

and

Contents

Basil leaves his paradise among the trees.	2
Isadora Makes a Friend	2
Bernard Makes a Deal	3
Isadora Finishes a Job	4
Basil makes it to the city	6
Basil drops off a Duffle Bag	7
Bernard gets toys for Basil	7



and

Basil leaves his paradise among the trees.

The sky above shifts, transforming into a luminescent burnt orange that casts a red-orange glow on everything below. Covered in ash, the road ahead splits as our driver looks at the clear skies, a river, and a thick forest in the rearview mirror. Max, his handler, insisted on city visits for social interaction, but the ongoing forest fires turned this departure from Basil's personal paradise into a scene reminiscent of Dante's Inferno.

Basil quickly moves his fingers across the keyboard strapped to his thigh. His message requests a doubled fee due to increased health risks and the need for safety equipment in the midst of the raging fires. 'Agreed,' blinks the response before slowly disappearing. A prompt appears on the dashboard, 'Modification agreed, void if late,' accompanied by a cartoonish 'To agree, press I AGREE now.' He reluctantly selects 'I AGREE,' grumbling about the necessity of protective gear, and immediately informs his supplier of the route and estimated arrival time.

As he looks through the windshield, flakes fall onto the glass. 'Maybe that used to be a house?' he wonders. The atmosphere changes from crisp to suffocating as Basil's Mercedes 300D enters the city's heat dome, significantly reducing visibility. Toggling various switches on the dashboard, Basil struggles to enhance visibility using infrared and motion detection, realizing the imminent threat of fire. He reflects on the root cause: faulty high-voltage wiring and negligence in brush management near power lines.

Relaxing into his seat and obeying the speed limit, memories flood back to a summer job herding for a power company. Managing the flock near power lines taught him valuable lessons in electricity distribution, safety, and hazard pay for the risk. He recalls using a light bulb to gauge proximity to the lines, the flickering indicator of a dangerous threshold.

Making good time amidst the debris from the forest fire, Basil exits into an exurban area, commenting, 'You'll never catch me living out here.' Wondering about Bernard's move, he reminisces about his loft and favorite bar, contrasting it with Bernard's choice to live remotely.

Isadora Makes a Friend

Wearing a full-face respirator and carrying a duffel bag backpack wrapped in plastic, Isadora navigates the desolate city. There are few people out, most of them wearing respirators or using wet bandanas and goggles. Isadora finds the scene rather steampunk-esque; her mobility is less restricted compared to others because her respirator is connected to a portable oxygen tank and she has an air pre-filter on her hip. The pre-filter not only makes it easier for the filters on her face to work, but also improves the otherwise unpleasant air she walks through. Her destination? A data center hidden and inaccessible to the general public. For three years, Isadora dedicated herself to establishing communications for her

and

volunteer platoon. Her squad operates on the frontlines, managing radios, intercepting enemy communications, and gathering intelligence before advancing. She recalls a near-failed mission where she had to crawl down a tower in the dead of night, expecting her triumphant signature move to happen. However, time was running out, so she looked through her night vision goggles and saw the approaching enemy.

Moments later, in the distance, a series of red and yellow explosions marked the enemy's location - a signal for her platoon. Isadora reacted with amusement, similar to a schoolgirl's giggles, before moving forward. Her platoon knows her as 'Joker' due to her skill in setting up lethal traps and creating explosive displays. This time, her sequence of explosions loosely mimicked Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture. She believed that leaving a lasting psychological impact on any survivors who may hear that tune in the future would be fitting, as physical wounds heal but psychological scars endure.

Isadora reached the approximate location of the data center. Despite getting soaked by dripping dark water and causing minor flooding, she meticulously scouted power lines and network cables. As she navigated through shelves and motherboards, she expressed surprise at discovering that it was a Bitcoin mining operation. Following the Ethernet cables, she traced the route to the network equipment and stumbled upon a vociferating systems administrator.

