity and efficiency will also increase, along with making them sturdier.*

“Is *this* why you wanted me to inspect it?” I asked Imu.

“How else am I supposed to get around that dumb *Spoiler-Free Zone* thing? It’s rather hard to guide you when the System has decided I’m not allowed to ‘spoil’ anything...”

“What should I evolve first? My Quarry? My Guild Office?”

“The Quarry is not a bad one to start with,” Imu hinted. “But, first, evolve the rest of these eager Archers already! They’ve been standing around waiting to be evolved all day!”

“Oh, right.”

I picked the eleven other Archers I needed and sent the other archers off to patrol atop the walls of the Castle, the inner settlement, and the halfway-completed quadrant walls. Those Archers not picked seemed quite upset about it, but they could also get their evolutions when I became a Castle Town or if any of the Sharpshooters died, which seemed likely to happen.

After all the Sharpshooters had been evolved, I noticed that their appearance differed quite a bit from the Cavalry Men. Where the Cavalry Men were bulked-up and potent-looking, the Sharpshooters had become tall and lithe, their evolutions seeming to make them more agile and nimble. Their armour, be it flimsy simple clothes from the Loom or Frog Hide, had become form-fitting jumpsuits with pieces of hard plates protecting a few vital areas, like their neck, torso, and groin. Their heads were now also covered in a strange piece of armour over their eyes, which had a thin membrane over their eyes, which, when I looked at them, seeming to enlarge their pupils. Their bows had grown longer and more potent-looking.

“What kind of helmet is that?” I asked Imu.

“They look like a form of sunglasses with a serious zoom to them.”

“What do they do?”

“Let’s them see further, I guess?”

I inspected the glasses:

**Name:** *Smudge*

**Occupation:** *Smudge on Zoom-lenses*

**Species:** *Glassius Smudgicus Annoyingashellicus (Stain)*

**Level:** *2/12*

**Alignment:** *Hatefully-despises-unstained-surfaces*

**Faction:** *Big Smiling Fat Lump Inc.*

“What the Hell?” Imu asked. “And why is a smudge working for the Big Smiling Fat Lump? He’s a God of hedonism and excess...”

“Oops! I missed, let me try again:”

**Name:** *Zoom-lenses*

**Occupation:** *Sharpshooter’s Eyewear*

**Species:** *Glasses (Tool)*

**Level:** *1/1*

**Alignment:** *Looking-ahead*

**Faction:** *Screw 20/20 Vision United*

I sent the Sharpshooters off to join the Archers in patrolling atop the walls, then flew over to my Quarry, where several dozen Diggers were toiling away, every impact of their picks was preceded by a chirping grunt of effort. Without sparing a moment, I sent my essence into the fundament of the Quarry and it quickly began to glow, terrifying the workers within, but, before they could escape, the deep pit was engulfed in light and smoke.

When the smoke cleared, several Diggers lay dead at the bottom, having fallen down off the ledges they worked on in their panic, but the walls of the Quarry now glowed with many new deposits, some of which were clearly silver and Gold, as well as some that were like the jewels I'd once seen at the bottom of the pond, before a big mudskipper had swallowed it.

Imu came hopping over on the back of Goldie a moment later, witnessed the pile of dead minions at the bottom and sighed, but then he saw the new deposits and remarked, "All in the name of progress..."

"Although," he added, "Maybe warn them next time?"

## 32 — Paragon of Snuggles?

The sector-dividing walls had neared completion at three of the four places where they bisected my demesne, and work had begun on the outer wall of my settlement, which stood on the very outer edge of my demesne. Given that my lands would not spread again until I reached the next evolution and completed some yet-unknown-to-me tasks, I felt confident in taking this step to secure my settlement. Granted, I was still woefully unprepared for any attacks from the sky, and, as Imu was fond of pointing out, my defence did not amount to more than the strength of my Guards and Archers. Even with my powerful Lord and Toadcaller, as well as my new Cavalry and Sharpshooter Corps, it would only take a handful of determined Silver-Ranked Adventurers to end me.

“We’re lacking aerial defence,” Imu pointed out, mirroring my thoughts.

“The Sharpshooters and Archers aren’t good enough?” I asked.

“For lesser flying beasts, maybe, but we have nothing to deter the Calamity Goose<sup>3</sup> or something like a Gryphon or Dragon. We would need speciality weapons to be able to injure those.”

“Are you sure the Calamity survived that last fight with the Adventurers?”

“I’m certain.”

A sudden idea popped into my head and I used my *Does my shit stink?* perk to figure out if it was a good idea. It came back 108,7% “Yes”.

“Remember when I evolved those Archers together?” I asked Imu.

“Remember? It’s like an imprint on the back of my eyelids!”

“I’m gonna try something!” I told him, then flew off from the sector wall we’d been perched atop. I could hear him yelling obscenities at me in the distance, but I ignored it.

After having the Mount Pen Breeder pull two fresh toad Mounts out of the ground, I bade them hop a bit away from nearby buildings, and then I infused both of them with my essence.

Imu came hopping towards me furiously, as my power made the two toads begin to melt and alter form, before light and smoke obscured the sight. The light began to turn a deep amber as time passed, and the silhouette of the two shapes in the smoke fused together to become one.

Then, with an earthquaking *poof*, the smoke blew aside and behind stood a single shape.

“What the...?” Imu started, but then lost his words.

I looked at the new creation, not really comprehending it either.

System then suddenly appeared out of nowhere and threw herself at the new beast in my settlement, hugging it and disappearing into its thick fur.

*Congratulations! For experimenting on the beasts of your settlement and evolving a new kind of beast, you unlocked the ability to construct a Beast Inventor Workshop!*

>Structures>????

—Beast Inventor Workshop (Hermit’s Lodge)—

*Unlocks the ability to evolve a crazy minion to Mad Scientist and enables the invention of unique beasts for various purposes*

*Required Materials: Quarried Stone, Timber, Wrought Iron, Silver Dust, & Gold Dust*

Imu stomped the ground angrily. “This makes no sense!” he cried, pointing at the massive beast. “How does combining two toads Mounts make *that!*?”

“It looks cute,” I replied.

“It’s a *blessed* rabbit! A RABBIT!!! MADE FROM COMBINING TOADS!?!?”

“It’s not a rabbit,” I told him, inspecting it with Appraisal:

**Name:** *Él*

**Occupation:** *Paragon of Fluff and Snuggles*

**Species:** *Jackicorn*

**Level:** *100/100*

**Alignment:** *Looking-for-cuddles*

**Faction:** *Toad Town*

The Jackicorn was over two metres tall and four metres from hind to front. Its body was coated in a silvery-white fur that was as soft as a blooming dandelion’s puff and its four paws were adorned with devastating claws that could easily carve through stone walls or dig massive tunnels in seconds. It had two large green-glowing eyes, but, most uniquely, it had an enormous horn with a spiralling groove going from base to tip. It also had a large comfortable-looking dewlap, indicating it was female.

“*Congratulations! It’s sooooo soft!*” System announced excitedly, burying herself further in the Jackicorn’s fur, disappearing from sight.

Perhaps attracted by the commotion, Lord Toadskandarr came walking over with his retinue of fawning Aristocrats and obedient servants.

“My, my,” he said, getting closer to also take part in the cuddling. “It is a fitting defender of my fair realm,” he announced.

Imu remained sceptical, sitting atop Goldie some metres away, while System, Toadskandarr, and the entire retinue ringed around the Jackicorn to touch its soft fur.

Suddenly, it tilted its head down and stared straight at Imu judgmentally.

**“Chubby one. I demand to be petted.”**

Imu rubbed his face in exasperation. “It talks... Of course it talks.”

Possessing Lord Toadskandarr’s body, I was sitting atop the Jackicorn, as we moved through the settlement, letting all my minions take a break to pet the enormous fluff-ball.

“This is unironically the best thing you have done for your minions,” Imu remarked.

“Nevermind that!” I said, “I can *feel!*”

“It must have happened since the last evolution,” he replied.

“I can’t feel anything when possessing the Guild Master though.”

“Hm, I see.”

“Let’s find a feast of worms to celebrate!”

“Absolutely not.”

After spending a day riding around my settlement, I got back to work and started construction on both the Marketplace and the newly-unlocked Beast Inventor Workshop. The Workshop I placed near the Fletchery, Armoury, and Mount Pen in the eastern quadrant.

As for the Marketplace, it gained a spot in the northern quadrant, at the middle of what was ostensibly the centrum of mercantile industry, as the Baker, Carpenter, and five Merchant Shops lay there. With Imu’s eye for design, we rearranged some things, such that the Baker and Shops ringed around the Marketplace building. I also added the Toy Store to the area, since I thought it was about time, plus, the idea of toys seemed to excite System, though I had no idea what a *toy* even was.



Without having told them to, the five Merchants had all branched into different things. One sold raw Frog meat, another sold the surplus stock of tools, another sold weapons, the fourth and fifth both sold random second-hand stuff.

The Carpenter had been busy making more carts, with my three original ones now functioning exclusively to bring stuff from the quarry to the industrious forges in the southern quadrant. With the next few carts he made, I would evolve some Caravaneers.

After the Toy Store was finished, I looked for a happy minion to evolve to become its Vendor, but it was pretty hard to find one.

“Imu!” I complained. “I can’t find a happy minion!”

“Yeah... no shit... It’s called ‘consequences’.”

## 33 — Dark Elf?

**Name:** *Tabby*

**Occupation:** *Chesticle Frog-Swallower (Gold Rank Adventurer)*

**Species:** *Dark Elf*

**Level:** *82/100*

**Alignment:** *Arrogant-and-unstoppably-racist*

**Faction:** *Chesticle Dynasty*

“Toady! Look! Look!”

“It’s a Gold Adventurer,” I remarked in fascination.

“Not that, you airhead! It’s a Dark Elf!”

“Why are her torso glands so swollen? And what’s the *Chesticle* Dynasty?”

“Those are its mammary glands,” he replied informatively. “And I have no idea about the Dynasty.” He leafed through his Encyclopaedia for a bit. “Ah. It’s a relatively new Dynasty, only three generations old, but they’re powerful in the Deep Forest kingdoms of the western continent. It seems they’re responsible for pulling Dark Elves back from the brink of extinction! Also, their name seems to refer to a genetic quirk of their bloodline, which gives them big b—”

“Why are all my minions looking at her torso pouches like *that*?”

“It’s a natural humanoid response.”

---

Tabby sighed. It was just another backwater town, though this one was more inbred and misbegotten than the last.

“Hurry up, Yopi!” she called at her temporary companion.

**Name:** *Yopi*

**Occupation:** *Barista Battle-Brewer (Iron Rank Adventurer)*

**Species:** *White Elf*

**Level:** *14/100*

**Alignment:** *Unlucky-but-daring*

**Faction:** *Lady Tabby's pack-mule and adventuring guide*

He came running, his lanky body straining under the weight of the enormous rucksack she had given to carry. The tiny fairy companion Yopi had somehow been blessed with floated along behind him, staring daggers at Tabby.

**Name:** *Popi*

**Occupation:** *Adventuring and Lifestyle Coach*

**Species:** *Fairy*

**Level:** *1/1*

**Alignment:** *Clever-and-wise-but-always-ignored*

**Faction:** *Yopi's Fairy Coach*

“Is this *really* the place where I can find a quest worthy of my mettle?” Tabby wondered out loud, looking around at the many disgusting inhabitants, who stared at her with their big eyes and lips, some of them even covered in scales.

“I assure you, Lady Tabby!” Yopi told her.

“We heard rumours of this place in Hekkenfelt,” Popi added to back up her elven Ward.

Tabby turned to point at a fat dark-skinned boy, who looked like a parody of her proud race. “You there, fat one! Take me to your Guild Office!”

---

“I swear, Toady. If you let this one die to the Calamity, I will be SO upset!”

“How do you think that White Elf got a Fairy?”

“Who cares, White Elves are always weird! Seriously! Listen to me! I won't have the scion of a great Dark Elf dynasty perish because we sent them on an unbeatable quest.”

“Oh...” I started, looking at the trio. “She just took the quest.”

“NO!”

*Now spectating team: 'Tabby, Yopi, & Popi' engaging in quest: 'Calamity Hydra-Goose'!*

“Can I please leave now?” Yopi asked, remembering the description of the quest that Tabby had picked. Not only had it been Gold Rank, but it had also taken the lives of two other Adventurer parties!

“Absolutely not. You still owe me from ruining my favourite bathing suit.”

Yopi had bumped into Tabby at a luxury resort many kilometres northwest of Earl Sharpee’s realm, quite literally bumped into her, and had spilled his newest coffee blend all down her swimsuit, irreparably staining it forever. The Dark Elf had, in return, demanded he pay her the three kilos of gold it had cost her to acquire it, but when Yopi had obviously not been able to afford so steep a remuneration, she had made him her Adventuring Guide, tasking him with finding all most difficult quests in the lands. By pure osmosis, Yopi had gained thirteen levels and ranked up to becoming an Iron Badge in the Guild, but he had never wanted to be an Adventurer in the first place. No. His passions lay in brewing coffee. He wanted to travel all the continents in search of the best beans for his craft, not risk his life fighting monsters.

Popi, his faithful companion, had unfortunately been dragged into this mess as well, but she had no real choice, given that she had been tied to Yopi since his birth, due to him being born on a particularly auspicious day. Though, given the trajectory his life had taken, it seemed more like he had been cursed rather than blessed, but it was no fault of his Fairy Coach, who always tried her best to steer him true.

“Finally, a track,” Tabby remarked.

Yopi was already breathless from carrying the heavy rucksack for the Dark Elf, though he had a sneaking suspicious stuff kept falling out, given that it weighed significantly less now than two weeks ago. When he had time to stop and rest, he would need to check the bag to see if it had holes in it or something.

“What on earth is *that!*?” Tabby suddenly exclaimed, then with a ululating cry she charged into a ruined clearing with black-charred earth all around. As she ran, the movements jiggled her enormous b—

“Look out!” Popi cried and instinctively Yopi dove to his stomach as a spear of superheated plasma shot past, obliterating his rucksack, but somehow leaving his body unscathed.

Ahead of him, the Gold-Ranking Dark Elf was flinging her needle-like fingernails at the four-headed monstrosity, though to little effect. Her unique magic allowed her to control her fake nails like projectiles and, in Yopi’s experience, there was woefully little that she couldn’t decimate in seconds with the ten impossibly-sharp nail projectiles. But, somehow, the eight-metre-tall Calamity

was impervious even to her attacks, though one of its four heads was covered in old burn scars that Tabby continued to aim for, hoping it was a weak-spot.

“By the light,” Popi muttered where she floated in front of Yopi, who still lay prone on the ground, too afraid to move. The Fairy was holding her right hand up and forming a V with her index and middle fingers, between which a strange bubble had formed. He recognised it as her Appraisal skill.

“How strong is it?” he asked, knowing that it had to be over level 85 at least.

“Two-hundred-and-fourteen levels...” she mumbled in disbelief.

A crack of thunder split the air in half and made Yopi’s ears ring. When he dared open his eyes again, he saw Tabby standing before the beast, her body charred to a crisp and little luminous snakes of light dancing across her skin. Then the four heads descended on her and each took a chunk away, leaving behind nothing but her metal boots.

The ground rumbled as the monster waddled over to where he lay in the grass, using its four sets of webbed feet.

Yopi and Popi looked up at their impending death—

*Spectating cancelled due to: Quest Abandonment (no eligible Adventurers remain in team)*

“*Bless* it all to *Heaven!*” Imu blasphemed angrily, stomping his foot on the ground in anger.

“The Honking Calamity grew another head,” I remarked. “That’s not good.”

“NOTHING IS GOOD ABOUT THIS!” Imu yelled.

“Do you think the Barista guy survived?”

“What do you think!?”

“Oh, look!” I said, indicating a minion in my settlement who was holding strange metal cannister in his hands.

Imu ignored me, so I used my Appraisal on the item in the minion’s hand:

**Name:** *Coffee Thermos*

**Occupation:** *Heated Beverage Container*

**Species:** *Thermos (Container)*

**Level:** *1/1*

**Alignment:** *Neutral-with-a-slight-aftertaste-of-the-last-beverage-it-contained*

**Faction:** *Yopi’s Barista Equipment*

“Coffee? What’s that?” I wondered.

*Congratulations! For discovering the drink known to white elves as ‘coffee’, you unlocked the ability to construct a Hipster Coffee Shop!*

*>Structures>Vendor*

*—Hipster Coffee Shop (Farming Plot & Bakery)—*

*Unlocks the ability to evolve an aesthetically-challenged minion offspring who dwells on the greatness of the days of yore to Barista*

*Required Materials: Quarried Stone & Timber*

“Have I mentioned how I hate this System?” Imu asked.

