

# Murphy's Quest

*Everything that can go wrong, will go wrong.*



# MURPHY'S QUEST

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# Chapter 1: Exposure Therapy

My name is Murphy. I've been preparing for this day since I was born.

I just woke up in a new world.

I'm standing in line while a mean-looking dwarf shouts a standard training prep talk at us. Unity, courage, yadda, yadda, for the King!

Everything's just like I expect. Four other boys stand next to me. We're wearing basic brown adventurer frocks, with wood clubs hanging at our waists and small packs around our shoulders.

Stats float over my arm like a fuzzy overlay. Basic noob stuff.

NAME: Murphy

RACE: Human

LVL: 1

HP: 10/10

STR: 5

INT: 5

FTH: 5

AGI: 5

EQUIPPED: Wood Club (4 damage), Basic Rags.

My grin spreads from ear to ear. Thousands of hours of jRPGs all for this moment. Prepare to bow to the wiles of Dark Warlock Emperor Murphy, plebs!

The drill sergeant dwarf is sending us on our first training mission: a simple fetch quest.

“ - collect one thousand kobold ears.”

Nani?!

---

There's no way out of the training grounds until we finish this ridiculous fetch quest. Stone-faced Level 10 soldiers guard every exit.

After a hopeless tour of the camp, I decide to grind out the kobolds. How long could this take?

Kobold Younglings spawn out of caves in the hillside, scurrying out every five minutes. The other boys have already claimed the closest caves to camp. I take over the last remaining one on the far side of the hill.

A Kobold Youngling (HP: 6/6) scrambles out of the cave and makes a run for it. I step forward and smack it on the head. It doesn't die.

The mean little thing claws me across the forearm. I scramble back, and smack him again. He falls over and disappears in a puff, leaving behind a highlighted green ear. I snap that into my pack.

I look down at my left arm.

Blood!?

I'm no good with real blood!

Uh oh.

---

I wake up that evening in my bunk. One of the other boys dragged me away from the spawn point before another Kobold appeared.

At least I killed the Kobold before passing out at the sight of blood.

The other boys all have 9 ears each. Kobold Scratch deals 1 damage, and you only heal while sleeping, so we could only farm 9 a day. There's no way to avoid getting scratched at least once per fight.

I do a quick mental calculation. This is going to be a long 112 days.

On the bright side, missing a day didn't put me too far behind.

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It's time to conquer my fear of blood.

I unravel my bandage. The three long gashes look way worse than 1 HP of damage. Fresh blood is still oozing under the scab.

Uh oh.

---

It's another hour before I come to. The bandage is still unwrapped, but the blood has mostly congealed. I'm hit by waves of nausea but manage to stay conscious.

I grit my teeth and peel back one of the scabs. My flesh is tender and pale underneath.

*This is the feeling of gaining experience.*

I calm my hyperventilation by imagining a gold XP bar slowly filling up, and take another peak.

*Hey, it's not so bad.*

Growing bolder, I wiggle the scab and try to pick more off. It's stuck. I keep pulling in frustration.

"Yowww!"

The whole scab tears off all at once. Blood spurts.

Uh oh.

---

The next morning, the boy on top bunk wakes me up for breakfast. I sit up dazed, staring at him blankly. I'm still clutching a chunk of dried blood.

You might ask: why haven't I mentioned the names of my fellow trainees? The reason is: a Dark Warlock Emperor can only meet so many Named Characters in his quest to ascension. They might be important later if I tell you their names now.

So I'm saving Named Character slots for girls.

After shovelling down breakfast, the other boys go farm Kobolds and I retreat to the barracks to continue overcoming my fear of blood.

This time, I'm more methodical. Sure, I puke a little in my mouth, and I'm covered in cold sweat. But two hours later, I'm staring at blood flowing out of an open wound with only a slight dizziness.

Well, the dizziness might just be blood loss.

---

It's day 2 of training, and there's not much to do. In the morning, we trainees go out to the Kobold caves after breakfast and collect 9 ears. But then we're all scratched up at 1/10 HP, so we spend the rest of the day chatting.

I expect the other boys to be suspicious that I don't know jack shit, so I spin them a yarn about a foreign-born orphan on a slave ship that ran aground, only survivor yadda yadda. They look at me quizzically.

