

and

Contents

Basil leaves his paradise among the trees.	2
Bernard Makes a Deal	3
Isadora Finishes a Job	4
Basil makes it to the city	5
Basil drops off a Duffle Bag	6
Bernard gets toys for Basil	7



and

Basil leaves his paradise among the trees.

The sky above undergoes a transformation, turning into a vibrant burnt orange color that casts a red-orange glow on everything below. The road ahead, covered in ash, splits as our driver looks in the rearview mirror, revealing clear skies, a river, and a dense forest. Max, Basil's handler, insisted on city visits for social interaction, but the ongoing forest fires have turned this departure from Basil's personal paradise into a scene reminiscent of Dante's Inferno.

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

As he gazes through the windshield, flakes fall onto the glass. 'Perhaps that was once 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 adhering to 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 as an indicator of proximity to the lines, flickering when the threshold became dangerous.

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.

Wearing a full-face respirator and carrying a duffel bag backpack wrapped in plastic, Isadora moves through the desolate city. There are few people around, most of them wearing respirators or using wet bandanas and goggles. Isadora finds the scene reminiscent of steampunk; 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 her face filters 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 the past three years, Isadora has dedicated herself to establishing communications for her volunteer platoon. Her squad operates on the frontlines, managing radios, intercepting enemy communications, and gathering intelligence before advancing. She remembers a nearly failed mission where she had to

and

crawl down a tower in the dead of night, expecting her triumphant signature move. 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 arrived at the approximate location of the data center. Despite getting soaked by dripping dark water and causing minor flooding, she carefully scouted power lines and network cables. As she moved through shelves and motherboards, she was surprised to find 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 the server cabinets, Isadora skillfully attached a thin string to the trigger of a concealed shotgun on what seemed to be a normal office desk in the dim warehouse.

The systems administrator vented his frustrations by berating and kicking an expensive piece of hardware, Isadora's attention momentarily shifted. He exclaimed, 'ты кусок мусора' (ty kusok musora), which means 'you piece of garbage.' Isadora calmly circled around the office and addressed him, saying, 'You should treat your equipment better, maybe give it a name, like Frank.' Startled, 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.' At this point, his options were clear - cooperate or remain silent.

Bernard Makes a Deal

Bernard lived on the outskirts of the city in a neighborhood known as the 'exurbs.' This location offered him a peaceful escape from the busy city life and provided him with a unique living arrangement. His home was cleverly constructed using repurposed shipping containers, making it an unconventional yet practical dwelling. However, the construction of the house was incomplete due to insufficient funds from the construction company. As a result, 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 exceptional level of seclusion, a luxury often lacking within the city limits.

and

Bernard's residence was located 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 longstanding 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.

Isadora Finishes a Job

As she tried to activate the security measures, she was confused by the lack of response. A strange device, similar to a credit card reader, was attached beneath the desk, just like the deceased had carried. Inserting the key card into the slot beneath the desk, the screen came to life, asking for the elusive security key.

With a casual shrug, Isadora inserted the USB key into the keyboard. Its light blinked faintly, and as she touched it, a chain reaction was set off. The once dormant servers sprang to life, monitors displayed cryptic data, and the room's lighting dimmed, as if paying respect to the eerie scene before her.

As the servers powered up, Isadora took a moment to examine the abandoned terminal. Icons covered the screen, each hinting at the digital world of the deceased. Among them, a familiar sight caught her eye - a Crypto-Coin Wallet icon shimmered beside another labeled 'Password Manager.' Navigating swiftly to the password manager, Isadora skillfully switched back to the terminal and entered the command 'pilfer.' The mouse jiggler she had connected earlier transformed into an automated hacking tool, its activity illuminating the screen with a series of digital maneuvers.

Thinking aloud about her next move, Isadora quickly dragged Mr. NOTA's body, hidden in shadows, and positioned it beneath one of the humming server racks. The eerie absence of any alarms or alerts gave her a moment of confidence. Humming to herself, she began preparing for an explosive finale to conclude the unsettling evening.

From her bag, she pulled out what appeared to be a typical cyber pad - a flip top display and a two-thumb keyboard. She used it to message her proxy, Niklos, informing him that NOTA Enterprises was about to experience an explosive market sell-off and that he should prepare for the order. She received a three-word response: "Date and Symbol." No longer humming and happy, she jokingly replied, "Soon and IDK," referring to "I don't know" as the stock symbol. An unimpressed reply repeated, "Dates and Symbol," causing Isadora to sit down on the ground and search through her pad for their stock symbol. After sending the expected response, she returned to the task of pilfering the data center for any useful

and

hardware or tools. Unsurprisingly, everything around her was from the last cryptocurrency boom. She grabbed as many hard drives as she could find, just before the planted explosives began to beep. While setting up explosives to bring down the data center, Isadora encounters a growling fur ball. “Are you growling at me, kitty?” Its tail is held high like a dog’s, indicating that it must have grown up with a pack of dogs in this area. “You had better come with me; it won’t be safe here for much longer.” Isadora returns to the tech station and retrieves her small orange and white device from the desk.