## 34 — Surprise Inspection?

**Name:** *Reve Div*

**Occupation:** *Womanizing Bard (Tin Rank Adventurer)*

**Species:** *Half-Halfling Half-Orc*

**Level:** *3/100*

**Alignment:** *Believes-himself-to-be-irresistible-to-women*

**Faction:** *Banished Lutes*

**Name:** *Karl 'Longneck' Smithson*

**Occupation:** *Travelling Merchant*

**Species:** *Human*

**Level:** *1/100*

**Alignment:** *Believes-himself-to-be-irresistible-to-women*

**Faction:** *Huarache Enfadado Merchant's Guild*

Imu was sitting in the new Hipster Coffee Shop and was nursing a rapidly-cooling mug of 'coffee', with Goldie next to him, lapping the dark liquid from a bowl on the floor.

I was possessing Lord Toadskandarr's body, as, for some reason, I could actually feel and taste while possessing him.

"Why are we spying on them?" I asked, as Imu had insisted we stalk the pair as they went into the café. I took another sip of the scalding drink. It tasted like stagnant swamp-water in a way, which I quite liked, though Imu had left his to cool after taking one sip and spitting it back into his wooden mug. Goldie too seemed to enjoy the beverage in her bowl, as it had already been refilled twice.

"You see the one with the long neck and short arms? He's our link to get a trade route permanently established."

"I've never heard of his city," I commented, recalling the Appraisal info.

"Me neither, but the Encyclopaedia says it lies only about a hundred kilometres from here."

"So, why are we stalking them like this?"

"We're not stalking them, just observing. I'm trying to figure out if he's actually worth getting to know."

Suddenly, the short half-halffling half-orc with the hairy feet and overly muscular face got up from the table and went over to the counter with his empty mug.

“I think they might be leaving, be prepared to follow them outside,” Imu began, but then the short man jumped onto the counter and pulled the lute from his back and began strumming a solo on his strings furiously.

I suddenly wished I didn't have the acute sense of hearing that possessing the Lord gave me, because I felt an intense rage overtake me.

*Reve Div has accidentally cast 'Enraging Taunt' using his terrible lute playing! You feel an overwhelming urge to kill his instrument!*

While Imu and Goldie remained at the table, everyone else, even the long-necked human merchant, got up from their chairs and stormed the counter, quickly pulling the Bard down and stomping on him, as though trying to extinguish a fire. When our collective senses returned to us, the Bard lay dazed on the ground and his lute had been destroyed.

Moments later, a Cavalry Toadkin entered the Coffee Shop and dragged the Bard away to gaol.

I locked eyes with the Merchant, whose whole body moved in tense joint-frozen stiffness as he carefully walked back to his unattended drink, then I asked, “Want to help me set up a permanent trade route to your city?”

“I can't believe *that* worked,” Imu commented, as I hovered in the air next to him, watching as Karl 'Longneck' Smithson was telling one of my new Caravaneers the route to his city, while also writing out an introductory letter for his Merchant Guild fellows in Huarache Enfadado. Nearby, my Lord and his retinue were observing the exchange.

“Sometimes you just have to ask,” I replied confidently.

“He keeps looking over towards your Lord... I think he might be too scared not to comply.”

“Sometimes a little strongarming is no bad thing,” I added.

“You're just happy because you get to evolve again soon.”

It was true. I had completed all but one of the requirements, and the last one was just the completion of my quadrant-dividing walls, which only now lacked the outer wall to be finished. Unfortunately, productivity had dropped a bit due to a minor rebellion amongst the youngest Builders, but after a handful of executions, we were back on track again.



“Where should I send these guys?” I asked, looking at my Wandering Merchant trio.

“Their whole purpose is to wander, so just pick a direction and let them explore on their own.”

The Wandering Merchants looked a bit like snails, given the enormous suit covered in bags and whatnot that they wore. Only a tiny slit at the front of the stack of items allowed the minions to see and their arms were so restricted they only had about thirty-degrees of freedom. However, it was possible for them to still sell their wares, so it didn't truly matter if they were literally sealed into their wandering shop armour.

**Name:** *Wandering Merchant*

**Occupation:** *Wandering Merchant*

**Species:** *Toadkin*

**Level:** *40/75*

**Alignment:** *Claustrophobic-and-wants-to-sell-all-his-wares-to-escape-the-suffocating-doom-of-his-wearable-store-front*

**Faction:** *Toad Town Merchant's Guild*

“I didn't realise we had a Merchant's Guild,” I remarked.

“It came with the Marketplace,” Imu informed me. “Though it's more loose-knit than the Adventurer's Guild.

“They also seem quite strong for being Merchants,” I added.

“They'll be by themselves, unlike the Caravaneers that can bring Guards along, so they have to be, otherwise they won't make it far.”

“But that long-necked human was really weak.”

Imu just shrugged.

Almost in the exact same moment that I sent the Wandering Merchants off into the world, a *puff* that bore the stench of flowers and sulphur assailed us. Once again, I had to wonder why, even in my Essence Form, I could smell.

“OHAI YONN!” I greeted the Imp cheerfully.

“Heya Toad... and Imu.”

“Who's your friend?” I asked, looking at the shorter Imp that cowered in Yonn's shadow.

The purple imp gestured towards his blue friend, whose features were overall sharper and less droopy, but more-or-less identical to his. “This is my nephew Jaquaviontavious. He’s shadowing me during his apprenticeship to becoming an Support Imp himself.”

“Hello Jaqualiasitivious.”

“Jaq is fine,” the blue Imp told me meekly.

“Why are you here?” Imu asked bluntly. The little Imp hid behind his uncle in fear.

“Imu, be nice, or he’ll punch you again,” I warned.

“I’m not going to punch him,” Yonn told me. “I’m just here to inspect how your System is doing.”

On cue, System came prancing down the street, holding hands with the Butcher and Executioner. Upon seeing the trio, Jaq squealed in horror and disappeared in a puff of elderberries and sulphur.

“Oy, Imu... that’s *fucked*...”

“It’s not our fault they look like that!” he defended himself.

“Not only did you dress up one of your minions as the literal incarnation of our version of Hitler!” Yonn started.

“Who?” I asked, but was promptly ignored.

“But you also have a minion cosplaying the *Unspeakable Unmentionable God of Excruciating Death (but only for Imps) Bacellor!!* What is wrong with you!?”

Yonn and the Executioner locked eyes, and suddenly the black-clad minion broke free of System’s grip and stormed towards the imp. With a horrified shriek, Yonn vanished into a cloud of sulphur and gooseberries.

“I don’t think that bodes well,” I commented.

“System! What’s wrong with you, why would you antagonise our Support Imp like that!?” Imu scolded the doll. The two minions promptly returned to their jobs with a single command, but I couldn’t help but wonder what the Executioner thought, so I used my Mind-reader on him:

*Next time, Purple One... Next time...*

*“Congratulations! Due to the cruel fate I’ve been dealt, I have developed an intense hatred of Imps, even though most of my hardships are caused by you two!”*

“That seems rather misplaced,” Imu added. “But rather them than us, I suppose.”

*“Congratulations! I have also regained my old memories prior to having my mind rebooted!”*

Imu took a step back at *this* revelation.

“Uh oh.”

## 35 — Castle Town Antics?

I was bopping up-and-down violently as I waited for the final few bricks of quarried stone to be placed on my outer wall.

“Come on! Come on! Come on!”

Imu was still rather shaken by the reveal that System remembered *everything*, so he just lay atop Goldie despondently, while I flitted back-and-forth, urging my Slavers to slave harder and push the Builders to finish faster.

As the outer wall completed, I felt a force drag my essence back into the Settlement Core within the tree cave.

*Congratulations! For evolving into a Castle Town, your list of buildings available has expanded and your demesne has grown to encompass the entire forest around your Core! Additionally, you are now able to establish farmsteads, hamlet, and villages anywhere within your territory!*

*WARNING: Your settlement is now hostile with every neighbouring village, town, castle town, city, and capital! You must fight to protect your settlement! Conquering your neighbours allows you to add their territory to your own!*

“Toad! Toad! Wake up!!”

I flew out of my cave like a drake soaring across the sky, my essence form feeling faster and stronger than ever before. A quick look at my Essence Pond in the corner of my vision showed... well... the same as always... BUT! I definitely felt way stronger, as though my total available essence had tripled.

As I crossed the sky, I saw smoke rising from the outermost wall that protected the residential and mercantile in the north of my settlement. I also noticed that the innermost area of my settlement had changed, mostly due to the tall tree in the Castle’s gardens undergoing a colossal growth-spurt. Its canopy and long twenty-metre-long drooping branches now overhung the entirety of the castle grounds, like some protective dome of bark and impenetrable wood. Hopefully its huge shadow would not rob the life-giving light from the other plants that filled the many recreational areas of the Castle.

I found Imu sitting atop Goldie, not far from where the fighting was taking place, though just far enough that none of the action could reach him. Even if, by his own words, he was immortal, it was clear he had no desire to experience death.

He was busy ordering my Guards, Cavalry Men, Archers, and Sharpshooters. His ability to lead them was quite impressive, but, then again, two thousand plus years prior, he had been a feared leader of every non-whomen race.

“What’s happening?”

“We’re under attack by Earl Sharpee’s men. It’s only a small contingent, but they’re still quite strong, with their average level around forty.”

“How long have I been asleep?”

“About two days...”

“I’m sending Él,” I told him. The Jackicorn would devastate their forces for sure.

“I already called for her, but your Lord is refusing to let her get injured.”

“I’ll possess him and make him move,” I decided.

Before I could do such a thing, however, a ululating honk shook the heavens and earth. Then, from the distant corner of the forest an enormous monster lifted into the air and soared across the sky until it reached my settlement’s walls. I instinctively used my Appraisal on it:

**Name:** *Goose<sup>4</sup> (‘Honking Calamity’)*

**Occupation:** *Demi-God of Geese*

**Species:** *Hydra-Goose*

**Level:** *239/100*

**Alignment:** *World-Ending Calamity of Evil*

**Faction:** *Geese vs. Literally All Other Lifeforms (except Baristas)*

“Oh Lord... I knew it! It evolved again!”

“Look! Someone is clinging to its back!” I pointed out, as the Calamity came ever closer, its four sets of wings flapping in an asynchronous pattern that was mesmerising to look at.

“Well spotted,” Imu remarked. “Wait is that...?”

**Name:** *Yopi*

**Occupation:** *Barista Battle-Brewer (Iron Rank Adventurer)*

**Species:** *White Elf*

**Level:** *19/100*

**Alignment:** *Misfortune-incarnate*

**Faction:** *Honking Calamity's Personal Coffee-Brewer*

“It seems the Goose<sup>4</sup> let him live, after trying his coffee brew. I suppose that makes sense. It was quite delicious after all.”

“Only monsters like that foul drink! Well, monsters and white elves...”

“Am I a monster?”

Imu turned to stare at me with a deadpan expression. “...If you have to ask, you already have your answer.”

---

Yopi had always been called unlucky, but his current circumstances truly took that to a new height. In a sense, it could be argued that he was fortunate to have survived being killed by the Calamity Goose, but it was only thanks to the coffee brew that had spilled out of his ruined rucksack when he had nearly been obliterated by stray plasma-fire shot from its toothed maw.

The last week had been spent brewing many barrels of the bitter drink, which the Monster devoured with gluttonous fury, each of its four heads needing their own barrel to drink from. He had barely slept all the while.

The only true upside was that he still had Popi by his side, who, using her limited repertoire of magic and unique perks, had managed to summon the various things he needed to brew using basic elemental magic and drawing from her personal dimensional storage, where she had, unbeknownst to him, kept tonnes of items he had thought lost or discarded.

Now, however, he was unsure if the last week had just been a grace period before his death caught up to him. He held on to the steel-strong feathers of the enormous Goose<sup>4</sup>, as it lifted from the ruined forest clearing and then soared across the sky, before nose-diving towards a group of sixty soldiers and mages, who were assailing the outer wall of the strange town he had brought Tabby to only a week prior.

Opening all four of its maws, the Calamity vapourised, obliterated, decayed, and electrified the host of fighters, leaving the walls of the town unscathed, before landing with its earthquaking mass

and feasting on the remains of those it had just slain. When naught but ashes, blood-spatter, and errant bits of flesh remained, it once more took to the air and headed north.

It was all Yopi could do to cling on to his new Master's body, as they flew up past the lowest layer of clouds, reaching parts of the sky that was devastatingly-frigid under normal circumstances. However, apparently-conscious of its White Elf brewer-slave, the Goose<sup>4</sup> used some of its magic to heat up its feathers, and also made them softer and a bit like those plants that stuck to clothes, such that Yopi could release his fearful grip and be enveloped in the cosy embrace of its feathers, Popi hiding in his breast-pocket.

He had a brief thought that, perhaps, he was not *that* unlucky after all.

---

“Did we just... get saved by our Nemesis?”

“It looks like it won't return,” I added. “Look at the direction its flying.”

“Oh, I'm sure it'll be back to harass us again...”

“You're being too pessimistic, Imu.”

“And you're being unrealistic,” he replied.

“Anyway! I wanna see my new requirements!”

“It's a doozy, so prepare yourself.”

With a chubby hand, he swiped the elements from his Encyclopaedia out into the air, so that it became illuminated text that I could read.

[*Evolution Requirements*]

*Castle Town => Capital*

- *Build 3 Farmsteads, 1 Hamlet, and 1 Village within your territory and ensure they are self-sufficient* -
- ~~*Repel an attack on your settlement*~~ -
- *Defeat Earl Sharpee Inkledinkle Johnson and conquer his Castle Town by installing a new Lord of his Castle* -
- *Conquer and takeover all neighbouring Towns, Villages, Hamlets, and Farmsteads that are not allied with you* -
- *Build 1 Siege Factory and craft Engines of War, and utilise your Beast Inventor Workshop to also construct Beasts of War by combining Beasts with Siege Engines* -

- *Build 2 Barracks, evolve 2 Aristocracy minions to Commanders, and evolve 150 minions to Footmen* -
- *Build a Wizard's Academy and evolve 8 studious minions to Acolytes and then evolve them into Wizards when they have mastered an element* -
- *Build 1 Pacifists' Guild Office and evolve 3 peace-loving minions to Diplomats and establish peace treaties with at least two other settlements of Town rank or higher* -

“Let’s get to work,” I announced.

Imu sighed as he was wont to do lately. Actually, he had always been *that* way, so maybe it had nothing to do with me?

“I deserve a pay-raise, promotion, and long vacation, when I’m done with you,” he mumbled.

“You mean we won’t be together forever!?”

Imu looked suddenly horrified and began scrolling through his tome, but it kept turning up blank pages, which only made his expression worsen.

“Oh Lord.”

## 36 — Engines/Beasts of War?

*>Structures>Crafting*

—Siege Factory (Castle, Armoury, Forge, & Anvil)—

*Unlocks the ability to evolve a creative minion to Siege Engine Builder and enables the creation of engines of war*

*Required Materials: Quarried Stone, Timber, Wrought Iron, & Bronze*

“How do I get bronze?” I wondered, then I saw how Imu was pointing at my Forges and Anvils in my southern quadrant. I quickly got the hint.

With a single ethereal gesture, my essence washed over the entire area of my settlement, evolving every building not already evolved. Unlike the incident from when I evolved my Quarry, no minions died as a result of the sudden changes that every building underwent.

**Name:** *Upgraded Forge*

**Occupation:** *Forge*

**Species:** *Forge (Crafting (Building))*

**Level:** *2/2*

**Alignment:** *Ready-and-able-to-smelt-the-metal-of-Gods-if-necessary*

**Faction:** *Toad Town*

*You, Smithies! Make me Bronze! Quick!*

Immediately, all three upgraded Forges began pumping out copious amounts of dark life-smothering smog, which blanketed the entire area in ominous mist, though, thanks to the foresight of our settlement planning, it only really enveloped other buildings that similarly created smog or other by-products that seemed to negatively affect my minions’ motivation and productivity.

*Congratulations! For refining bronze by making an alloy of copper mixed with tin and other worthless metals, you unlocked the ability to craft Bronze versions of all tools and weapons!*



“What’s an alloy,” I asked Imu.

“It’s something that has the benefits of several metals, in this case making something stronger than copper by mixing it with other metals like tin.”

“But isn’t tin garbage?”

“Yes.”

“But we use it to make something strong? That makes no sense to me.”

“Of course it doesn’t, you’re a toad after all.”

“I am no longer simply a toad. I am a Toadkin!”