Silently maneuvering behind server cabinets, Isadora adeptly set up a thin string onto the trigger of a shotgun discreetly mounted on what appeared to be an ordinary office desk in the dank warehouse. As the systems administrator berated and kicked a piece of expensive hardware, Isadora's attention momentarily shifted. He exclaimed, 'ты кусок мусора' (ty kusok musora), which means 'you piece of garbage.' Circling around the office, Isadora calmly addressed him, 'You should treat your equipment better, maybe give it a name, like Frank.' Surprised, the technologist responded, 'Ё моё!' (yo moyo), which roughly translates to 'Oh my!' He then asked Isadora, 'What are you doing here? Are you one of Mikhail's girls?' Isadora retorted, 'No, I'm here to dismantle this place after acquiring the GostCoin you're mining. You can cooperate and maybe survive, or you can cause me trouble, and I'll leave you behind when I demolish this place. Your choice.' His options were clear at this point - cooperate or remain silent.

However, he chose a third option and lunged toward the shotgun that Isadora had prepared earlier. Being completely untrained with such a weapon, he pulled it from the mount and got caught on the string. Puzzled, he looked back and pulled again, accidentally shooting himself in the face. As a result, the cabinets were covered in grey matter and skull fragments.

Bernard Makes a Deal

Bernard resided on the outskirts of the city, in an area commonly known as the 'exurbs.' This location offered him a peaceful escape from the busy city life and provided him with a unique living arrangement.

and

His home was cleverly constructed using repurposed shipping containers, making it an unconventional yet practical dwelling. However, the construction of the house remained incomplete due to a lack of funds from the construction company. Consequently, the house was three-quarters finished, with two shipping containers on the ground floor, two more on the second story, and an additional pair serving as a garage at the back. Despite its unassuming exterior, stepping inside revealed a spacious 60 ft x 60 ft area equipped with all the essentials of a typical home. The entire setup, including plumbing and electricity, cost only \$20,000, with an additional \$10,000 investment. This unconventional home provided Bernard with an unparalleled level of seclusion, a luxury often lacking within the city limits.

Bernard's residence was situated in a cul-de-sac within a developing neighborhood. It was conveniently close to amenities but far enough to maintain a sense of distance from the bustling city life. The discreet appearance of the house helped Bernard avoid unwanted attention. He had a voice communication system connected to his cellphone, ensuring that he could receive calls no matter where he was on the property. Today, Bernard received a text from Basil, indicating that he would be visiting in three hours. Bernard looked forward to Basil's arrival as they had a long-standing trade partnership. Unlike Bernard's other customers, who were often private investigators or busy college students with demanding requests, Basil was always satisfied with the goods Bernard provided. Bernard had just returned from The Farm and was ready to exchange a variety of items with Basil in their usual trade.

Isadora Finishes a Job

Isadora's breath hitched at the sight of the severed stump where the systems administrator's head once sat. The crimson pool spreading from the lifeless body dulled the cold room's sterile ambiance. She couldn't help but contemplate the grim choice of "None of the above" - a choice that now meant a life ended, leaving her to navigate the intricate labyrinth of servers.

Feeling around the corpse's waist, Isadora's fingers brushed across an access card, a wallet filled with useless remnants, and a handful of shiny, translucent rocks. One item, however, caught her attention - a keychain clasp a touch authentication device bearing the same scratches as the USB port on the nearby keyboard.

As she attempted to activate the security measures, she was baffled by the lack of response. A strange contraption, akin to a credit card reader was mounted beneath the desk; the deceased had carried a similar device. Placing the key card into the slot beneath the desk, the screen flickered to life, demanding the elusive security key.

With a nonchalant shrug, Isadora inserts the USB key into the keyboard, the faint blinking of its light, her touching it setting off a chain reaction. The once dormant servers hummed to life, monitors glowed with cryptic data, and the room's lighting dimmed as if bowing to the macabre scene before her.

Pondering what Mr. NOTA (None of the Above) was working she now has time to look at. While the

and

servers spin up she looks at the terminal that the tech left open and found several familiar icons one being a Crypto-Coin Wallet and another a password manager. Quickly opening the password manager Isadora switches back and types the command pilfer and the mouse juggler she plugged in earlier became an automated hacking device.