Her cyber pad beeps once more, indicating that the detonators have been synchronized. “Please select your departure window: 1 minute, 5 minutes, or 15 minutes.” She chooses five minutes, picks up the growling cat, and places it in her bag. She chuckles as the room is filled with small flashing lights that are about to explode.

Basil makes it to the city

Basil skillfully steered his vehicle off the congested highway and onto the desolate outskirts near Bernard’s residence in the city. As he neared, he was confronted with a haunting sight—a neighborhood reduced to charred ruins. The landscape was littered with piles of debris and blackened trees, clear evidence of a community that had underestimated the threat of forest fires.

Coming to a stop at a deserted traffic light, Basil felt a peculiar sense of isolation in the desolation that surrounded him. After cautiously scanning his surroundings, he made the decision to bypass the empty intersection and proceed through the remnants of a neighborhood that had clearly not adequately prepared for wildfires. The eerie silence enveloped him, intensifying the feeling of desolation in the scorched environment.

Bernard, an enthusiast of apocalypse preparedness, lived on top of 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 atmosphere for himself and his guest during the short journey from the gate to the secondary entrance. “Where did I hide those CBRN gas masks from the start of the pandemic?” Bernard exclaimed triumphantly, producing two masks with dramatic flair, reminiscent of Link from Zelda. “It’s dangerous to go alone! Take this.”

In perfect timing with Bernard’s preparations, Basil arrived at Bernard’s house after navigating through the desolation and making his way up to the secluded neighborhood. Irritated by the need to park at the gate and manually request entry, Basil expressed his frustration in a colorful mixture of Polish and English. “Świński skurwiel, open up!” he shouted into the microphone before grumbling to himself and returning to his car. The gate to Bernard’s paradise swung open, giving just enough space for Basil’s vehicle to pass through before promptly closing behind him. Bernard was lucky to be in the right place at the right time when this undervalued property became available. Initially seen as problematic because of its water features, the property offered a city view but required navigating a narrow road to

and

reach it. The developer, envisioning it as an inheritance for his uninterested daughter, sold it at a bargain. Bernard wasted no time in making it his own, seizing the opportunity with astute determination.

Basil skillfully drove his vehicle towards the unique improvised garage. The garage was made 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 excessive approvals. Standard shipping containers are often stacked much higher for long-distance transportation. Basil's understanding and interpretation of local regulations ensured compliance with city rules, making inspections easier to pass. 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 appreciatively thinks. 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.

Basil drops off a Duffle Bag

Basil stretched and contorted his tired muscles after the long drive to meet Bernard, trying to relieve his stiffness. Exhausted from the journey, he briefly hugged Bernard, put down his travel bag, and sprawled out on Bernard's sofa. "Why not come in and take a break?" Bernard teased with a smirk. The oversized duffle bag caught Bernard's curiosity, equipped with arm straps for easy carrying. Inside, smaller bags seemed to be haphazardly packed into the duffle bag.

"Are these all...?" Bernard asked.

"Yup, packed to the top. Last year's harvest was terrible, but this year's... overflowing," Basil casually replied, gesturing with his hands.

"Can I see?" Bernard timidly inquired.

"Sure thing," Basil responded, grinning.

Opening the sealed duffle bag involved a systematic process: loosening the tension straps, disconnecting various accessories, and finally unzipping a magnetic closure. As the bag was unzipped, a distinct smell filled the air—a unique blend of psilocybin mushrooms and marijuana, two main crops from Basil's beloved enterprise, The Farm. Among rows of fruit bushes and vegetables, these crops held significant importance. While the hallucinogenic mushrooms were traded with Bernard, the rest served as essential ingredients for enriching the soil for other crops.

The Farm served multiple purposes—it was Basil's sanctuary, a place for Bernard's occasional gardening weekends, and a storage facility for goods, produce, and equipment. It wasn't extravagant, just a small cabin facing a cliff. However, behind this unassuming cabin was The Farm. From one end to the other, it was filled with produce—some thriving vertically on the walls, others hanging from the ceiling in

and

basins. Rows of beans, squash, hot peppers, and even corn adorned the space. The purpose of The Farm had evolved over the years. Originally conceived as a garden of air-purifying plants for cliffside living, it had transformed into a multi-tiered agricultural enterprise, complete with goldfish, salmon, and snails.

Bernard shifted his gaze to Basil, who had now fallen into a peaceful sleep on the couch. He gently covered Basil with a warm woolen blanket, ensuring his comfort, before turning his attention to the task at hand—cataloging Basil’s bountiful harvest.

Bernard gets toys for Basil

As expected, the harvest was bountiful, allowing Basil to secure a significant line of credit for his upcoming venture. He retrieved a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Bernard, indicating that it was time to start inventory.

With great interest, Bernard examined the list, which included items such as a Cyber Pad, Ethernet Cable 50ft, and Burst Transmitter. The list continued onto the second page, detailing essential software, hardware, and specialized equipment.

“I don’t usually ask, but...” Bernard started to say.

“Don’t worry. It’s a routine assignment, although there may be complicated politics involved,” Basil interrupted.

Suddenly alarmed, Basil jumped up from his seat, startling Bernard. “What time is it!?”

Stonebreaker and Hudson

and



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