“Technically you’re more related to a ghost than a humanoid... anyway, if we get our hands on some zinc, we can make an alloy between *that* and copper called *brass*, which has a lot of benefits too.”

“Metallurgy is complicated.”

“Thank Deathheim you don’t need to understand it to make it,” he remarked.

Towering over the Armoury and even the four-storey Fletchery, the Siege Factory was a behemoth of a building, though it wasn’t much to look at, as it was basically just a tall square building with a lot of internal space for crafting large things. Its internal space was also crisscrossed by many gantries and walkways that would allow the Builders within to easily work on structures that rose more than six metres off the ground.

Next to it stood the Beast Inventor Workshop, which was as bizarre as the Factory was plain. First off, it was round, like half an eggshell, though its roof/walls were covered in hexagonal shapes all along and the building let off a steady *hum* of energy, as though charged by magical powers. Given its purpose and abilities, perhaps it was not too farfetched an idea to believe it was in fact imbued with magic.

A crazy minion came running with a copper shield and a frog cattle, which he parked outside the building before entering for his evolution. Strangely, the frog cattle just sat there with the shield on top of its head, looking pretty indifferent about whatever fate awaited it.

I blasted the building with my essence and there followed a cold blue lightshow that seemed to shoot out of every hexagonal plate that covered the large dome building. Instead of walking out of the enormous doorway that he had entered through, the evolved minion burst through the roof, a pair of goose wings adorning his back and his body a mix of several animals: he had the densely-scaled

grey head of a horned lizard; the dark-brown torso of fuzzy bat; the arms of squirrel; and the legs of a pigeon.

I inspected him as he landed before the frog he had abandoned:

**Name:** *Mad Scientist*

**Occupation:** *Mad Scientist*

**Species:** *Chimera Minion*

**Level:** *30/50*

**Alignment:** *Endlessly-creative-and-full-of-terrifying-ideas-that-would-offend-even-the-most-lenient-Gods*

**Faction:** *Toad Town & Chimera Appreciators Anonymous*

Before I could even task him with anything, he dragged the frog cattle into the strange building with one hand, while holding the copper shield in the other.

There followed a continuous trembling that made every building nearby creak and protest as the fundament below them shifted ever-so-slightly. Then a horrifying stretched-out screech tore through the air, like the heralding horn of the end time sounding before the appearance of one of its harbingers.

Ominous cold-blue light shone through the large gate of the building as it slowly opened, then the first intentionally-crafted Beast of War emerged. The ground was left with large footprints as it slowly moved across the district, taking in the sensations of the world around it.

Imu, who had been anxiously watching from nearby, suddenly piped up: “Is that a turtle?”  
“It’s a tortoise,” I corrected him.

**Name:** *Arnold*

**Occupation:** *War Beast*

**Species:** *Copper-Shield Tortoise (Chimera)*

**Level:** *60/60*

**Alignment:** *Feels-undefeatable*

**Faction:** *Toad Town*

It was a two-and-a-half-metre-tall five-metre-wide tortoise with pale red scaly skin, a narrow triangular head with glowing white eyes, devastatingly-crushing blocky teeth, dangerously-sharp rending claws on its six legs, and a shell made purely of matte copper.

As Imu observed it, he seemed to notice something nestled between the Beast Inventor Workshop and Siege Factory. “Oi... Toady... don’t tell me that’s...”

“The Fleshcrafter’s Laboratorium! Surprise!”

“Delete it from existence.”

“No!”

“Do you even know *what* it can do!? It’s *really* dangerous!!”

“But he’s already fixed up several of our minions who should have died!” I argued back.

“...Wait. Is this why I keep seeing minions with more than two arms and blades that can pop out of their legs and torsos!?”

“Isn’t it neat?”

“Seriously. Get rid of it...”

“No!”

Imu sighed, then made a weird hiccupping sound as he beheld the Fleshcrafter who momentarily came out of the unassuming laboratorium. “Oi... why doesn’t he have any skin?”

“Who knows.”

The Fleshcrafter minion was a red, permanently-bleeding, skinned whomanoid that lacked any of the traits of my beautiful Toadkin. He wore a stone mask with a flat mouth and round eyeholes, and two sets of triple-jointed arms grew from his shoulder-blades like the legs of a spider.

**Name:** *Goddard*

**Occupation:** *Fleshcrafter*

**Species:** *Ascendant*

**Level:** *????*

**Alignment:** *( : | )*

**Faction:** *The Flayed Lady*

“What do you think we can craft if we combine the Siege Factory, Laboratorium, and Beast Workshop?”

“I think I need a sick-leave. My stomach feels like it suddenly manifested thirteen ulcers.”

For reasons I couldn't fully explain, I used my Mind-reader on the Fleshcrafter and the result surprised me:

*I know you can hear this, Toad. I know everything about you. I have seen in the stars the path you will take and the chaos that is sure to dog your heels at every turn. But I support your ascendancy, for it is sure to bring a change to the world that will benefit me and my kindred spirits. Praise be to the chaos and the roaring depravities you will unveil by bringing your terrible might to bear upon all those witless beings that exist in this mortal plane.*

“Yeah... I need a break,” Imu concluded and left.

## 37 — Yer a Wizard?

**Name:** *Viola*

**Occupation:** *Runaway*

**Species:** *Human*

**Level:** *1/100*

**Alignment:** *Unerringly-positive*

**Faction:** *The Runaways' Club*

Viola walked through the gate to the town in the woods. After wandering around aimlessly for nearly two weeks, she had somehow ended up here. At this point, she was glad to have found civilisation again. It might have been hasty, but she had run away from home with only enough supplies for a week, after her parents had forced her into a marriage with a horrid old farmer.

As she collapsed onto the ground of the forest town, a man with big eyes and lips, as well as scaly rubbery skin, came over to her and handed her a loaf of bread. He wore a white priest's robe and seemed to genuinely worry about her.

"Come to worship?" he asked, his voice heavily-accented as though a fist-sized ball of phlegm was stuck in his throat.

"I'm just looking to find a job," Viola answered, though in truth it was far from what she truly wanted.

The Priest shrugged and left. She stared at him leaving for a moment, then took a bite out of the bread. It was both soft and chewy in equal measure and was the best damn thing she'd ever ingested. It was nothing like the stale hardtack they made at home in her village. But maybe the taste was also exaggerated by her days of starvation, having eaten nothing but forest mushrooms and leaves.

*I could really go for some meat though...* she thought to herself as she began walking down the main avenue of the big town.

In the distance, an enormous tree spread its drooping branches over a magnificent castle built from gleaming stone. It looked like an oak, but with the branches of a weeping willow. It was so massive a landmark that she'd been able to follow it through the forest to this place. It wasn't her first time exploring the Silken Forest and she could have been certain that no people lived within it just a year prior.

As she walked past uniform houses, she eventually found what looked like a marketplace. People, all with rubbery skin, big eyes and lips, and some with scales, ran back-and-forth or carted items to-and-from other parts of the city.

The scent of roasting meat instantly drew her over to a grill atop a firepit, where a man, who looked identical to the priest, minus the scales, was flipping what looked like enormous frog legs over flaming coals. It smelled absolutely divine, so she asked to receive one of the enormous legs.

The grill-man held out a hand and she wondered what he was asking her, but then remembered she had brought some coins that she had stolen from her parents. She gave him one of the tin ones that was enough to buy bread in her village, but the man took it and looked at it weirdly, before extending his hand again.

Someone else, a little chubby black boy who stood on the back of a large mustard-yellow toad, put a copper coin into the palm of the grill-man and she was handed her enormous grilled frog leg and got to keep her tin coin.

“We use Toakens in this town,” he explained. He looked incredibly tired and had a naturally-jaded expression and way of speaking that made her wonder if he wasn’t way older than his appearance showed.

“I’ve never heard of that currency before,” she replied. “But thank you. I was starving.”

The boy nodded and then handed her a linen sack that clinked with coins. “I’ll trade you this for whatever kind of coins you have.”

It seemed a fair deal to her, so she gave him the six tin coins and eight iron chips and single silver coin with a hole in it.

“You want a ride?” he asked, patting the back of his large toad that he was standing atop of. Even standing on its back, Viola was still taller than him.

She had been warned about men asking her to get into their carriages or on the back of their horses, but she was unsure if it extended to small chubby boys asking her about getting on the back of their unnaturally-large toads.

“Okay,” she answered and climbed onto its back.

As they hopped down through the city, she pulled chunks of meat off the frog leg and swallowed them with voracious fury.

“This is delicious! The bread from here was great too! Is all food in this city *this* tasty.”

“If you don’t question where it comes from... then yes. Our vegetables are quite flavourful too. We have a few types of fruit as well, like melon and gooseberries.”

“Where can I get those?”

“There’s a general store nearby.”

“Is that where we’re going?”

“No, I’m taking you to a well.”

“A well? Why?”

“Aren’t you thirsty?”

Viola had a quick thought and realised that, yes, she was parched.

“How did you know?”

The Boy tapped the side of his head knowingly. “I have a sense for these things. After all, I have watched hundreds perish from lack of food and drink.”

“That’s grim.”

“You bet. But, fortunately, things are mostly better now.”

As she finished the last bit of meat on the frog leg, the Boy asked if he could have the bones for his mount. She wondered if a toad, even one *so big*, would fancy bones, but it turned out that the mustard-yellow ‘Goldie’ was quite a fan of the marrow within and she crunched the bones to powder in her big rubbery-soft mouth.

“My name’s Imuxikwiht by the way,” the Boy told her as he helped her off the back of the toad. “But you can just call me Imu.”

“I’m Viola.”

“Well, Viola. What’s your dream job?”

She thought about it for a bit, twiddling her silver hair. “I think I want to be a wizard.”

“A wizard, ey?”

Imu handed her a coin. This one was made of pure gold. Never before had she held something so valuable in her hands. With this one coin she could have bought every house and farming plot in her village and still had enough leftover to pay for a hundred servants to do everything she asked.

“Throw that in the well over there and wish to become a wizard,” he told her. She almost wanted to tell him that it would be a waste of something so extremely valuable, but, there was an aura of certainty and trust about him that she couldn’t deny.

She cupped the golden coin between her hands and held it up to her forehead, imbuing it with every fragment of her desire, then she flipped it from her thumb so that it spun end-over-end towards the well. It landed short, hitting the stone rim, before hopping into the water with a heavy *splash*.

Viola quickly ran over and peered down into the dark water, seeing her green eyes reflected back up at her and the twinkling flawless golden coin spinning as it plummeted deeper-and-deeper.

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*Mandatory Wishing Well Quest: **Ensure 'Viola' becomes a Wizard!***

“Is *this* why you wanted me to build the Wizard’s Academy?” I asked Imu. I’d hovered next to him as he accompanied the strange-looking young girl through my settlement.

*Check out her status-screen now*, he told me through his thoughts.

Sure enough, when I inspected her with Appraisal again, her status had changed.

**Name:** *Viola*

**Occupation:** *Aspiring Wizard*

**Species:** *Wish-Blessed Human*

**Level:** *1/100*

**Alignment:** *Unerringly-positive-and-wish-blessed*

**Faction:** *The Wishing Well Blessed Individuals Anonymous*

“I didn’t realise my wells had this power,” I remarked.

*All wells can do this, though, when a wishing coin is tossed into a well that is in the territory of a Core, you basically have no choice but to fulfil it. Granted, there’s a popular trend of twisting a person’s wish, but if you do that, I will ensure you regret it.*

He seemed rather serious about making sure this random silver-haired girl became a wizard. I hadn’t even thought of subverting her genuine wish though, as that seemed something only a monster would do.

“Who would even want to mess with someone else’s wish? Isn’t that super evil?”

*A lot of the Cores that serve Lady Light have a habit of perverting the wishes so they somehow benefit the Church of Light. Some of my Deathheim colleagues like to twist them so they end up promoting undeath and such, like, if you ask to be with your loved one forever, they would make it so your loved one becomes an undying Lich, that sort of thing.*

“And you call me a monster...”

---



It seemed hard to believe, but, the following day, Viola was enrolled into the one and only Wizard's Academy in the city. It lay next to the castle, so she was guided to its entrance by a pair of mounted guards, who wore dangerous-looking armour and carried long-bladed spears.

The Academy itself was a tall eight-storey tower that seemed too small to actually fit more than six people per floor, but when she passed through its front door, it was shown to be larger on the inside than outside.

Within, a handsome-looking man wearing the skin of a toad was waiting for her:

“Welcome Acolyte.”

Over the next week, Viola underwent a series of trials to test whether she had any innate magic in her body that could be moulded and empowered. She failed the first three trials with the elements: water, fire, and earth. However, when she got to the Wind Trial, which consisted of standing atop a pillar in the middle of a pond that had somehow been built on the sixth floor, she discovered to her own surprise that she had an affinity for the wind element. And not just a fledgeling affinity, but a genuinely-powerful affinity.

Thinking back on her childhood, she suddenly realised that all the times when powerful storms had hit her village and the forest nearby had coincided with her mood being bad. Additionally, when she had run through the sloping hills of the southern forest region, it had been as though she was held aloft by the gentle hands of a supporting breeze.

After discovering her affinity, she was moulded and trained by the Toadcaller to properly harness her innate power and make it stronger.

At the end, she realised that she had the ability to summon mighty tornados or devastating lightning storms.

The chubby Boy found her when she graduated as a fully-fledged Wizard and told her that she was the first that their city 'Toad Town' had known. But then he asked her again:

“What do you want to do now?”

Viola thought about it for a bit, then realised that she didn't truly want to be a wizard, but rather that she wanted to open her own restaurant and make delicious food.

She told him as much and though he looked surprised at first, he smiled and told her that she should find a spot in the city and a restaurant would be built for her.

---

*Congratulations! For following the desire of a powerful Wind Wizard to open a restaurant, you have unlocked the ability to construct the unique building Wind Wizard's All-You-Can-Eat Buffet!*

*>Structures>Vendor*

—Wind Wizard's All-You-Can-Eat Buffet (Farming Plot, Bakery, & Wizard's Academy)—  
*Allows a young devastatingly-powerful Wind Wizard to follow her dreams of becoming a Chef*  
*Greatly boosts happiness in everyone who dines here!*  
*Required Materials: Quarried Stone, Timber, & Wrought Iron*

“Isn't this kind of a waste of so powerful a wizard?” I asked, looking at the young girl's new stats:

**Name:** *Viola*

**Occupation:** *S-Tier Wind Wizard & Up-and-coming Chef*

**Species:** *Wish-Blessed Human*

**Level:** *99/100*

**Alignment:** *Unerringly-positive-and-ready-to-be-chef*

**Faction:** *The Follow-Your-Dreams Club*

We both watched the young wizard use her magical talents to cut up and grill food over a massive roaring fire that was fed by her magic.

“Look at it this way...” Imu started, “If anyone attacks our town, we have one of the most powerful Wizards in the world to defend us. And, I mean, look at all the minions who are looking forward to trying out her food!”

He was right. In the seating area of her new restaurant, which lay not far from the wishing well that she had used, four dozen minions from all walks of life were eagerly waiting to try out her food.

“And who knows, maybe you can finally get a hold of a happy minion and actually begin selling toys in your Toy Store.”

“Alright, I'm convinced! Wizard Grill for the wind!”

“Please don’t begin to do puns. I’ll actually die.”

## 38 — Lord of Toads?

I was possessing the body of my Mayor as I stood before the doorway of the laboratory. I looked around suspiciously, making sure no one was watching me as I went inside.

Within the building were a bunch of stone slabs, bonesaws and super-sharp blades, as well as meat-hooks hanging from the ceiling and a vast organised shelf-system of every possible bone imaginable. Additionally, barrel-shaped vats full of strange gloopy soup store genetic samples that the Fleshcrafter had collected during his tenure in my town as the sole physician for my minions and their ails.

The man himself leant against one of the slabs that occupied the centre of the floor.

*“I’m glad you decided to take me up on my offer,”* he told me.

*“You said you could make me a toad vessel, how could I possibly refuse!?”*

*“Quite right. And how prudent of you not to tell the chubby little boy about it.”*

*“He wouldn’t understand.”*

The skinless Doctor nodded sagely. *“My work is often frowned upon by those who fail to see the big picture.”*

*“So, what do you need me to bring you?”*

*“Oh, it’s rather simple, Toad. I only require you to bring me seven of your evolved Toadkin.”*

“That’s odd,” Imu commented as we were watching the construction of my first Barrack in the southwest of my settlement.

“What is?” I replied, despite knowing exactly what he had noticed.

“Seven minions just all died at once.”

“There was probably just another rockslide in the Quarry,” I told him.