Isadora, taking a moment as the servers whirled to life, examined the abandoned terminal. Icons adorned the screen, each hinting at the deceased's digital world. Among them, a familiar sight caught her attention - a Crypto-Coin Wallet icon glimmered beside another labeled 'Password Manager.' Swiftly navigating to the password manager, Isadora deftly switched back to the terminal and keyed in the command pilfer. The mouse juggler she had connected earlier transformed into an automated hacking tool, its activity lighting up the screen with a sequence of digital maneuvers.

As Isadora contemplated her next move aloud, she swiftly dragged Mr. NOTA's body, shrouded in shadows, and maneuvered it beneath one of the humming server racks. The eerie absence of any alarm or alert gave her a moment's confidence. Humming a tune to herself, she set about preparing an explosive finale to conclude the unsettling evening.

Reaching into her bag she pulls out what looks like a typical cyber pad, a flip top display and a two thumb keyboard that that she uses to message her proxy Niklos making them aware that NOTA Enterprises is about to have an explosive market sell off and he should prepare for the order. She gets back a three word message "Date and Symbol." No longer humming and happy she writes back "Soon and IDK" making a joke about "I don't know" being the stock symbol. An unamused response repeats "Dates and Symbol" causing Isadora to sit down on the ground and start searching through her pad for their stock symbol. Sending the expected response she gets back to the business of pilfering the data center for any good hardware or other tools that she could use. Unsurprisingly everything around is from the last Cypto currency boom. She grabs as many hard drives as she can find, before the planted explosives start to beep.

While setting up the explosives to bring down the data center, Isadora comes across a growling small fur ball. "Is that you growling at me kitty?" It's tail at firm attention like a dogs it obviously grew up around here with a dog pack. "You had better come with me, it's not going to be safe here for much longer." Isadora goes back to the techs station and takes out her little orange and white device from the techs desk.

Her cyber pad beeps again, detonators synchronized, "Please press your departure window with three options of 1 minute, 5 minutes and 15 minutes." She chooses five, scoops up the growling cat and puts it in her bag and she laughs as the room is filled with small flashing lights that are about to explode.

Basil makes it to the city

Basil skillfully maneuvered his vehicle off the congested highway and onto the desolate outskirts near Bernard's residence in the city. As he approached, he was met with a haunting scene—a neighborhood reduced to charred remnants. The landscape was adorned with piles of debris and blackened trees, evidence of a community that had underestimated the threat of forest fires.

Pausing at a deserted stoplight, Basil felt an absurd sense of solitude in the desolation around him. After cautiously looking around, he decided to ignore the empty stop and continue his journey through the remains of a neighborhood that had clearly not prepared well for wildfires. The eerie silence enveloped him, intensifying the feeling of desolation in the scorched surroundings.

Bernard, an enthusiast of apocalypse preparation, lived atop a hill adjacent to a man-made reservoir and a cascading river. Fire was not his primary concern; instead, he focused on ensuring a breathable environment for himself and his guest during the short trip from the gate to the secondary entrance. "Where did I stash those CBRN gas masks from the pandemic onset?" Bernard exclaimed triumphantly, producing two masks with theatrical flair, reminiscent of Link from Zelda. "It's dangerous to go alone! Take this."

In perfect synchronization with Bernard's preparations, Basil arrived at Bernard's home after traversing the desolation and navigating up to the secluded neighborhood. Annoyed by the need to park at the gate and manually buzz for entry, Basil expressed his frustration in a colorful blend of Polish and English. "Świński skurwiel, open up!" he bellowed into the microphone before grumbling to himself and returning to his car.