"What's a ship?"

Apparently there are no oceans in this world.

Anyhow, now they just think I'm crazy.

It's probably for the best.



Turns out we're in a Church-sponsored city-state called Beltine and we're training to join the Alliance battlefront against the Demon King. Turns out every single one of these boys is a poor orphan who wants to be the next Ordained Hero. When they open their mouths, all I hear is \*trope trope trope\*.

I have to get out of here!

## Chapter 2: Empiricism

How does the cunning Dark Warlock Emperor Murphy solve the Thousand Kobold Challenge?

I ask my bunkmate in the morning to camp a spawn point together. My thinking: if we can both hit the Kobold before he gets a chance to attack, we won't take damage. That way we can grind all day.

Of course I'm not yet ready to grant my bunkmate Named Character status. He'll have to earn it.

He agrees to give it a try. So we're squatting together around a Kobold cave, and my thighs cramp but I don't want to look like a wimp. These other boys must have grown up on manual labor. I wonder if they also have STR: 5?

The first Kobold that spawns takes a hard left when he sees us. We step forward in unison, but my bunkmate is farther away and hits him late. The Kobold scratches me right before he dies.

The next one is the same, and the next one.

No matter how closely we time our attacks, the scrawny little rats always get a Kobold Scratch in right in between.

I hang my head. There's only one possible conclusion...

Combat is turn-based?!

---

No way is the future Dark Warlock Emperor staying here to smack Kobolds for another hundred days.

I sit around dawdling all afternoon with the other trainees. They seem to be bonding and enjoying themselves. Must feel like a vacation for them.

Suddenly, I have a bright idea. I'll dual wield clubs! That'll kill the Kobolds in one hit. My bunkmate lets me borrow his club. I pick up my own in my right hand, and grab his in my left.

It won't budge.

*Really?*

If I drop my club, I can pick up his in my left hand. Somehow as soon as I pick one up with one hand, the other becomes too heavy to lift. I feel so much sympathy for video game characters now. To live in a world where physics itself is your enemy...

On the other hand, I'm not the most athletic character, so this may come in handy.

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It's embarrassing to admit, but I'm finally saved by a bad habit. When I'm really bored, I drink a lot of water. I probably down 15 mugs of water while listening to the campfire conversation.

That's why I wake up three times to pee this night. The first two times I'm super sleepy and drop back into bed immediately, so drinking 10 mugs of water wouldn't have been enough. But since I drank 15 mugs, I wake up for a third time just before dawn and sunlight started streaming in before I fall back in bed. That's when I notice the HP bar over my hand is full!

Do you ever feel as if you're at the brink of a revelation but don't know what it is? I stand in the doorway and stare sullenly at my hand.

*Huh?*

HP: 10/10.

*Oh!*

My wounds are completely healed! Thinking back, they'd already healed on my first two trips to the outhouse. I stand there grinning like an idiot, still staring at my hand. I start cackling. Gotta practice that diabolical Dark Warlock laugh, after all.

My bunkmate throws a pillow at me to shut me up. "What's the big idea, crazy?"

I ignore him.

HP refills every time I sleep, regardless of how long!

---

The next morning proceeds as normal. Two hours of mind-numbing Kobold-bashing later, the other guys invite me to a game of sportsball. I decline graciously.

Time for a power nap.

Lying in bed in daytime makes me restless. I stare at the bottom of the bunk above and count the swirls in the wood. That reminds me of the big mahogany dining table that my parents picked up from a yard sale back when we lived in Ohio.

Can't believe we lugged that old thing all the way to Pennsylvania.

My third grade teacher Ms. Lynn gave out stickers for good behavior. I saved all those stickers and put them on the legs of that old table. Would I ever see it again?

Even though I really miss my parents, it's only the thought of that mahogany table covered with Hello Kitty stickers that makes me tear up. Was it even mahogany? The word 'mahogany' makes it sound especially nostalgic, so let's just pretend it was.

I finally fall asleep and dream of Pittsburgh.

---

I wake up from a nightmare in which the world turned pixelated like Minecraft.

*Thank God I landed in an alternate universe with high resolution.*

Never thought I'd say this, but I miss alarm clocks. I overslept.