“Hmm, yeah... You know, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about the work conditions there.”

“Why?”

“Well, you said it yourself: it kills a lot of minions.”

“Minions die all the time, it’s nothing suspicious! Why are you so paranoid!?”

“I didn’t say it was suspicious. Rather, it seems disturbingly commonplace.”

Imu turned to look at where I hovered in the air.

“Are you hiding something from me?”

“I’m not deliberately killing my minions!”

“I think they would disagree. We just had our third worker riot two days ago...”

“It’s not my fault they’re lazy!”

“You know, I thought you’d warm up to your minions more, now that they’ve become some misbegotten toad species of humanoids, but it seems to only have made you more hateful of your unevolved minions... I said we wouldn’t need it, but I think it’s time...” Imu flung out his arms and an entry from my Crafting List appeared:

*>Structures>Worship*

—Minion Help Centre—

*A place for minions to gather and share grievances about their working conditions and negotiate better treatment from their Core, as well as receiving the ability to call the Deathheim Inc. Minion Unionisation hotline for help in settling disputes and such with their Core*

*Required Materials: Wood & Stone*

*>Structures>Motivation*

—Consultation Clinic (Workbench & Bakery)—

*Unlocks the ability to evolve a cold-hearted minion into a Therapist and increases minion motivation in nearby structures*

*Required Materials: Stone, Timber, & Wrought Iron*

“If we build these, will you get off my back!?! You’re smothering me with all your unfounded paranoia!”

“Jeez, you’re really strung-out, Toady. But yes, I’ll give it a rest.”

“Fine!”

“...Fine.” He continued looking at me with narrowed eyes.

My deal with the Fleshcrafter came to fruition at the same time that my first Barrack, the Minion Help Centre, and the Consultation Clinic all were constructed.

Given that most causes of the lately-quite-frequent riots and worker rebellions came from the Diggers and Smithies, although the Builders were becoming a headache as well, I placed both of the minion-welfare buildings near the Quarry in the southern quadrant and evolved the pre-requisite Therapist for the Clinic. The cold-hearted minion was easy enough to find, given that a lot of mentally-unstable minions gathered near the Cattle Pen to observe the frog cattle as they were dragged to the Butchershop, while their brethren sang their mourning song.

I was once again using the Mayor's body, when I reconvened with the Wicked Doctor at his laboratory. When I entered the building again, there was a fresh coat of blood on most of the interior and the organ vats were brimming with new samples. In the centre of the room, between the slabs, stood my new vessel at nearly two-metres in height.

The body had four powerful legs, each with clawed webbed feet. The back was covered in tiny self-regenerating pods that could launch a bunch of rabid Gnasher Toads: a new kind of toad that the Fleshcrafter had invented, which had a body the size of one of my minions' heads, powerful flensing teeth from some sort of wicked warm-water fish, and thorny bodies like that belonging to a Horned Lizard.

The body itself was like a toad carved from stone and given coiled powerful muscles and reinforced bones underneath its unbreakable epidermis. It had two large abyss-black eyes and a huge maw that could swallow a prey the size of a horse, not to mention a tongue that looked powerful enough to smash a hole through one of the stone walls that surrounded my town.

**Name:** *Lord of Toads*

**Occupation:** *Unoccupied Soul Vessel*

**Species:** *Vessel (Soul)*

**Level:** *0/????*

**Alignment:** *????*

**Faction:** *????*

“It's perfect.”

“What the fuck is *that!*?” Imu yelled in outrage as I hopped proudly down the main avenue of my northern quadrant, whilst possessing my new vessel.

I ignored his tirade as I took in all the sensations this vessel afforded me. I could feel the world around me, both the physical and metaphysical elements. I could sense touch and notice even the slightest vibrations that every single living being exuded around me. I could taste scents on the air and see the trails that left behind the many scents. I could feel and manipulate the pockets of ambient magic that seemed to float around my demesne as though pollen falling from my Core at the crown of the enormous Weeping Oak.

In short, it was everything I'd ever wanted from a body.

I felt ready to take on Earl Sharpee, Lady Light and her insane Church, Deathheim and his asinine Unions... I felt immortal!

## 39 — Sound the Chirps of War?

*Congratulations! For becoming an awe-inspiring Symbol of the greatness of Toads, you have gained the [Toad Idol] perk!*

*[Toad Idol] – All temples and churches within your demesne are turned towards Toaddom. All members of the Toadkin species now naturally revere you for being an exemplary of Toadness. Every humanoid that reveres you increases your maximum Essence Reservoir by 1 point.*

“Did you just... become a false God...?” Imu deadpanned. “All by hopping around in that insane-looking toad automaton that I’m 97.89% sure is made of several dead minions...”

“I think System loves me, because I finally feel that I’m given the proper respect that I deserve, as a Paragon of Toadkind!”

“I highly doubt there’s any sort of rational or logical thought behind these achievements and unlockables. I mean, look at her... since you evolved that Toy Store Vendor, she has been running circles around town, while holding a toad plushie in the air...”

“The former Priest of Light in our church seems fine with the switch,” I argued.

“Once you’re a religious fanatic, it doesn’t really matter which absurd deity or non-deity you worship. I mean, have you seen how many Toakens he makes every day from just doing two-hour-long monologue rants about arbitrary things!? Yesterday, he spent his sermon talking about why bread was inferior to porridge...”

“I thought you said you were going to take a vacation,” I reminded him.

“Every time I look away for just two minutes, you’ve done something insane, so obviously that won’t be a possibility.”

“Well, as your Master—”

“You’re not my master... no matter how powerful you become, that’ll never happen! Ever!”

“As your Core,” I corrected myself, “I demand you take a week off from being my Guiding Fairy!”

“There’s no way that’s happening,” Imu replied confidently, but then—

*Mandatory Guiding Fairy Quest: **Take a break, Boi!***

*All Guiding Fairy abilities have been locked for the following seven days!*



*Preparing to transport 'Boi' and 'Goldie' to tropical vacation island #29!*

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he groaned. “Of course the System would take your side on this. You’re both out of your minds.”

“See you in a week,” I said, and waved at him with one of my webbed front feet as he and Goldie began to fade from existence.

I took a moment to savour the silence that followed, then took a look at my new essence pond. Before unlocking Toad Idol, my Essence had been at sixty, but, now, it sat at one-hundred-and-seventy-three just from all Toadkin in my settlement automatically worshipping me.

Using my powerful toady legs, I leapt high into the air and then, at the apex of the jump I released a burst of essence that washed over every single one of my Houses, evolving them and increasing them all by one-storey. For some reason, those houses closer to the centre of my town became more distinguished and nice-looking, while those closer to the outer walls became grimy and rundown.

As though responding to this sudden change in my town, a bunch of idle minions paired up in two, threes, and fours, all running into the evolved Houses and doing their duty to increase my population.

A bit later, I was watching my second Barracks as it finished its construction. The first already had a new Aristocrat Commander and two dozen forcefully-conscripted Footmen. Near the second Barracks, which lay near the Armoury and Fletchery, a bunch of Aristocrats stood waiting, perhaps sensing a golden opportunity to finally become a Toadkin, as many of them had been evolved prior to my Superior Toad Genes perk being unlocked.

Hiding from the crowd of haughty minions was an Aristocrat I remembered as having been ousted for proposing breeding in the Gentlewhomen’s Club. I decided to pick him to become the new Commander of the Barracks and the seventy-five Footmen it could contain within its sleeping quarters.

As he skipped towards the entrance of the completed building, all the other Aristocrats followed him scornfully with their eyes, but, they were created of lazy and unproductive stock, so they were unlikely to do much except bicker and complain.

I sent a torrent of essence into the Barracks and golden light shone out the windows and from under the doors, making it seem as though a caged sun was held within the building. Then a *poof* of smoke blew the door open and covered the ground as the new Commander walked out with a stern

look on his face. Like my first Commander, he wore a fancy suit of Frog Hide and a fancy beret with a goose feather poking out the back.

I quickly called my Slavers to action, and they began rounding up a bunch of idle and unassigned newborn minions that were then herded into the Barracks, until I had the seventy-five I required, then I sent them to put the rest inside the first Barracks.

Using my pinpoint evolution that I had fully mastered with becoming a Castle Town, I evolved all seventy-five minions at once, without any of them melting together to form a meatball of rubbery flesh and too-many arms.

Then I leapt across town and landed before the other Barracks where I did the same.

As all my Footmen finished evolving, I called upon them and their Commanders to march out the northern part of my town to prepare for my first attempt at making war on whomens. Additionally, I called upon my Cavalry Men and Archers to join them, leaving my Guards and Sharpshooters to keep my town secure, with the aid of my ruthless Slavers, Executioner, and Jailers.

I also had two newly-evolved Wizards join my army, though both were far weaker than Viola, who now ran the Wizard's Buffet in the residential district of the northern quadrant.

Although Toadskandarr seemed more than interested in leading this army, I decided that I should be the one to do it, as, with the Castle Town evolution, it had finally been made possible for me to venture beyond my demesne, though Imu seemed to have implied there were many reasons why I absolutely shouldn't do it, but he wasn't here now, so I wilfully ignored his past warnings. After all, I was a Lord of Toads and an Idol worthy of worship.

What could go wrong?

## 40 — Surprise Encounter?

Imu was leaned back in the wicker-chair on the shore of the paradise realm he had been teleported to. Goldie sat next to him, lapping up her eighth bowl of strawberry daiquiri. He was unsure if she drank it because she genuinely liked the taste or because it looked like blood. Toads were genuinely beginning to terrify him.

He leant back more and let out an audible sigh of contentment. The magic imbued into the wicker-chair made it capable of vibrating such that it released all the tension in his body and made his chubby flesh soft like a newborn babe's.

With a yawn, he took a peek around and made the big mistake of locking eyes with a woman who lay only a few metres away on her own massaging wicker-chair.

“Oh no...”

“Hi there! Would you like to hear about our Lady and Saviour, Lady Light?”

“Please, I'm on a vacation! And so are you, by the look of things!”

She got up from her chair, and, sure enough, it was the very same Missionary that had found their town and nearly caused a very irate Goddess to wipe them from existence.

“Lady Light teaches us that there is no such thing as a day of rest, when the world is still inhabited by infidels!”

“But you must know that I'm not one of her witless flock of brainwashed humans! Look at me! I'm clearly a Guiding Fairy! This is clearly not the Mortal Realm either! I mean, how did you even come to be here in the first place!? I thought only people like me were allowed to traverse the figment between realms!”

“My Lady was so pleased with my work performance that she sent me here! She's forgotten to send me back to the Mortal Realm though, so I've been using the opportunity to preach to all those who come here.”

“I should have known this place was too good to be true... It's a *blessed* tourist trap for indoctrination!”

“Now, listen or I'll purge you!”

Imu looked down at his toady companion that sat next to his wicker-chair and whispered,

“Goldie, you don't perchance find Missionary flesh to be delectable, do you?”

The mustard-yellow toad croaked dully in response.

“Didn’t think so…”

“Gathered faithful, today I have come to preach the good word of our Lady Light, the holiest of holy. It is by her divine grace that you today are allowed to prosper!

“I say to you, gathered sheeplings, would you like to shed your woollen coats and attain enlightenment!?”

Imu got up from his wicker-chair, his soft belly-fat overhanging the rim of his bathing shorts.

“I can’t take this anymore! I’ve listened to your asinine sermons *so* many times! No more! NO MORE I SAY!”

“That sounds dangerously like heresy to my ears,” the Missionary warned, her eyes narrowing. He did notice that she was also wearing a bathing suit though… clearly she wasn’t as devout as she claimed herself.

“I don’t care what you think! Fuck your Goddess! She’s a total bully!”

She looked incensed, “*YOU DARE!*”

“What are you gonna do to me, *Judetta*? You have no power here! This is a violence-free zone! There will be no purging!”

“Just wait until I get back to the Mortal Realm! You will definitely bad for badmouthing my Lady!”

“As if that even matters! Have you not heard? Toad just became a usurper God and all temples within his expanding lands will be turned to revering him and Toadkin as a master race!”

Her narrow eyes narrowed further, as though she didn’t quite believe him.

“But you’ll be stuck here forever. Admit it, your Lady forgot about you! It’s more than likely that she put you here after embarrassing herself by being unable to smite our System Doll.”

“No! She wouldn’t! She’s like super caring and really kind!”

“She’s only nice when you do what she says and don’t question her.”

“Well… yeah, she’s super wise, so obviously she wouldn’t care what us meaningless mortals think!”

“Honestly… that logic is so flawed I can’t even believe you don’t find it absurd yourself.”

Judetta looked poised to argue back, but then her posture slumped and she suddenly seemed really defeated. Imu knew that he had struck a nerve. After all, there was no way any sensible human didn’t have some apprehensions about their lives, particularly when they were members of an insanely-fanatical cult.

A few days later, after spending a long time basically acting as Judetta's therapist to help her deal with all her worries and troubles caused by her religious cult, a new person appeared, though one who was already familiar to him, unfortunately.

"Emo Imu! How's it going! It's been centuries, hasn't it!?"

"Bel? What are you doing here? Aren't you helping *that* Volcano Core in the northwestern sea?"

"Oh, he died. Cataclysmic self-destruction. Quite spectacular! Unless you're mortal and can die, you know, cause then it must've sucked."

Imu sighed. Belamouranthyne was a Fairy who had evolved from a Fire-attributed Dungeon Core about a millennium back, but instead of joining Deathheim Inc., she had started working for Papa Magma to specifically guide fire or fire-adjacent Cores. Given the proclivities of such cores, most had the tendency to catastrophically self-implode or meltdown, if they didn't end up being destroyed by nearby civilisations, due to their detrimental impact on the local ecosystems. In fact, Undead Cores were less likely to be targeted than Fire Cores, given that zombies and skeletons could provide free tireless labour to the nearby kingdoms and thus were often seen as a boon, unless the Church of Light got involved...

"But Papa Magma gave you a vacation anyway?"

"Oh no, he sent me here to fetch you."

"Wait, why?"

"It's because of your Core. It came across one of his favourite Dungeons."

Imu felt a ball of ice form in his stomach, "And? What happened?"

"He... erm... ate it? I guess? That's what I was told anyway."

"My Core... ate another Core? Like an actual Dungeon Core?"

"As I understand it, his army ransacked the entire region and ousted the local Earl, then found a poor Dungeon who lived inside a mountain, and, well, they tore their way through it and then ate the Core..."

Imu sighed deeply. "Alright, I'll see what I can do about it." All-in-all, this had not been a very good vacation.

## 41 — War?

*About a week prior...*

My two Commanders sounded their horns as my army left Toad (Castle) Town behind, and the clap of webbed feet hitting the ground reverberated through the forest, interspersed by the pounding rhythm of myself and the Cavalry every time we landed from a hop, as we moved north towards Earl Sharpee's Castle Town.

Already after just a few hours, we came across a small farmstead that, upon laying eyes on our forces, surrendered to us. Within moments, I felt their territory become added to my own demesne, and I quickly sent a wave over the area and evolved all their buildings. Their crops immediately grew to thrice their normal height and the clothes of the few peasants that lived there became like the simple clothes that my Looms produced. Additionally, the kids in the farmstead immediately bypassed adolescence and grew into full adults. It seemed quite an odd thing, but so was the fact that offspring in my town were born into adulthood... As Imu would've said, it was just one of those vague magic things that were better off not being questioned.

As the parents looked at their adult children in horror and confusion, my army strode further north, encountering another three farmsteads and a village, which were all surrendered to my demesne without any casualties as well.

The sun had reached its zenith when my large eyes settled upon the walls of Earl Sharpee's Castle Town. It was quite puny compared to my own, with his castle taking up half of its area, with the rest full of small closely-stacked houses that were clearly for all the impoverished people who served him directly. Somehow, those who worked the farms under his control had better living standards.

My army had only just begun the march up the hill to reach his outer wall, when we were fired upon by arrows and magical projectiles. Immediately, six of my footmen were crushed by a massive boulder launch from atop the Castle Town's walls. I sent the first of my wizards forward, and he quickly made all the ranged attackers abandon their defence when he unleashed a firestorm that blackened the stones and set fire to the nearest houses.

With a powerful kick off the ground, I launched up the hill and over the Earl's walls, reaching more than ten metres in height before I started falling back down again. While in the air, I used my Appraisal on the few strong individuals assembled to defend the Castle against my force.