The gate to Bernard's paradise swung open, allowing just enough space for Basil's vehicle to pass through before promptly closing behind him. Bernard had fortuitously found himself in the right place at the perfect time when this undervalued property became available. Initially seen as problematic due to its water features, the property offered a view of the city but required navigating a narrow road to reach it. The developer, envisioning it as an inheritance for his uninterested daughter, sold it at a bargain. Bernard, astutely seizing the opportunity, wasted no time in making it his own. Basil skillfully drove his vehicle towards the unique improvised garage. The garage was constructed by joining two 10 x 20 shipping containers together, with the middle section removed and attached to a sturdy support frame. This unconventional arrangement allowed Basil to avoid the need for excessive approvals. Standard shipping containers are often stacked much higher for long-distance transportation. Basil's ability to understand and interpret local regulations ensured that he complied with city rules, making it easier to pass inspections. As Basil brings the car to a stop, he notices a gas mask conveniently placed by the driver's side, illuminated by the headlights. "How thoughtful of him to pay attention to the small details," Basil thinks appreciatively. He parks the vehicle with care and proceeds to open his door. Putting on the gas mask, he realizes that it significantly enhances his breathing compared to his previous makeshift solution of using a damp towel to cover his face.

and

Basil drops off a Duffle Bag

Basil stretched and contorted his fatigued muscles after the lengthy drive to rendezvous with Bernard, in an effort to alleviate his stiffness. Exhausted from the journey, he embraced Bernard briefly, set down his travel bag, and sprawled out on Bernard's sofa. "Why not come in and take a breather?" Bernard jested with a smirk. The oversized duffle bag piqued Bernard's curiosity, equipped with arm straps for convenient portability. Inside, smaller bags appeared to be carelessly packed into the duffle bag.

"Are these all...?" Bernard queried.

"Yup, crammed to the top. Last year's harvest was abysmal, but this year's... overflowing," Basil nonchalantly replied, gesturing with his hands.

"May I?" Bernard timidly inquired.

"Sure thing," Basil responded, grinning.

Opening the hermetically sealed duffle bag entailed a systematic process: loosening the tension straps, disengaging various accessories, and finally, unzipping a magnetic closure. As the bag was unzipped, a distinct aroma permeated the air—a peculiar blend of psilocybin mushrooms and marijuana, two primary crops from Basil's cherished enterprise, The Farm. Amongst rows of fruit bushes and vegetables, these crops held significant importance. While the hallucinogenic mushrooms were allocated for trade with Bernard, the remainder served as vital constituents in enriching the soil for other crops.

The Farm served multiple purposes—it served as Basil's sanctuary, a locale for Bernard's sporadic gardening weekends, and a storage facility for goods, produce, and equipment. It was not extravagant, merely a small cabin situated facing a cliff. However, concealed behind this unassuming cabin was The Farm. From one end to the other, it teemed with produce—some thriving vertically along the walls, others nestled within basins suspended from the ceiling. Rows of beans, squash, hot peppers, and even corn adorned the space. The purpose of The Farm had evolved over the years. Initially conceived as a garden of air-purifying plants to facilitate cliffside habitation, it had metamorphosed into a multi-tiered agricultural enterprise, complete with goldfish, salmon, and snails.

Bernard shifted his gaze to Basil, who had now drifted off into a peaceful slumber on the couch. He gently covered Basil with a cozy woolen blanket, ensuring his comfort, before redirecting his attention to the task at hand—cataloging Basil's abundant harvest.

Bernard gets toys for Basil

As expected, the harvest yielded a plentiful harvest, allowing Basil to secure a significant line of credit to purchase supplies for his upcoming venture. Retrieving a piece of paper from his pocket, Basil handed it to Bernard, signaling the start of their inventory:

and

Bernard examined the list with great interest:

1 x Cyber Pad 1 x Ethernet Cable 50ft 1 x Burst Transmitter

The list continued onto the second page, detailing essential software, hardware, and specialized equipment.

“I don’t usually ask, but...” Bernard began.

“Don’t. It’s a routine assignment, although with complicated politics,” Basil interrupted Bernard.

Suddenly alarmed, Basil jumped to his feet, startling Bernard. “WHAT TIME IS IT!?” 715 > 711 characters 109 > 108 words

Stonebreaker and Hudson



Call for Papers is always open, contact the editor for submissions.