Still, my HP refilled as planned. Dragging myself out of bed with the grungy taste of nap in my mouth, I'm off to collect more Kobold ears. By dinner time, I've caught up with everyone else. I have 37 ears now, and everyone else only has 36.

At dinner, I tell my unnamed bunkmate about the HP refresh trick. We craft a master plan.

That night, we take turns sleeping.

He watches me while I fall asleep. As soon as he thinks I'm fully asleep, he shakes me awake and sends me off to hunt Kobolds while he takes a nap. When I get back, I shake him awake, and so on.

By morning the next day, I've made three trips to the Kobold caves and he's made two. We're so excited by our strategy that we blaze through the afternoon. At the end of the day, we both pass 70 ears. I arrange mine in neat, morbid stacks of ten under my bed.

Unfortunately, even though short naps heal HP completely, they don't cure exhaustion.

I'm having trouble uncrossing my eyes.

"Hey Murphy, how many fingers am I holding up?"

My bunkmate raises a trembling hand. I'm not sure if his hand is shaking or my vision.

"Six?"

We giggle helplessly. It's like being drunk. Whacking Kobolds is hard work!

It's time to get back out there.

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At this point, I realize it's futile to keep my bunkmate's name from you. His name is Pluneth and he has the makings of a Core Party Member. Yesterday he kept to the plan and bashed just as many Kobolds as myself.

Whacking Kobolds with the whole group for a change makes the morning nice and relaxing. It's almost as if everything is back to normal, even though Pluneth and I have three times as many ears by this point. That's when it happens.

As the sixth Kobold of the morning pops out of existence, I heard what I can only describe as Narrator Voice emanate from the back of my skull: “Level Up!”

A warm glow travels up my spine and bathes my body in gold light. Yes! God rays extend from the heavens to shine a spotlight on me ... no I think I imagined that last part.

I check my stats:

LVL: 2

HP: 15/15

Everything else is the same. I suppose stats are just placeholders until we pick Classes. A few eyes turn to stare inquisitively.

Five minutes later, Pluneth hits LVL 2 just after me. Now everyone is glaring.

The cat’s out of the bag.

---

“Spill the beans, Murphy! How’d you two level up so fast?”

We make the most of a PR disaster. Pluneth and I regale the others with the tale of our misadventure into sleep deprivation. Mouths hang open in admiration.

“Wow! That’s smart!”

A booming laugh emanates from the corner of the dining tent, startling all of us. It’s Sarge. The dwarf walks over and claps a muscled hand on each of us, nearly toppling me over.

“Well done lads. Only 1 in 5 classes figure out the Sleep Recover before training ends. To find out on the fifth day must be a record.”

A mischievous glint flashes across his eyes. He tickles the sunken bag under my bloodshot eye with a stout finger.

“But you boys only solved half the puzzle! You can recover HP just by lying down on a bed and closing your eyes for a minute. You don’t have to fall asleep.”

*You don’t have to fall asleep. You don’t have to fall asleep. YOU DON’T HAVE TO FALL ASLEEP.*

The Drill Sergeant’s words reverberate in my skull. I bury my face in my hands. All those hours wasted staring at the wood swirls under Pluneth’s bunk, and I could have just closed my eyes and counted to 60?!

## Chapter 3: Murphyjitsu

Having learned Sleep Refresh, the rest of Training progresses smoothly. Throughout the day, we stream in and out of the barracks to get a minute of shut-eye between Kobold spawns.

12 ears an hour, 10 hours a day, it only takes 8 more mind-numbing days to finish this fetch quest.

To pass the time, Plun and I share stories and songs on the grassy knoll.

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Plun's family was slaughtered by orcs in the war front and he was raised in a local orphanage.

He gets teary-eyed telling the story.

Emotional stuff makes me nervous. I think about how Mom comforts me, and reach a hand out to pat his shoulder.

I wish I could say we shared a poignant moment of silent understanding between two human beings and that was somehow enough. I wish I could say that being present for a friend in his moment of need inextricably linked together the strands of our fates.

The truth is, my hand brushes awkwardly against his (rather bulky) bicep, and he shoots me a weird look.

“No Homo!” I shout instinctively.

“What?”

“Uh, no comment, no comment. Continue your story please!”

...