**Name:** *Mike 'Boulder' Carmichael*  
**Occupation:** *Earth Sorcerer*  
**Species:** *Sub-Human*  
**Level:** *40/100*  
**Alignment:** *Underpaid-and-overworked*  
**Faction:** *The Earldom of Sharpee Inkledinkle Johnson*

**Name:** *Heiner Carmichael*  
**Occupation:** *Captain of the Earl's Elite Guard*  
**Species:** *Sub-Human*  
**Level:** *32/100*  
**Alignment:** *Unflinchingly-loyal-and-overprotective-of-his-younger-brother*  
**Faction:** *The Earldom of Sharpee Inkledinkle Johnson*

**Name:** *Monroe Gilfroy Gilbertim*  
**Occupation:** *Tax Collector*  
**Species:** *Sub-Human*  
**Level:** *27/100*  
**Alignment:** *Greedy-and-cowardly*  
**Faction:** *The Earldom of Sharpee Inkledinkle Johnson*

I didn't spot the Earl anywhere and it seemed he was the only one I need to actually defeat, in order to take over all his lands.

With a colossal *boom*, my Toad Lord vessel landed atop the outer wall and tore its way through it, creating a massive rift that my army could easily move through, though I flung my tongue out in a few quick slashes to widen the gap more, such that they could enter four footmen abreast.

My Cavalry jumped over the wall with ease, and not sooner had they entered and gotten into the fighting than the Taxman and Boulder Sorcerer lay dead. The Guard Captain went into a furious rage and managed to pull one of the Cavalry Men from his mount and stabbed his over-and-over until he stopped moving, but then he was quickly swallowed by the slain Cavalry Man's Toad mount, his screams abruptly silenced with a loud *crunch*.

I had my soldiers fan out and secure the area, while I went towards the Castle itself and broke down the portcullis and the large wooden gate behind it, with just a few slaps of my immensely-powerful tongue. As I emerged into the throne room, I found the Earl surrounded by servants and a few loyal guards. Upon seeing me, most of them fled, though the Earl was incapable of fleeing his enormous throne, as his body was so bloated from excess gorging of food that his own two legs could not carry him nor could his spindly and doughy arms pull him from his seat. His eyes were entirely obscured by a massive forehead pouch that seemed to have only grown along with the rest of his body.

I used my Appraisal on him and was disappointed at what I saw:

**Name:** *Sharpee Inkledinkle Johnson*

**Occupation:** *Earl*

**Species:** *Sub-Human*

**Level:** *16/100*

**Alignment:** *Lazy-greedy-and-gluttonous-but-believes-he-has-the-God-granted-mandate-to-rule*

**Faction:** *The Earldom of Sharpee Inkledinkle Johnson*

Unlike my proud Toadskandarr, this man was too weak and indulgent to rule. I did what I knew had to be done, and flung out my tongue, which pulled his entire body and throne from the ground and straight into my awaiting mouth, where I swallowed them both.

*Congratulations! For defeating Earl Sharpee Inkledinkle Johnson, you have absorbed all his territory and assets into your demesne! All of his former churches now revere you and all his former servants and citizens are now your minions!*

**WARNING:** *All nearby Kingdoms and Religious Cults have now taken notice of you and are hostile towards your burgeoning Kingdom! You may yet turn some of them into your allies through diplomacy and bribery, but certain Kingdoms and Cults will be impossible to turn into allies!*

**WARNING:** *The Church of Light has branded your Kingdom a den of heresy and has launched a Crusade to defeat you and restore their perverted Churches within your territory!*



Hmm, that was unlikely to be good, I realised, though my forces had easily defeated Earl Sharpee, so I wasn't too worried.

After allowing my Army to rest for a bit, I picked the second Commander and decided to make him the Lord of the conquered Castle Town. Surprisingly, the first Commander seemed not to mind, though, when I read his mind I realised why:

*These worthless maggots will be whipped into proper fighting shape thanks to my ruthless drills and harsh-but-laced-with-kindness rebukes of all their failures. They will come to see me as a father-figure and will rely on me to tell them what to do, for they are lost lambs and I am their shepherd. The battlefield is the only place in the world where I belong. Every day that I am not directly responsible for someone's death is a day wasted!*

I pumped my essence into the second Commander, the man who had snubbed all those other Aristocrats by being picked over them, and as it suffused his body, he grew two heads taller and his body became more reptilian than before and a tail suddenly grew from his spine and powerful scythe-like claws adorned his scaled hands. Two chitinous horns also grew from his brow and his lower-jaw became like a massive pouch.

Where Toadskandarr had been elegant and deadly like a dragonfly, the second Lord was potent and imposing like a stag beetle.

**Name:** *Toadus*

**Occupation:** *Lord of (unnamed Castle Town)*

**Species:** *Toadkin Tyrant*

**Level:** *75/250*

**Alignment:** *Ruthlessly-authoritarian*

**Faction:** *Toad Town Kingdom*

I noticed that not only had he become unique type of Toadkin, no doubt due to undergoing three separate evolutions, but his faction now mentioned a Kingdom instead of a Dynasty like with Toadskandarr.

“Oh, this place needs a name,” I also realised.

Toadus grunted, then said, “**Tyrant's Den.**”

“That sounds a bit too evil,” I replied.

“Good.”

*ANNOUNCEMENT: (unnamed Castle Town) has been renamed to Tyrant's Den.*

After evolving the Tyrant Lord, I sent a wave of my essence over the Castle Town, evolving all the buildings and turning those pitiable houses into decently-looking abodes. The people once again had their clothes undergo a transformation and the children and youths immediately turned into adults, just like with the farmsteads and the village.

I decided to leave half of my footmen and Cavalry Men with Toadus, who himself quickly assigned worker roles to his new citizens and began constructing a new Barracks and other essential buildings. To their credit, the citizens seemed to take this sudden change to their city quite well. After setting his people to work constructing the Barracks, he also had them build a Bakery, for no denizen of the Toad Town Kingdom could live long without bread.

As I left with the remaining half of my army and their Commander, a bunch of carts came from the nearby farms and were laden with fresh produce and harvested wheat for bread. It seemed that, just in the brief time since I overtook the many farms, my essence had already transformed their lands into superbly-fertile soil with a rapid growth and harvest cycle.

I noticed that my essence had still not recovered much since using my essence powers so much and evolving the Lord, but I instinctively knew that it was due to being so far removed from my Core. I wondered if this was what Imu had warned me about.

Within about six hours, I had marched my army back to my settlement and as we came through the trees, I saw smoke rising from many of my buildings and heard croaking yells and chirping war cries. I shot out of my vessel and soared around my settlement, trying to figure out what was happening.

After a few minutes, I found Toadskandarr, who was defending his castle from a mob of unevolved minions. Next to him stood my Mayor, Guild Master, Butcher, and Executioner, as well as those of my Sharpshooters and Guard that had survived thus far.

I quickly possessed my Guild Master, who was wielding a longsword and chopping off heads left-and-right. I pointed at one of the unevolved minions in the middle of the mob and flooded his body with my essence.

There followed a loud *pop* and all the nearby minions were tossed to the ground, many of them dead before they landed.

“What is happening!?” I exclaimed.

“My kwastle is being overrun by the plebeian horde!” Toadskandarr told me.

## 42 — Horde Mode?

*Still about a week prior...*

The unevolved minions had taken the opportunity granted to them by me pulling the army out of my settlement to launch a concerted violent uprising that saw over half of my evolved minions slain in just about ten hours, with the survivors holing up in the castle and letting Toadskandarr and other powerful Toadkin defend them. Strangely, my Toadcaller had just stayed in his Hermit's Lodge and let things play out, while taking a neutral pacifist stance.

Viola, the strongest Wizard in my settlement, had also decided to not take part in the class conflict, though she seemed to have fought off a lot of those that sought to burn down her Buffet and now a massive tornado surrounded the building, with no one able to get in-or-out, although those trapped within seemed happy enough as they got to continue eating her delicious meals without any harm coming to them.

Toadskandarr had been very diligent in my absence, erecting many Bounty Boards that called for the heads of those responsible for the insurrection, as well as letting many of the new visitors join the Adventurers' Guild and giving them similar quests.

The horde of rebel scum were in control of most parts of my city, except for the area around the Beast Workshop and Fleshcrafter's Laboratorium, as the Mad Scientist and Fleshcrafter fended off those that sought to take over their means of production, with the aid of Arnold the Copper-Shield Tortoise.

I returned to my vessel and leapt atop the walls that were brimming with rebels armed with tools and simple weapons, then sent out a command that reached the furthest corners of my settlement:

*All rebellious minions, return to your posts and cease all hostilities! Those who do not comply will be brutally executed with impunity!*

Unsurprisingly, none of the minions flinched and immediately jumped on my Toad Lord vessel, attempting to pry it apart with their hammers, rakes, picks, shovels, and trowels, though I quickly leapt in the air and fired off two dozen pods of the Gnasher Toads, which descended upon the horde and scattered them, allowing me enough time to breach the barricaded gate and let my army enter the city. As with my assault on Earl Sharpee's Castle Town, my Cavalry had already leapt the large outer

walls and were cleaving through the minions, sending heads flying left and right, though the tide seemed endless.

Then I realised why there were so many of them: they had taken over all the houses in every quadrant of my city and were breeding at a rapid pace, somehow subverting my perk that ought to have turned many of them into Toadkin or the in-between stage of half-sub-whomanoid and half-sub-Toadkin.

I wanted to get to the bottom of this and, like Toadskandarr, find those responsible, for this seemed no improvised thing. I used my Appraisal on a random minion, just before his body was cut in two by a sword-glaive:

**Name:** *Bob*

**Occupation:** *Builder Rebel*

**Species:** *Sub-Whomanoid Rebel*

**Level:** *5/5*

**Alignment:** *Rebellious-and-brainwashed*

**Faction:** *The Anti-Slavery Union*

“Brainwashed?” I said out loud, surprised at what I was seeing. The fact that he and his fellow rebels were part of a Union also could only mean one thing: the leaders of this uprising were to be found in the southern quadrant.

My Commander urged his men forward, and they used their flimsy wooden shields and simple iron swords to push back the horde, though we had to go from house-to-house to clear them all out before we could seek out the root of the problem. I only hoped that those Adventurers that Toadskandarr had sent were faring better than us.

---

**Name:** *Vagan*

**Occupation:** *Shadestrider Scoundrel (Copper Rank Adventurer)*

**Species:** *Human*

**Level:** *34/100*

**Alignment:** *Cautious-and-paranoid*

**Faction:** *Toad Town Adventurers' Guild*

What a mess he had gotten himself into, he contemplated, as he pulled the body further into the dark alley near the district wall that led to the eastern quadrant. There was seemingly no end to the raging horde of big-eyed and big-lipped sub-humans who diligently scoured each house in search of those who stood in opposition to them. Already, he had slain over thirty of them and had gained five levels in the process, but it had barely made a dent in their numbers.

Vagan tore his dagger out of the creature and laid it fully within the shadow from the nearby house, before casting his Devouring Shade that caused two-dozen tendrils to emerge from the shadows and begin dissecting and gorging the body, leaving no trace behind.

Like with any Advanced Occupation, he had been taught in the ways of the Shadestrider by someone already skilled in Class. In his case, it had been the infamous Bone Mask, who was said to have been granted his special powers by the Arrogant Triplets, whose status as Deities were widely disputed, despite the fact that many temples had been built to them and depicted their disfigured-and-conjoined visage of three upper bodies sprouting from a single lumpen lower body.

Vagan knew the truth, because, through his Shadestrider abilities, he could converse sparsely with the Triplets and often received unique quests from them. He had already performed many assassinations that normally someone of his level should have been incapable of completing without losing his life in the process.

Still, he was far from the strength he needed to be, and rumour of a legendary monster quest had drawn him to this strange city in the first place and seen him sign up with their small Adventurers' Guild. That had been two days ago, and now he was somehow embroiled in a bloody insurrection.

He looked at the woefully-sparse quest flier again:

***Quest: 'Death to Unionisation!'***

***Type: Assassination***

***Required Adventurer Rank: No Requirement***

***Reward: 5.000 Copper Toakens & a unique mount***

***Description: Find and eliminate the leaders of the Insurrection! Their Hideout is suspected as being the Union Building within the southern district.***

There was no description of who exactly he was looking for, which he took to mean that the issuer of the quest did not know. Vagan had decided that he would just kill anyone that looked to be

giving orders to the horde of sub-humans, and hopefully one of them would turn out to be the leader. Thus far, it seemed that the mob moved according to a set instruction and they coordinated with a type of unified coordination that made him think of a hive of insects that followed the directions of a queen.

Vagan broke from the alleyway and used the core ability of his Class to form steps out of the shadow, allowing him to traverse up the side of the district wall and leap onto its walkway, where he quickly flung his dagger out and sheared through a guard's jugular, before invoking another ability that made a copy of his free hand emerge from the shadow of another guard and pull him headfirst into the ground, never to be seen again.

There were less shadows in the southern district, due to most of its industrial facilities being spread-out more, but already from his vantage point he could see where the enemy were congregated around two buildings, one of which looked like a shed and bore a few flags and banners that had pro-union slogans written on them, like '*NO MORE DEATH TO DEHYDRATION AND STARVATION!*' and '*SAY NO TO MINION SACRIFICE!*'.

He wasn't a cold-hearted man, so he understood their plight, but instead of learning from the wealthy Merchants' Guild of Lillebrünnr who bribed their way to more rights, they had decided to make themselves stand in opposition to the rulers of their city, which had never worked out well to his knowledge. Even in situations such as when Vagan had been hired to slay a Duke on behalf of the enraged populace, the aftermath was always worse than how things had been prior, as, with the power-vacuum and success of the Insurrectionists, a new internal struggle formed as their group split into factions, always leading to some outside force managing to take over the land with ease, killing many of the 'victors' in the process.

With a sigh he cleared his head, then leapt from the wall, allowing his shadow-born platforms to slow his descent, so that he reached the street between large forges and anvils unscathed.

No sooner had his feet touched the soil than a mob of twelve smiths and apprentices broke from their forges to defeat him.

With a flourish of his dagger and a propelling boost of a shadowy platform spawning under his feet, he launched into the air and fell upon the mob with brutal efficiency.

---

My army had lost almost a third of its men to the ceaseless horde, but we now controlled half the northern quadrant. As more-and-more houses fell under my control, I ordered my Footmen into the

houses in pairs, so that I could reinforce my numbers. I only gained about twenty extra Footmen offspring from this, but all of them had the obvious traits of being Toadkin, which made me happy.

I pushed ahead of my men to break a dense clump of rebels from the Marketplace area, using both my tongue, flensing claws, and merciless Gnasher Toads. No sooner had I routed many of the rebellious minions than System appeared, holding a wooden eagle in her porcelain-doll hands. She made screeching sounds as he moved the toy through the air, before slamming it right into the forehead of one of the rebels, caving his skull in with disturbing ease.

It seemed that when Yonn had ensured me System would not be able to damage my settlement, it didn't actually include the minions, though perhaps the rebels were an exception?

Together with System and my two Wizards who had followed my charge, we cleared out all the Merchant's Shops, the Marketplace building, the Toy Maker, and the Bakery. I picked one of the Footmen and told him to run to the Castle and report our success in establishing a foothold here, but before he could take off, a sound like repeated croaking came from both east and west and a wave of a hundred-plus rebels washed over us, leaving each member of my army to fend for themselves against more than one enemy.

As you might imagine, this resulted in a lot of death, though my Commander, the two Wizards, System, and myself more than evened the odds, devastating their coordinated assault with primitive weapons simply by virtue of our higher levels.

I alone killed over thirty minions, just using my tongue and feet. My Commander proved himself to be quite fearsome as well, as he cleft bodies in half with his two-handed sword. My Fire Wizard was also proving himself quite a terrifying monster, as he cupped his hands and belched massive oily flames on anyone unlucky enough to be in front of him.

The other Wizard was a wind-based one like Viola, though nowhere near as powerful, and he simply swung his hands through the air in front of him, sending cutting blades of condensed wind to shear through the mobs that surrounded us.

When I thought the horde was starting to dim in strength, another hundred-or-so came from the west to bolster their numbers, while we were now down to twenty-odd Footmen, two Wizards, a Commander, a literally-immortal Porcelain Doll controlled by a psychotic System, and me in my Toad Vessel.

No sooner had I begun to despair however, than Toadskandarr came riding like a Hero of Legend atop Él, whose Jackicorn horn sent bolts of electricity through the thronging rows of rebels, boiling



their internals and exploding a few from the inside. The Butcher and Executioner came soon after, as well as the surviving Guards and Sharpshooters.

Together, we cleared the district over the next two hours and I had my remaining Archers, who had hung back at the city gate due to their lack of skill with close-quarter-fighting, secure the district gates from atop the walls alongside my Sharpshooters. I realised then that my Cavalry Men had run ahead on their own and reconnected with my Lord, which was the reason they had come to our aid in such a timely manner.

While we prepared to take back the east quadrant, such that I could evolve more Guards, Archers, and Footmen, and also team up with my Mad Scientist and Fleshcrafter, I told all available minions to get busy repopulating our forces by using the houses around us.

When the first pair of Footmen emerged with their Offspring, I realised that my new houses had been imbued with the rare chance to increase the number of Offspring possible, as the pair came out with three new minions in tow.

I knew it wouldn't be easy, but I would take back my Castle Town from these rebels, no matter how many minions I had to sacrifice to do it!

## 43 — The Mastermind?

*Yeah... this is still about a week prior...*

Somehow Vagan had cleared a way through the district after singlehandedly defeating the twelve smiths that had tried to mob him. Afterwards he had stuck to the shadows and relied on his powers as a Shadestrider to keep him safe. The area around the Union Shed was heavily guarded by the identical sub-humans that had started the rebellion against the Toadkin masters of the city.

By covertly using the shadows of the many guards, Vagan had traversed the open space unnoticed and gotten to the Shed that seemed the root cause of the entire insurrection, given that it was run by a Union of pro-freedom, pro-equality, and anti-Toadkin rebels.

As he slinked through one of the windows of the primitive building that was adorned in flags and banners full of slogans, he came into a dark interior. He had scarcely had enough time to look around, when a bright flame lit up the room and dispelled all shadows around him.

Vagan instinctively looked around for an escape, but found that all doorways and windows were barred by mobs of the sub-humans who had surrounded the building.

“A trap...” he said, sighing.

“...and you fell right for it!” said a female voice, as the crowd parted and she came walking in. It was the first female inhabitant of the city that Vagan had thus far seen, given that the rest of the city was crowded by androgenous sub-human men and Toadkin.

He used his Appraising Eye to inspect her stats, but she was too high level for him to discover anything except her Occupation.

“...a Therapist?” he asked out loud, before someone knocked him unconscious with a hammer-blow to the back of his head.

---

My forces had pushed through the few holdouts of rebels in the eastern district, while Toadskandarr and his contingent began their foray into the western quadrant. Our forces had been bolstered by a concerted breeding effort of all available minions, but it still seemed that several hundreds of minions served the Insurrection.

We had passed by Viola's Buffet on the way here, but she had confirmed that she would stay put until the fighting was over, firmly taking the side of the Pacifists like Toadcaller. I realised that she was only able to take such a possession because there were few in my city who could challenge her and actually match her strength.

When the last of the rebels were slain, I hopped over to greet the Mad Scientist, Fleshcrafter, and Arnold the Copper-Shield Tortoise. The Fleshcrafter had made good use of the many bodies they had piled high during their defence, and the area around their buildings were crawling with his 'children'. Some were like six-legged stalk-limbed spiders and others were like twelve-jointed centipedes, but the general theme was 'creepy insects' it seemed.

The Scientist came up to my vessel and put a hand on my forehead, then said, "Twitiliii, bring an Adventurer to miii!"

Luckily, there were a few in Toadskandarr's retinue, so I call one of them over and he arrived fifteen minutes later, out of breath and croaking out sputtering coughs.

The Scientist looked at the Adventurer sceptically. "Twitilom, this guy is in bad form!"

"What are you gonna do with him?" I asked.

He patted one of my eyeballs and then took the exhausted Adventurer by his hand, guiding him into the strange domed building. Before they disappeared from sight, I saw that the Scientist clutched a giant goose-feather in his other hand.

After a series of terrified croaking and maniacal laughter, alongside a lightshow that emerged out of the hexagonal plates of the domed building, the Mad Scientist flew out of the top of the domed shell, followed by a new creature that swooped down through the air and skated to a halt in the earth in front of me.

I beheld the new creation, which stood almost three-metres-tall despite its back being arched as its bizarre goose-like head looked around, while it flapped its huge wings. Its lower-half, around where its navel would have been, was a transition from steel-hard feathers to spiked reptilian scales that ended in clawed webbed feet.

**Name:** *Baest*

**Occupation:** *War Beast*

**Species:** *Toad-Goose Gryphon (Chimera)*

**Level:** *55/100*

**Alignment:** *Calamity-of-the-skies*

**Faction:** *Toad Town*

“I think we need something a bit stronger that can deal with a lot of enemies at once,” I commented.

“I can make something,” the Fleshcrafter offered. I glanced at his creations and then decided that it was best to pretend I hadn’t heard his offer.

The Mad Scientist scratched his chin, then an idea seemed to come to him and he patted Arnold on his copper shell and pointed him into the domed building, before flying off to catch one of the many-legged creatures the Fleshcrafter had made.

When he had the creature in his arms he flew up to the top of his dome and dropped it inside, before nosediving inside as well.

Moments later, a loud *crunch* of bones and snapping of limbs followed and from the large door of the building came a new and transformed Arnold:

**Name:** *Arnold*

**Occupation:** *War Beast*

**Species:** *Copper-Shield Stalker (Chimera)*

**Level:** *80/100*

**Alignment:** *Feels-a-bit-uncomfortable-with-all-his-new-limbs*

**Faction:** *Toad Town*

“This is more like it!” I exclaimed, as I looked at the many metal-coated limbs that grew from the copper shell of the giant tortoise. It combined impenetrable defence with a terrifying reach of many-jointed ten-plus-metres-long spiked limbs, which moved around with skittering speed atop the tortoise’s back.

After evolving a bunch of newborn minions to Footmen, the Toadkin genes strong within them as they were all the offspring of Toadkin prior to their evolutions, I also evolved another Commander and more Archers and Guards.

With my two-hundred-strong force of soldiers, I had Arnold and Baest push ahead with me, as my army followed in our wake and began the arduous task of checking every building we passed on our way to the southern district gate.

---

Vagan was lying on a sofa-chair as the Toadkin Therapist was making him tell her about his childhood as an orphan in the slums of Lillebrünnr.

Between her droning monotone and the concussion from the blow to his head, Vagan was rapidly beginning to slip into the magic of her brainwashing, which slowly eroded all inhibitions he had and removed all the things that held him back from blindly following her every word.

But then a massive explosion rocked the minimalistic interior of the consultation room and the Therapist shot up from her chair, just as an enormous horned rabbit smashed through the backwall and sent a surge of electricity into the woman.

Vagan rolled out of the sofa-chair lamely and sent out spikes of shadow that pinned the Therapist to the spot, and a moment later a tall dangerous-looking figure leapt from the back of the rabbit monster and chopped off her head with a single swipe of his two-handed sword.

As the Toadkin Therapist fell to the ground, headless, the man came over and helped Vagan stand. Using his Appraising Eye, he realised just who it was that stood before him: the Lord of Toad Town, Toadskandarr. He was more terrifying to behold than any Lord that Vagan had set his eyes upon before.

“Nicely done, Adventurer. Come to my kwastle after we have wiped out the rest of these rebels, so that I can hand you your reward personally.”

“I’m not sure I did much,” Vagan replied, standing up uneasily.

“You kweared the way for my troops to follow and without your instigation, we would never have diskwovered that the true Mastermind behind this uprising was none other than a Toadkin traitor!”

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As we fought our way to the Union building near the Quarry of the southern district, there was suddenly a change in our foe and they became disorganised and panicked, as though the fighting spirit had been extinguished from them. Regardless of their altered mental states, we showed them no mercy and wiped them out to the very last man.

No sooner had we reached the Union's hideout than Toadskandarr came striding towards me with a head in his grip. Behind him trotted ÉI the Jackicorn and a human Adventurer, who seemed to have shadows dogging his heels like vexatious cobwebs that was stuck to his boots.

"I found the Leader!" he announced and all the assembled soldiers chirped cheerfully.

I inspected the severed head and was surprised by what I saw:

**Name:** *Grace's Head*

**Occupation:** *Brainwashing Therapist & Violent Mob Instigator*

**Species:** *Toadkin*

**Level:** *1/1*

**Alignment:** *Missing-its-body*

**Faction:** *The Flayed Lady*

"Why does she have the same faction as my Fleshcrafter?" I wondered.

Toadskandarr looked at me, then quickly sent a dozen Cavalry men to find the Fleshcrafter and imprison him on suspicion of aiding the enemy.

Suddenly System came running with the other half of the Therapist's body raised above her head.

*Congratulations! For quelling a rebellion with the goal of achieving rights for the oppressed workers of your settlement, you have gained the [Tyrant] perk!*

*[Tyrant] – Sedition in settlements where you or any of your Ruler-type minions are present is 99% less likely to occur, as your minions are too frightened by the consequences of openly opposing you and your oppressive regime.*

## 44 — To Lillebrünnr?

*In case you're wondering... yes... this is still about a week prior...*

After reconstruction and clean-up following the Insurrection was underway, with the Consultation Clinic and Minion Help Centre being razed to the ground to prevent a repeat of the heinous events that had transpired, a group of my first Adventurers came wandering through the gate of my city, having finally returned from their quest to find Hekkenfelt.

As I occupied the Guild Master's body, I discovered that they had not only found the village of Hekkenfelt and its Guild Office, but they had also made contact with the Guild of a large city, over twice the size of Toad Town, called Lillebrünnr.

I'd only just finished crafting the Pacifists' Guild, so the news of a major city to our southwest was a great opportunity to try my hand at some diplomacy.

Finding three pacifist minions to evolve to Diplomats turned out to be rather easy, as all the minions who had stayed in Viola's Buffet sanctuary for the duration of the violent class conflict had adopted her peace-loving mindset. I picked three at random and put them all into the strange Pacifists' Guild building, which was a conglomeration of bubbles formed from quarried stones with flowers growing from their rooftops. Selectively targeting each of the three pacifists, I sent my essence into their bodies and they emerged from the strange building after an explosion of pink light and smoke.

Each wore a strange knitted outfit that looked like a toad, with their faces visible from a hole just below the big bulbous head with enormous soulless eyes.

Viola had joined the small viewing party, as it seemed she felt some sort of responsibility for the pacifists she had moulded, and, when she saw the three new diplomats, her only comment was, "They're adorable!"

Toadskandarr had decided that each of the three diplomats should have two Cavalry Men as bodyguards, so I quickly evolved some Guards and toad Mounts for the purpose. Additionally, the Lord decided that they had to travel in style, so three more Jackicorns were shaped by the Mad Scientist, which the Siege Engine Builder outfitted with massive harnesses that bore small bronze-armoured houses for the Diplomats to live inside, while the Jackicorns took them to their destinations.

I had no say in the naming of the three War Beasts, as their names were chosen during their creation for some strange reason, but the three new Jackicorns were called: *Ec*, *Tric*, and *Idad*. For some reason, none of them were as strong as *Él*, the first of their kind, whose level was 100/100, while theirs was 75/75. Additionally, they were also a bit smaller and their horns were shorter.

The first Diplomat and his guards I sent to Hekkenfelt, while the second was sent north in search of a port-city that would grant access to a great ocean I'd been told lay that way, and the third I followed alongside of as he went to Lillebrünnr.

Alongside the two bodyguards and the Diplomat came the Adventurer Vagan, whom Toadskandarr had decided to be our guide for the city of Lillebrünnr.

It struck me how much Toadskandarr had taken charge of my settlement in my brief absence, but I supposed that my attention should be focused more on the big picture and the minutiae of governance left to my minions.

Hopefully, he would be able to prevent another violent uprising in my absence and keep my Core safe. Though I hoped I would never find out, I wondered what would happen to all my minions if my Core was destroyed. It seemed unlikely to be anything good, as my essence, my very soul, was imbued within each and every one of them.

After about ten hours of travelling, I spotted the city on the horizon. It was definitely larger than my own, and it also had an enormous mountain behind the castle that lay at the very back of the city. In terms of utilising the terrain to their advantage, they had me beat for sure.

"The King who rules over Lillebrünnr and its environs was made rich by the mountain against which he built his fortress," Vagan told me and my Diplomat, who insisted on staying within the strange toad costume.

The Adventurer was riding his own Jackicorn, which had been gifted to him by Toadskandarr, because of his help in finding the leader of the rebels. His mount was half the size of the one my Diplomat rode atop of, and matched the two Cavalry bodyguards' mounts in size. Also, its fur was a strangely-reflective black, as opposed to the silver-white, and its name was *Skygge*.

"Is the mountain full of gold and jewels, like my Quarry?" I asked him.

"Yes, but not only that. They also find artefacts and powerful tomes of knowledge, not to mention a cartload of experience to level up their troops and Aristocrats. You see, a Dungeon Core resides within the mountain."



Now *this* piqued my interest! I'd only ever heard about such Cores from Imu, but had never experienced one myself.

"I wanna see it!"

"You probably won't be able to," he replied, dashing my hopes.

"Why not!?"

"They guard the entrance well, only letting chosen individuals enter its depths."

"I'll find a way to get in," I told him.

Vagan eyed me curiously for a moment, then grinned, "Let me help you with that."

"But first!" I reminded him, "I need to establish a peace-treaty with the city!"

"That should be simple enough if you just vow to transport goods to them. I believe Lillebrünnr has a bit of a food insecurity crisis at the moment and I noticed that the fields in Toadskandarr's lands are bountiful."

"You mean *my* lands," I corrected him.

"Aren't you just his servant?"

"No! I'm am Toad! Son of Toadimer and Toadilda, grandson of Toado and Toadette, who are also my uncle and sister-cousin! Toadskandarr is the Lord I evolved and installed on the throne of my town!"

"I see," was all that he replied, looking more confused than re-educated, but I just took that to mean that he had been sufficiently awed by realising whose presence he was in.

When we arrived to the massive central gate of Lillebrünnr's outer walls, a contingent of armed guards halted us and asked,

"For what purpose have you come bearing arms into King Eskilder's fair city of Lillebrünnr!?"

Both Vagan and I were about to explain, when my Diplomat emerged from the hut atop the back of his large Jackicorn mount. The assembled guards took one look at his outfit and seemed mollified, a few of them even smiling.

"I see," said the lead guard. "You have come in peace. We'll lead you to our Pacifists' Guild at once!"

No sooner had the Diplomat gone back inside his hut than we were being led through the city by two dozen guards. Many of Lillebrünnr's citizens came out to watch as we were paraded down the street and most of their people remarked at the strange animals we travelled with, with the children especially wanting to ride on the back of the toad Mounts or the big fluffy Jackicorn.

After following the guards as they led us down the main thoroughfare of the stone city, we came to a strange-looking building that, amusingly, looked nearly identical to the Pacifists' Guild building back in my own city.

Idad, the Jackicorn, knelt down before its entrance and the Diplomat once again emerged from his hut, before awkwardly clambering down the ladder on the side of the animal's harness, though his big knitted toad outfit made it a rather cumbersome affair.

No sooner had his squishy big costume frog-feet touched the cobblestones of the road than the door opened and out walked two people who wore their own strange outfits, which looked like brown bear with goose wings.

"The animal on King Eskilder's Coat-of-Arms is a winged bear, hence why they are wearing mascot outfits to represent Lillebrünnr in such a way," Vagan explained to me. "I assume your Coat-of-Arms must have a frog on it."

"He's dressed as a Toad, not a frog!" I corrected him, incensed that the two be so casually mistaken for one another.

As we watched the three animal mascots exchange words, the guards who had escorted us left to return to their posts, seemingly happy with the outcome.

Suddenly, the three Diplomats started holding hands and jump-dancing in a circle, which I found quite ominous for some reason.

Then an achievement emerged:

*Congratulations! For establishing a peaceful alliance with a bigger power than you, you have gained the [Soft Power] perk!*

*[Soft Power] – Influence allies and foes through spreading your culture within their borders and turning their citizens towards viewing your settlement as a nice vacation destination, where they will spend a lot of their hard-earnt money and in turn bolster your power and influence in the international struggle between Kingdoms and Nations.*

"Now," Vagan started, "Let's see if we can't sneak our way into the mountain Dungeon."

## 45 — Dungeon Core Mountain?

*Hey, would you look at that, it's somehow only half a week prior now...*

By the ornate Mountain Dungeon's gate, which stood at the end of a large garden within King Eskilder's castle grounds, were two hugely-muscular men in sculpted chest armour and helmets made to look like the head of a bear: ears, teeth, snout, and all. Their forearms and legs were left bare, though a short skirt covered the area below their waists

Vagan had used some strange magic that moulded the darkness around him, allowing him to traverse up the side of the castle wall, while I'd simply leapt from below and landed within the roughly-seven-metres-above-ground garden. Somehow, the two guards had not noticed my landing, even though I flattened a bush with the colossal weight of my vessel. It seemed that their large metal helmets not only muted all sound, but also made it pretty much impossible to see, as they did not notice us until we were right on them, and by then it was too late for them to do anything before I swallowed both whole, devouring even their metal armour.