“When the slave trade ended several centuries ago, the Belstine peerage decided to draft their orphans into the war effort.” He gives me a long history lesson but I'm too busy cringing inside.

After Plun's lecture, he teaches me a melancholy song about war veterans fighting to their dying breath for Beltine. It's altogether mediocre even to my tone-deaf ears.

I absentmindedly pick a modern song to teach him in exchange. What came next, I should have predicted.

Even in this world, Taylor Swift is an instant hit.

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Every night, I dream of the old world.

“Mommy, why is my name Murphy?”

“Well, dear, I planned to name you something normal like John or Allen, but I changed my mind after meeting you. You were just too special!”

She never did tell me what changed her mind. Dad says she first went to the hospital to give birth to me on March 11, 1997.

My birthday is April 1.

It was Mom’s decision to name me Murphy, after Murphy’s Law:

*Everything that can go wrong will go wrong.*

She used to say, “Murphy, sometimes things just go wrong and it’s nobody’s fault.”

Her words ring in my ears at this very moment as I try to block out the chorus of *Back to December* echoing around camp for the fourth day in a row. Plun set it to a local military theme.

Even the camp guards are singing it.

Will T Swift be my lasting contribution to this world’s culture?!

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We’re all set to hit a thousand ears today. Sarge lines us up after breakfast for a final briefing.

“When you complete training, report to the front gate with all thousand ears. You will be escorted to the Class Choice building, where your specialization will be determined.”

I expect Sarge to regale us with a long tutorial message about the Class system. Long lists of strengths and weaknesses, personality traits and combat abilities, astrological signs and job descriptions. Don’t All Choose Mage. Healers Are Important Too. That kind of thing.

I’m disappointed. He gruffly dismisses us.

“Hey Plun, how’s Class Choice work?”

“Do you know *anything*, Murph? The four Classes are Warrior, Mage, Cleric, and Rogue. Each class specializes in one of the four main stats. Class Choice happens in that building yonder,” Plun gestures at the looming white-gold tower on the horizon, “It’s the last step in a rookie’s training.”

“OK, thanks!”

I zip off to the Kobolds, eager to reach Class Choice ASAP.

---

Character Creation is my guilty pleasure.

My favorite video games are team-based RPGs, where each Core Party Member can be customized individually. I spend hours pulling sliders and scrolling through menus: from Eye Color to Forehead Width, from War Scars to Eye Shadow. If the game let you pick Starting Classes, I'd build one character of each Class and write each a backstory before picking a favorite.

One character I always come back to: Murphy, Dark Warlock of Good. His special ability:

### **Chaos Field**

Disasters appear around Murphy when least expected.  
Strikes Terror in the hearts of enemy and ally alike.

With pure heart and clear head, Murphy wields the power of Chaos to save the world!

---

*970 ears, thirty more to go! Less than three hours left!*

Over the years, I've learned to notice the sinking feeling in my stomach when I feel too optimistic. It feels like a lump of smoldering coal burning through my intestines one layer at a time. The sinking feeling never fails to give me diarrhea later in the day.

"Where ya going, Murph?"

"Be right back!"

I race back to the bunks to check my stash of ears. They're still there.

*... 93, 94, 95. Plus the twenty in my sack, none missing. Thank God.*

The lump of coal continues to smolder. Too anxious to leave my trophies under the bed, I start packing them into my knapsack by the fistful.

Two silhouettes appear in the doorway.

"Hand 'em over."



## Chapter 4: Noticing Confusion

Two muscle heads stand in the doorway, clubs out. Let's call them Crabbe and Goyle.

Were those really their names?

Might as well have been.

"Hand 'em over," Crabbe smacks his Wood Club against his other hand like a police baton.

Now it comes to me: these two have been missing from Training almost every day since the Sleep Refresh was revealed. My spidey sense must've triggered just at the moment they snuck off to steal my hard-earned ears.

Cornered, my adrenaline kicks in. Mind starts racing.

*What would Harry do?*

They messed with the wrong interdimensional traveler. Imma go Robert Downey Junior on these fuckers.

All the possibilities lay themselves clearly before my eyes. Knock out their knees. One running jump. A feint to the side. I'll point behind them wide-eyed to distract -

---

"Murphy! Murphy!"

"Wh--- What happened?"