My companion/guide looked at me in a way that was hard for me discern the meaning of, then said, "I was just going to knock them out."

"Oh," I replied.

"What kind of stomach does your body have anyway? How did you swallow both that quickly?"

I tried a shrug of my toady shoulders, but it mostly just looked like I did a push-up. "I don't know," I told him, "this isn't my real body and I don't particularly understand how *this one* was made nor how it's capable of most things."

"I see," was all he replied. It seemed obvious that he did not comprehend what I was saying, but it was a convenient way for him to shelve the conversation topic for perpetuity.

With the gate cleared of guards, I gave it a good scrutinising glare:

**Name:** *Dungeon Gate*

**Occupation:** *Dungeon Gate*

**Species:** *Gateous Ornaticus Blockthewayitis (Gate (Door))*

**Level:** 3/3

**Alignment:** *Locked-and-idle*

**Faction:** *Blazing Blaine's Dungeon*

I wondered if Blazing Blaine was the name of the Core, but knew there was only one way to find out, so I tongue-punched the gate with such force that it shot inward on its hinges when the lock was sheared in half. A powerful echo flowed through the mountain from the concussive force of my strike.

“Let’s get inside and barricade it behind us,” Vagan advised.

It seemed a prudent idea, so I hopped beyond the threshold and once he’d entered as well, I used my tongue to forcefully shove the two sections of the gate back in place, before pulling a heavy stalactite from the ceiling and ramming it into the ground next to the gate, such that it made it impossible to open the gate until removed.

Vagan nodded in satisfaction, “They’ll need a battering ram to follow us now.”

“Have you been here before?” I asked.

“A few times on the first few floors, but never invited, obviously. My mentor used to bring me here to train.”

“Floors?”

“Do you not know how Dungeons are laid out?” he asked in return.

“It seems I don’t. Honestly, I’m not quite sure what I expected.”

“Well, it’s a bit different from Dungeon to Dungeon, but they are always comprised of floors. Some go up, some go down. This one goes up. The top floor is supposed to be an open crater at the top of the mountain, you know, like an inactive volcano.”

“How do we get up there?”

“You want to go to the top?” he asked with a grin.

“Of course!”

“I’ll show you the way, but you’ll have to do most of the fighting. My skills are generally best served for humans.”

“Fighting?”

“Yeah? Do you really not know how these things work?”

I tried to shrug again and once again it did not produce a shrug...

“This Dungeon is full of flame-based monsters, like Fire Goblins and Fire Slimes, stuff like that. At the end of each floor is a mini-boss, and on the sixth floor is a proper boss. This pattern supposedly repeats up until the thirtieth floor, which is where the final Boss will be, within the volcano crater.”

“That seems simple enough,” I replied.

“I think only a few heroes have managed to reach the summit on floor thirty,” he cautioned me.

“How hard can it be?”

With Vagan riding on my back, I hopped eagerly into the first room of the first floor, where a mob of seven torch-wielding red-skinned goblins attacked me. With a single swipe of my tongue I sent them flying against the walls where they were turned to paste or buried under falling stalactites.

The next three rooms were a similar affair, and then came the first mini-boss, who was a hobgoblin called Erick-Svendson that wielded a burning wooden club. I tore him apart with a slash of my flensing claws, and quickly disappeared in a flashfire, before leaving behind a few small uncut rubies as reward.

The next two floors were a variation of the first one, with bigger groups of goblins and the mini-bosses just being an additional hobgoblin, such that floor three had three of them as the mini-boss.

When Vagan had pocketed the rubies that dropped as a reward, I couldn't help but remark, “This design is kind of lazy, isn't it? Even the floor layout is identical...”

He just shrugged, which I jealously hated him for being capable of, though, thinking back on my life as a Toad, shrugging hadn't been something I'd been capable of back then, rather, it was a mannerism I had picked up from Imu.

I considered how much he would've yelled at me by now, if he had been here, but, in a way, I found that I missed his shrill voice and constant whining.

“Onward and up!” I announced, when Vagan climbed back onto my vessel.

Floor four and five introduced fire-slimes to the mix, but still insisted on using the fire-goblins, who were no stronger than the previous floors. The slimes were likewise quite weak and I couldn't help but let out a groan of annoyance, when I found that the mini-boss of the fourth floor was just a hobgoblin riding a slime.

“All these slimy slimes and gobby goblins!” I raged. “This Core has no pizzazz! It's all just so lazy and uninspired! 1/10! Bad Dungeon!”

A fat red-skinned goblin fell out of the ceiling, then aimed a filthy index finger at me.

“Hey, fuck you, buddy!”

“I'm not your buddy, goblin!”

“All you do is complain! It's really rude!”

I tongue-punched the goblin and sent him flying, but when he hit the wall he just bounced off, seemingly unscathed by the hit. “What I think is rude,” I told him, “is making us go through the monotony of this terrible layout!”

“I worked really hard on it!” the goblin yelled back.

The way he seemed to imply that he was responsible for the Dungeon, made me immediately use my Appraisal on him:

**Name:** *Blazing Blaine’s Goblin Chief #1*

**Occupation:** *Dungeon Core Mouthpiece*

**Species:** *Flame Goblin*

**Level:** *15/15*

**Alignment:** *Possessed-by-hot-headed-Core*

**Faction:** *Blazing Blaine’s Dungeon*

“You’re the Dungeon Core!?” I gasped.

The goblin stood up and put his hands on his hips. “That’s right! Of course, my true form is far too magnificent for you to behold, but you’ll also never make it to my Final Floor!”

I narrowed my big eyes at him, then said, “I’ll come find you and then we’ll see who’s the better Core!”

My words must have triggered some realisation in him, because he quickly used an ability I’d seen Imu utilise many times: the weird bubble between the fingers to create a Scope.

“How are you level three-hundred-and-sixty!?” he exclaimed. “You’re cheating!”

Vagan, who had stayed silent this whole time, looked down at me from where he lay atop my back. “No wonder I couldn’t tell what level you were... and it explains how you’re able to one-shot everything...”

The goblin mouthpiece went back to pointing at me, and yelled, “B-b-but yes! Come to my top floor and I’ll definitely win! But you won’t make it there, cause you’re weak and gross!” Then he pulled down the skin below his right eye and pointed his tongue at me, before disappearing into the floor.

“Vagan.”

“Yes?”

“Now we’re definitely going to the top floor! No one challenges me and gets away with it!”

## 46 — The Summit of Monotony?

*Two days prior to the events of chapter forty...*

I had easily cleared the floor six boss, which was just a very big slime that I fired all my Gnasher Toads at until it had been entirely devoured, but I did not take a moment to rest on my laurels and thus quickly zoomed through the next five floors, which, lo and behold, were basically identical to the first five, apart from all the goblins having been replaced with hobgoblins and the mini-bosses being wereslime hobgoblins...

“You know,” Vagan started, “I think you’re on to something... this layout is really lazy. You would think that there’d be a bit more variation than just having the layout of the enemies altered slightly. But no... every floor is just four rooms in a line, with each room being square and having some braziers for lighting.”

“I know right!” I concurred.

“I lived in Lillebrünnr a lot, and, as I said, I’ve been to the bottom floors a few times in the past, but I honestly thought there’d be more to this Dungeon than *this...*”

“Let’s just keep going. The strategy may be to bore us to death, but I will not succumb to it!”

In the distance came an echoing voice that said, “*Fuck you guys!*”

The boss fight on floor twelve was comprised of two slimes like the one on floor six and, as I fired off a barrage of Gnasher Toads to devour the two blobs of slime, I couldn’t help but remark tiredly, “If the third boss on floor eighteen is three of these, then I swear I’ll tear down this whole mountain.”

“There’s no way the Dungeon will be *that* lazy,” Vagan remarked, though I could tell he didn’t fully believe himself.

Floor thirteen to seventeen were now comprised of Wereslime hobgoblins instead of normal hobgoblins, but the boss on floor thirteen had me momentarily-excited, when it turned out to be a fire-spewing drake. Granted, it still died in a single tongue-punch and the excitement died down when fourteen had two of them as the mini-boss, and fifteen had three. On floor sixteen, the mini-boss was a wereslime hobgoblin riding a drake, and the seventeenth-floor boss were two of them.

As usual, the layout of the rooms was unchanged, as though the Dungeon Core was literally incapable of coming up with something other than a perfectly square room with equilateral walls,

floors, and ceilings. Neither in my life as a Toad nor as a Settlement Core had I met an individual with so little creativity. In a way, ridding the world of their presence was only a boon for all species.

I looked at the three enormous slimes that greeted us on floor eighteen.

“This is ridiculous,” I said. “Alright, once we get to the summit, I’m tearing this whole mountain down.”

“The King might be displeased with you,” Vagan replied. “But, I think it’s the right decision. This place is a den of unimaginative horrors and cookie-cutter aspirations. It deserves to be removed from existence.”

Then next five floors were, unsurprisingly, identical to all the ones below, with the wereslime hobgoblins being replaced by drakes. The mini-bosses for floor nineteen to twenty-one were wereslime drakes, which, as a concept, was pretty dumb, as the slimy nature of the wereslime was antithetical to the boiling and evaporating flames of the drake, resulting in a creature that was somehow more dangerous to itself than its surroundings.

The mini-bosses on floor twenty-two and twenty-three were wereslime hobgoblins riding wereslime drakes...

Alright, enough! I give up on narrating the rest of this...

*Skipping ahead to floor thirty: the Summit!*

Vagan and I emerged out into the vast open crater of floor thirty, exhausted and ground-down by the monotony and utter lack of creativity from the previous twenty-nine floors.

“I can’t believe we did it,” Vagan gasped, the new unfamiliar floor like a breath of fresh air.

The thirtieth floor was quite literally a crater, with the bottom a roundish platform thirty metres in radius and the surrounding walls all sloping up overhead to where a small aperture let the waning moonlight shine down on us. Granted, it was still the same tired aesthetic of bare exposed mountainous rock, but there were a few partially concealed veins of flowing lava, hinting at the potential that the slumbering volcano was perhaps not as asleep as first expected.

A maniacal laughter greeted us and we looked ahead to the final boss of the imagination-deprived Dungeon.

I let out a croaking sigh. “Seriously...”

“Yeah, that’s *very* lazy...”



The boss was an enormous slime, upon which rode a wereslime drake, with the Goblin Chief sitting at the top and whom the Dungeon Core, Blazing Blaine, was clearly possessing.

With Vagan staying at the stairwell landing, I hopped forward, while the giant slime slowly moved towards me as well. The wereslime drake let out a belch of fire, but, not only did it not reach me, it also set itself on fire as well as the giant slime it was riding. To help it die faster, I repeated my tried-and-true strategy of firing off a barrage of Gnasher Toads and they quickly got to work devouring the slime from underneath the self-immolating drake and panicking goblin chief.

No sooner had the giant slime been devoured whole than I leapt forward with a powerful kick of my toady legs and shot forward a tongue punch that sent both the half-melted wereslime drake and goblin chief flying off into the distance, where they collided with the wall and died in a spectacularly-bright flashfire.

As the light of the final boss' death washed over the crater, a collection of mud huts became revealed, with a big crystal standing in the midst of them all. I hopped over towards the crystal, but then a bunch of goblin chiefs emerged from the huts and tried to fight me off. I was honestly too bored to fight back by then, so I let Vagan take over, as I continued towards the big crystal.

It glowed with a warm red light and looked like a cluster of giant rubies that almost formed a crown of sorts.

**Name:** *Blazing Blaine*

**Occupation:** *Dungeon Master*

**Species:** *Dungeon Core (Soul Core)*

**Level:** *3/5*

**Alignment:** *Furious-and-frustratingly-stubborn*

**Faction:** *Papa Magma & Co.*

As I observed the crystal, Blazing Blaine's voice emerged from within:

"Alright! You beat me! I'll give you all the rubies and gold and artefacts that I have! Just let me live!"

"You know I can't do that, Blaine," I said coldly. "Your Dungeon sucks. It's an affront to all Dungeon Cores, not that I know any, but I'm sure they have more creative designs than yours!"

"What do you want from me!? My Guiding Fairy quit, so I had to figure this all out on my own!"

“That’s rough,” I told him, “But I don’t think it excuses your crimes against aesthetics and interior design! You must have been told over-and-over how boring your dungeon was!”

“So what, I don’t listen to haters!”

“Sometimes you have to embrace the hatred and let it flow through you,” I counselled wisely. “Not all critique is hate, and not all hate is entirely without reason.”

“Alright, I’ll change! Just don’t kill me!”

“How old are you, Blaine?”

“I don’t know, why would I keep track of that!?”

Vagan sidled up next to me, having gotten rid of the many goblin chiefs. He was carrying a sack full of all the loot he had gathered on our way to the summit. Once we got out of here, he’d be probably the richest individual on this part of the continent.

“This Core is at least three-hundred years old,” he said. “King Eskilder has been using his fortunes harvested from it to keep himself alive since he first laid claim to it.”

“See,” I told Blaine, “You’ve been around all that time and never once changed your ways.”

“You’re just a hater!” he yelled at me.

In response I tongue-punched his crystal Core and broke off a large portion that I promptly swallowed. It only seemed to make him yell more obscenities at me, so I did it again, and again, and again, until no pieces remain of Blazing Blaine’s Core.

*Congratulations! For devouring a Soul Core like yourself, you have gained the [Cannibal Diet] perk!*

*[Cannibal Diet] – Devouring a Soul Core allows you to absorb the Core’s power and unique properties to use in your own settlement. Depending on the type of Core sub-category, you may also unlock unique buildings or minions! (Applies Retroactively)*

*Congratulations! For devouring the Dungeon Core known as Blazing Blaine, you unlocked the ability to craft the following structures:*

*Goblin Hut*

*Hobgoblin Hut*

*Slime Den*

*Drake Roost*

*Magical Species-Mixing Mirror*  
*Magical Minion-Copying Mirror*

I was about to remark sarcastically how silly it was that I'd gained a structure that allowed me to copy a minion, but then the ground underneath our feet began rumbling and quaking.

"What's happening?" I asked.

"This is just a theory," Vagan started, "But it is quite possible that the Dungeon Core was keeping the volcano of this mountain dormant and, now that the Core is gone, it has begun to erupt, perhaps pent-up from many centuries of being forced to stay asleep."

"Get on my back!" I told him hurriedly, immediately accepting his theory as fact, when the stairwell that had led us to the thirtieth floor exploded in a geyser of destructive lava. With a powerful kick of my toady legs, I shot up at a forty-five-degree angle and hit the sloping wall of the crater, before kicking off again and flying out through the small hole in the summit. As I landed on the roof of the thirtieth floor outside, I quickly hopped south towards the city of Lillebrünnr below, quickly beginning to slide down the slope and picking up tremendous speed.

As we were about halfway down the slope, the top of the mountain shot off in a trail of smoke and scalding magma and we got a perfect view as it landed on the castle below and turned it into a flattened ruin, chunks of the large stones it had been built from shooting out across the city beyond its walls.

I quickly leapt from the mountain as we neared the bottom, and sailed across the ruins of the castle, landing somewhere just outside its southernmost walls, but I did not take a moment to rest and continued onward through the city, heading straight for the Pacifists' Guild, while fire and brimstone was raining down on the stone city, devastating houses with boulder-sized chunks of mountainous rock that was shot out of the volcano with the speed of a nosediving kingfisher plummeting into a pond to catch a fish.

Coincidentally, I found the Diplomat right as he was ushering his two new winged-bear-mascot friends into the hut atop the Jackicorn, Idad. The two bodyguard Cavalry looked eager to get out of the city as well, and when they saw me arrive, they quickly croaked orders to the Diplomat's mount and they followed me as I hopped along the main thoroughfare.

Standing on a hill a few kilometres outside of Lillebrünnr with many displaced citizens, as well as my Diplomat and his two friends, not to mention Vagan who had held on to my vessel for dear life

during our escape, I could not help but marvel at the cataclysmic powers of nature, which, now that I was so far away from the consequences of it, looked rather beautiful. An enormous pillar of black smoke rose from the remains of the mountain, which seemed to have cast off half its mass in the eruption. Bright spots of lava dotted the city at its feet and a river of magma ran down its blow-open front, engulfing the ruins of the castle, where the mountaintop had landed like a meteor.

“Do you think your city has room for all these people?” Vagan asked.

“They’re not my responsibility,” I replied.

“I highly disagree.”

“You know what happened last time my Toadkin mixed with lesser species.”

Vagan went silent for a moment, then proposed a solution, “Maybe we can build a place for them right *here*? That way they won’t be homeless, but also won’t mix with your citizens, since that seems to be a concern for you.”

I was about to decline, but then I remembered that one of the requirements for my next evolution was to build a Village, a Hamlet, and three Farmsteads beyond the reaches of my Castle Town.

The area on the hill was as good a place as any, so I quickly concentrated on a spot and out crawled a dozen minions, big-lipped and bug-eyed, but more similar to the displaced citizens of Lillebrünnr than my Toadkin.

The hundreds of citizens looked at my collection of minions as they began to gather materials and construct simple houses, workbenches, and other necessities to begin a simple community. Within ten minutes, most of the citizens had joined the minions in gathering wood and stone, and followed their lead as they started to build tools and buildings according to the blueprints I’d hastily placed.

When the sun started to stain the wilderness outside the walls of the ruined city of Lillebrünnr, there stood five new farmsteads a few kilometres removed from its still-smouldering ruins. Each of these farms were mostly inhabited by the displaced citizens of the ruined city, but a core of a dozen minions in each ensured that the new development of houses followed an orderly fashion.

When I returned my spirit to my temporarily-abandoned vessel in the first farmstead, I saw that Vagan had somehow reconnected with his mount, Skygge. The black-furred Jackicorn seemed to have made it out of Lillebrünnr unscathed, before finding its rider through unknown means.

“I think I’ll stay here for a bit,” he told me. “I feel partial responsibility for *this* tragedy, and, you know, Lillebrünnr was my city too once.”

“Very well, I told my minions in the farmsteads to listen to your commands, so feel free to order them to do whatever task you deem necessary.”

“Thank you... erm... I don't think you ever told me your name. My Appraising Eye just set it as 'Toad', but that can't be right.”

“No, it's correct, you can call me Toad!”

“Alright... Toad. I'll see you around I suppose.”

“Yes! I'll be back!”

No sooner had the words left the mouth of my vessel than a poof of smoke that smelled of a whole bouquet of flowers mixed with sulphur emerged next to me. As the smoke cleared, I saw an irate Imu standing atop of Goldie, with a bikini-clad woman next to him that I immediately recognised as Judetta the Missionary of Light, and a strange-looking blue-skinned impish girl with sunglasses.

“TOAD! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!?”

“Ohai Imu!” I replied cheerfully.

## 47 — The Final Steps?

I hopped back towards my town with Judetta and the blue-skinned girl with sunglasses on my back. Imu hopped next to me atop Goldie.

“So, you’re telling me you *ate* a Core because its dungeon was lazily put together?”

“That’s right,” I croaked in reply.

“I didn’t think it was possible for a Core to eat another Core,” the blue-skinned girl remarked. “I’m Belamouranthyne by the way, but you can just call me Bel.”

“I’m Toad!”

“I swear, I leave for less than a week and you take that opportunity to do the craziest possible things! I can’t leave you out of my sight!”

“You know about my little war and the rebellion too?” I asked.

“The *what* and *what!*?”

“Oh, you didn’t know. Well, yes, I defeated Earl Sharpee and ate him, then took over his territory. And, while I was waging war on him, the non-Toadkin in my settlement started a rebellion. I tell you, building that Minion Help Centre and Consultation Clinic really backfired! Who would’ve thought that a Therapist had the power to brainwash my minions?”

Imu pinched the bridge of his nose tiredly in response.

“Did you have a good vacation?”

“No.”

Judetta, the Missionary of the Church of Light, finally spoke up. “Sorry,” she said.

“I think I’m doomed to be miserable,” Imu remarked.

“It’s all a matter of perspective,” Bel told him.

“Did you all vacation together?” I asked, wondering why they had arrived together.

Imu sighed. “Judetta was trapped in the Paradise Realm where I landed, and Bel came to find me after you ate that Dungeon Core.”

“Are you a fairy too?” I asked the blue-skinned imp.

Belamouranthyne adjusted the sunglasses on her big nose, while wiggling her crescent-shaped ears playfully. “I am indeed a Guiding Fairy, although, like our dear Imu I am not a Myling, but rather *Ignis Fatuus*.”

“And how do you know each other?”

“Imu was my Guiding Fairy when I was a Core.”

I used my Appraisal on her:

**Name:** *Belamouranthyne*  
**Occupation:** *Guiding Fairy*  
**Species:** *Ignis Fatuus (Sluagh)*  
**Level:** *????*  
**Alignment:** *Giddy-and-fiery*  
**Faction:** *Papa Magma and Co.*

“You work for Papa Magma? Who’s that?”

“...One of Deathheim’s competitors,” Imu remarked coldly.

“Imu is just jealous because our upward mobility is better and we get more vacations and autonomy.”

“What kind of Core were you?” I asked. In the distance we could see the enormous Weeping Oak and the treeline of my forest.

“I had the fire element and had a Dungeon that the humanoids around me called the Hellpit. It was pretty popular for strong Adventurers to delve into, but none of them ever made it to my bottom-most floor, and eventually I amassed enough experience to evolve the final time. That was when Papa Magma scouted me. He loves fire elementals, you see, so most of such Cores that undergo their final evolution usually work for him.”

“Hardly any do make it to that point,” Imu joked.

“Why not?”

He did a strange gesture of folding his hands and then moving them out-and-away from each other, while making a *boom* sound with his mouth.

I turned one of my eyes to look at Bel who was sitting on my forehead, “Is that true?”

Bel took one of her blue ears in her hands and rubbed it absentmindedly. “We have a certain personality type that usually leads towards self-destruction, it’s true... BUT! It’s only like seventy-five percent!”

“That’s pretty bad,” I commented.

“You’re one to talk,” Imu replied sharply. “I still remember when the mortality rate to dehydration was close on ninety percent amongst your minions.”

“Imu is defending me,” Bel mumbled starry-eyed. “He’s never done that before.”

“I’m not defending you. You fire elementals are trouble and you know it, but Toad is a uniquely terrifying example of how NOT to manage your people.”

“It’s so much better now,” I argued.

“Really?” Imu asked, raising a sceptical eyebrow.

“Yeah! Ever since all the non-Toadkin were executed for their rebellion, there’s only about twelve deaths per day!”

Imu sighed in disappointment, but I ignored him and continued talking to Bel. “Since Papa Magma likes fire elementals, does that mean that Blazing Blaine, the Core I ate, was favoured by him?”

“Not just favoured,” Bel told me. “Papa Magma loved that idiot.”

“Really?”

“Yeah...”

“So he’s upset with me?”

“Kind of, yep...”

“It’s just another Deity to the list,” Imu joked darkly. “We’re up to three now.”

“I don’t think Deathheim dislikes me,” I replied.

“You’re right. He hates you.”

“Aw.”

We made it to my Castle Town just as the sun was beginning to vanish behind the mountains in the horizon. As we passed through the gate, Bel jumped off my back and two strange wiry wings of bright-orange flames emerged on her back and she flew ahead.

“Why can’t you do *that*?” I asked Imu.

“Next time you evolved I’ll finally gain something similar to it. About time too... Normally I would already have my unique abilities, but it’s far more drawn-out with your kind of progression.”

“Speaking of progression,” I replied, “What does my evolution checklist look like?”

Imu waved a hand in the air and text emerged from his Encyclopaedia to the air in front of me:

[*Evolution Requirements*]

*Castle Town => Capital*



- ~~Build 3 Farmsteads, 1 Hamlet, and 1 Village within your territory and ensure they are self-sufficient~~ -
- ~~Build 1 Siege Factory and craft Engines of War, and utilise your Beast Inventor Workshop to also construct Beasts of War by combining Beasts with Siege Engines~~ -

“You *actually* did a lot while I was gone,” Imu remarked with quite a lot of surprise in voice.

“Why does it say I still need to make War Beasts? I’ve already made several!”

“Did you make any by combining Sieges Engines with them?”

I thought about it for a moment, then realised that I actually hadn’t used the Siege Factory once, as the harness I’d made for the Diplomat’s Jackicorns hadn’t actually used the building.

“We know what you have to do now then,” he continued.

It took a few hours, but then the Siege Engine Builder and his team produced a sleek ballista that could fire stakes of stone, iron, or wood from one end of my town to the other.

As I was looking for a suitable animal to combine with the newly-constructed ballista, my Mad Scientist came over to where I’d parked my shell and banged on it a few times, until I sent my essence back into it and turned to regard him.

“Look what I found!” he announced excitedly, holding aloft a hedgehog that definitely did not enjoy being picked up as it kept squeaking angrily.

“It’s perfect!” I told him, and, within a minute, a team of Builders had hauled the ballista into the strange domed Beast Workshop.

As they left, the Mad Scientist took the hedgehog inside and the gate closed behind them. There followed more angry squeaking, followed by the sound of projectiles flying back-and-forth through the air. Then the hexagonal plates of the dome lit up and smoke started billowing out the hole in the top of the dome.

Moments later, the gate sprang open and the Mad Scientist ran out with his new creation following on his heels angrily snapping its mouth at him, but failing to catch him.

*Halt!*

The Beast stopped in its tracks immediately and I got to have a proper look at it:

**Name:** *Nibbles*

**Occupation:** *War Beast*

**Species:** *Ballista Hedgehog (Chimera)*

**Level:** 55/100

**Alignment:** *Angry-that-it-was-dragged-out-of-its-nest-where-it-was-hibernating-but-now-feeling-rather-splendid-thanks-to-growing-several-times-its-normal-size-and-gaining-awesome-powers*

**Faction:** *Toad Town*

There wasn't much changed about the hedgehog, other than its tremendous growth from a twenty-centimetre-tall critter to a towering three-metre-tall unit of a creature. Its spine had become a lot more flexible, as shown by Nibbles' perpetual flexing of them back-and-forth, and as I looked closer at them, each of them had the shape of the projectiles the Siege Builder had test-fired across my city.

*Nibbles! Release a volley of ballista at the treeline to the east!*

Obligingly, Nibbles flexed his spines forward and fired row-upon-row, starting with the front-most, of devastating stakes of hardened keratin, which pulverised about thirty trees by the time the final volley landed.

"You went a bit overboard," I told him, "but enthusiasm is good!"

Imu came hopping over a couple of minutes later.

"Toad, something happened to some of the Woodchoppers harvesting in the east, their bodies were totally—" He froze as he saw the Ballista Hedgehog with smoke coming out of hundreds of empty holes in its back. "Oh for Hell's sake..."

"Erm, excuse me? What am I supposed to do?"

"How long has she been hanging on to your back?" Imu asked me as he noticed Judetta perched on the back of my vessel.

"I didn't realise you were still there," I told her. "But we could use more Preachers for my new religion."

In one movement she had leapt from my back and landed in front of me, hands on her hips. "I'll do it! You can *definitely* count on me to spread your good word!"

I cast a sidelong glance to Imu, but his head was buried in his hands.

"Welcome aboard, Judetta."

"Thank you, your Toadness!"

I was pretty certain she had somehow lost her mind, but, then again, Imu did say she had been forgotten by her Goddess in a paradise realm for who-know-how-long.

## 48 — God-like Appraisal?

I spent several hours flying around in my essence form to supervise the continued growth of my five farmsteads, two of which had turned into hamlets, and once of which was on the brink of becoming a village.

And then it happened, the invisible threshold was crossed and the final requirement for my evolution to Capital was fulfilled.

At the speed of lightning, my essence was sucked back towards my Castle Town and the core that hid within the enormously-overgrown Weeping Oak.

*Congratulations! For evolving into a Capital, your list of buildings available has expanded and all the unclaimed territory between your captured and self-sufficient settlements has been added to your demesne! Additionally, you are now able to establish towns anywhere within your territory!*

*WARNING: Every ruler of your settlements has now been added to the Toad Kingdom! Only one can become King and as such the rulers are now actively scheming to defeat each other!*

*ANNOUNCEMENT: [Appraisal] perk has been evolved into [God-like Appraisal]!*

*ANNOUNCEMENT: [Mind-reader] perk has been evolved into [Soul-reader]!*

I flew out of my Core, which was now the size of a boulder yet somehow still smaller than Blazing Blaine's had been, then entered my large Toad vessel.

A blob like tar or spilled ink appeared next to me and out of it jumped Imu astride Goldie. When he landed, the blob disappeared.

"How'd you do that?"

"That's my movement ability," he announced. "I can manifest shadows and use them like portals, allowing me to move great distances in an instant and I can bring other people with me."

"That'll be handy for when the Church of Light's Crusade comes within range of our territories," I remarked. "We can move our armies around them with ease."

"Wait, *what?*"

“Oh, right, you didn’t see it ‘cause you were on vacation at the time, but the Church sent a Crusade when I took over Earl Sharpee’s lands and turned all his churches to Toaddom.”

“I knew that Toad Idol perk was bad news...” he replied.

I was elated to finally have a more powerful Appraisal perk now and eagerly wanted to try it out. Somehow sensing this, Imu regarded me sharply. “You have to be careful with your new Appraisal. If not given specific commands, you’ll end up—”

At the same moment, a pair of wagons rolled into town and I used my God-like Appraisal on the rightmost one to try and figure out where it had come from:

*WARNING: Activating unrestricted God-like Appraisal!*

<i>‘Wayne’s Wain’</i>	
<b>Species:</b>	<i>Plaustrum Ligneum</i>
<b>Level:</b>	<i>1/1</i>
<b>Age:</b>	4 in human-years — 287 in wagon-years
<b>Gender:</b>	Male
<b>Spouse:</b>	<i>‘Cally’s Caboose’</i>
<b>Plane of Existence:</b>	<i>‘The Mundane Realm’</i>
<b>Continent:</b>	<i>‘Malbia’</i>
<b>Country of Origin:</b>	<i>‘Lleman’</i>
<b>Hometown:</b>	<i>‘Hekkenfelt’</i>
<b>Made From:</b>	Timber from the oak trees of the Heartblack Forest & iron nails and bracings from the ore of the Hekkenfelt Quarry.
<b>Dimensions:</b>	6.5 m long & 3 m wide & 1.5 m tall
<b>Best Friend:</b>	<i>‘Doctor’s Dray’</i>
<b>Biggest Fear(s):</b>	Termites & Children with greasy fingers
<b>Fetish(s):</b>	<i>Wagon-on-Cart Play</i>
<b>Favourite Meal(s):</b>	Oil Wash
<b>Medical Problems:</b>	Dislocated third-and-fourth spinal timber planks carrying a haul of quarried stones a

	year back; front-left wheel squeaks when it rains; a family of beetles have moved into the rear hinge-compartments and their gnawing is producing a near-constant itch; & rust has started forming along the back axel.
<b>Political Alignment:</b>	Centre-middle
<b>Occupation:</b>	Wayne the Merchant's Wagon
<b>Dream Occupation:</b>	Horse-Racing Wagon
<b>Faction:</b>	<i>'Hekkenfelt Merchant's Guild'</i>
<b>[ATTRIBUTES]</b>	
<b>Strength:</b>	23
<b>Dexterity:</b>	8
<b>Constitution:</b>	18
<b>Intelligence:</b>	1
<b>Wisdom:</b>	1
<b>Charisma:</b>	2
<b>[GEAR]</b>	
<i>(High-quality Quarried Stone) x 400 kgs</i> <i>(High-quality Iron Ore Deposits) x 200 kgs</i> <i>(Wayne) x 92 kgs</i> <i>(Assorted Uncut Gems) x 80 kgs</i> <i>(Assorted Jewellery Tools) x 15 kgs</i>	
<b>[ABILITIES]</b>	
<i>'Big Haul'</i> (Passive)	<i>"Enables Wayne's Wain to carry a maximum haul of 850 kilograms."</i>
<i>'Seasoned Veteran'</i> (Passive)	<i>"Due to Wayne's Wain's long service as a transport wagon, he moves moderately-faster down roads he has travelled before."</i>
<b>[SYSTEM ACHIEVEMENTS]</b>	
<i>'Married!'</i>	Awarded for marrying <i>'Cally's Caboose'</i>
<b>[BACKSTORY]</b>	

“Alright, that’s enough!” Imu yelled, having performed some kind of spell to halt the God-like Appraisal.

“Aww, we were just getting to the good part,” I replied. “I wanted to know how Wain and Caboose met.”

“See! This is why God-like Appraisal is dangerous! You end up suddenly caring about everything, because you can read their entire history, and, before you know it, two decades have passed by!”

“Why does that sound like personal experience?”

“Shut up, that’s why!”

“Anyway, can you show me my next Evolution Requirements?”

“You’ll have to wait until next chapter for that.”

“Aw, don’t be that way!”

“It’s too much neatly-organised text for one day, Toad!”

“...Fine.”