"Crabbe and Goyle knocked you out and stole your ears!"

I sit bolt upright, but already know it's too late. Plun helps me up and we shuffle shamefaced into the Drill Sergeant's office.

---

" - and that's the last thing I remember, Sir."

Sarge studies me in contempt.

*He'll find the bastards. They can't get away with this.*

The silence draws out like a string of mozzarella cheese from a hot pizza.

"Let this be a lesson, boy. Out there, in the dungeons, you won't get a second - "

I run outside. I'm in no mood to take shit from this midget. The other boys are gone now, probably already left for Class Choice.

Only Murphy left.

Without me, they'd still be slaving away at 9 ears a day.

A Kobold spawns nearby. I bash its head savagely.

"I will enjoy watching you die."

I don't remember what that's from, but the words flow smoothly out of my mouth. I barely notice the Kobold Scratch as I kill the little rat.

*Crabbe, Goyle, I'm coming for you!*

---

"Murph! Hey!"

A voice pulls me out of my rage.

"Plun? What are you doing here?"

"You thought I'd abandon you, Murph? What kind of friend do you take me for?"

The word disorients me. Here, in this fantasy world, I plan to acquire plenty of Core Party Members, but

...

"Friend?"

"You asshole, Murph. You think just because I'm an army-raised orphan I don't know how to be a friend? Listen, take half my ears. It's only gonna take four more days if we farm these fuckers together."

There's times when you have no words to say, so you just hold the other person as tight as you can and cry. This was one of those times. In anime, this would be high time to cut to a montage: meeting eyes during training, singing *Back to December*, hunting Kobolds together, sharing stories on sleepless nights.

But this isn't anime.

This is real life, and I'm crying my eyes out, hugging my best friend.

"Murph, you whiny little fuck. You owe me."

I like to think I saw a tear at the edge of Plun's eye as well. It's the first time since I landed in this strange yet familiar world that everything feels - three-dimensional. Real.

Too real.

---

The staff leaves Plun and I to our own devices, and we set up near the Kobold spawns to farm. I figure out that Sleep Refresh doesn't happen lying on grass, but it does work on top of blankets.

We lie down next to adjacent Kobold caves, bopping them as they spawn. It reminds me of a beach vacation, except instead of sipping martinis the two of us kill Kobolds every five minutes. Ears collect up in piles.

“Hey Murph?”

“Sup?”

“All those stories you tell. About horseless carts and number machines and the big lake and Murica. They're true, aren't they?”

“Yep.”

“So you're not from here - I mean this world - are you?”

“Nope.”

“Huh.”

We pass out under the open sky.

---

The second day, I have a brilliant idea. I've been studying Kobold Younglings in the neighboring caves. They scurry off in a random direction and disappear out of sight, and only attack if aggroed.

I explain my plan to Plun during breakfast.

We raid the empty barracks and drag all the furniture - desks, chairs, mattresses, dressers - out to the hill. Arranging them in a simple maze, the Kobolds only have one way to run - directly into our waiting clubs. Setup takes the whole afternoon.

Plun and I sit back and relax, bopping the Kobolds in waves of six as they run through the furniture funnel.

By mid-afternoon the third day, we make the quota of 2000 total ears.

---

There's a spring in my step as we approach the gate.

The guard dumps the contents of our sacks into what I can only assume are magic counting bags. He waves us through.

A scarred, muscular hand stops me just as I'm leaving.

“Hey kid, we’ll miss you around here. Make sure to visit.”

*Is this a sidequest?*

“Yessir, Sarge!”

As the dwarf wanders off, we hear a familiar melody in his gruff voice.

♪ I'd go back to December, turn around and make it all right ♪

♪ I go back to December all the time ♪

---

Hooded priests direct us through the Class Choice building. Plun and I separate into two adjacent rooms.

Mine is completely empty.

Narrator Voice turns on in my head:

“Murphy, Level 3 Human, are you ready for Class Choice?”

I tap the Yes button that appears in the air.

“Please stand by as we calculate your designated Class.”

*Excuse me?!*

“No, no, no.”

“Please stand by as we calculate your designated Class.”

The pleasant feminine Narrator Voice is only a tad less grating than Dad’s GPS.

---

Wanna know how I survived to the age of 16 in this cruel life, where even inanimate objects are imbued with diabolical malice against me?

Normal people have five stages of grief. I’ve learned to cut it down to two by skipping straight to acceptance. The clues I should have noticed flood through me.

*“You will be escorted to the Class Choice building, where your specialization will be determined.”*

*The strange lack of tutorials for Class Choice.*

*Plun’s remarkable nonchalance about Class Choice. What had he said?*

*“Class Choice happens in that building yonder.”*

*Not “we choose our Class in that building yonder.”*

*I should have noticed...we don't choose our own Classes...it's Chosen for us...*

A weaker man would plead with the Gods of Fate to be selected as Mage. But I know what's coming, and I choose to accept my fate with open arms. That choice, at least, is in my power.

“Cleric!”

Acceptance somehow fails to stem the flow of tears down my cheeks.

## Chapter 5: Fail Gracefully

“I need healing!”

“Murph, over here! I’m wounded!”

“Heal me!”

“I need healing!”

I aim my Initiate Chime at Plun and cast Heal. The spell sends a circular golden orb crawling through the air. It misses my party by a wide margin and vanishes into the dungeon wall.

“I need healing!”

Chimes must be the silliest weapons ever invented: a combination Menora/Wind Chime, with candles on top and musical instrument on bottom. I dangle the Holy weapon away from my body, trying not to light my loose-fitting Initiate Robes on fire.

“I need healing!”

“Murph, top me up!”

A second golden orb leaves my Chimes. It grazes Plun’s buttock before connecting with an enemy Bandit, saving her from the brink of death.

“Whose side are you on, dipshit?!”

At first, the enemy tried to focus-fire me. They soon realize I can self-Heal, and furthermore that I can’t hit anyone else with this slow-moving skillshot.

That’s why I, LVL 3 Cleric Murphy, am standing in the center of the fight bodyblocking for our Mage Vant.

“I need healing!”

By divine providence I finally land a Heal on our Rogue Tess as she weaves around. Tess and I have ... philosophical disagreements about the proper way to play Rogue. I’d rather she STAY IN ONE PLACE and shoot arrows. Instead she insists on running in dagger style.

“I need healing!”

“I JUST HEALED YOU!”

---

I met a few minor setbacks since last week.

Class Choice is an archaic name. Once upon a time, nobody picked Cleric. The Church complained. Now “The Goddess” chooses for you. Class Choice is permanent.

Clerics are members of the Church who specialize in Healing and Purity magic. Main stat FTH, secondary INT. Stats are determined by LVL and equipment, but also can be trained individually.

The basic Heal spell is an orb skill-shot. The size and power of the orb scale off FTH, and the speed of the orb scales off INT.

XP sharing is out of whack in this world. XP for a kill is divided equally among all players who dealt damage to the enemy and all players who healed them. With my weak and impossible-to-aim Heal spell, this becomes an issue.

One might ask, “Why is your Heal so weak, Murphy? Have you been slacking off?”

To make a long story short:

---

INT is trained by reading the Training Books in the Library. The moment I got a free hour I went over to get some INT buffs. Here’s the first line of Training Book 1:

*Yberz vcfhz qbybe fvg nzrg, pbafprgrghe nqvcvfpvat ryvg, frq qb rvhfzbq grzche vapvqvqhag hg ynober rg qbyber zntan nyvdhn.*

That’s right. The spoken language in this world is slightly accented modern English, but the written language is ROT13. Or rather, they use the character ‘N’ to refer to our letter ‘A,’ ‘O’ for ‘B,’ etc.

ROT13 English turns out to be way harder to learn than a random other language.

---

FTH is trained by daily prayer and ... chastity.

The first words Father Penitence said to me: “Dear boy, the fingers of the Devil wrap around your heart. Deliver yourself from sin!”

The second morning, Father Humility casually passed me in the hall: “To sin with yourself is to tread roughshod on the gifts of the Goddess.”

At dinner, Father Temperance only serves me a half-portion of porridge: “Lust is a slow and insidious killer, my child.”

As I hurry into Mass, Father Generosity shook his greying head: “Every day, we stray further from the Goddess’s light.”

Even the mute old monk who sweeps the floors crosses himself every time I pass by.

I have a problem, ok?

These priests are like walking blacklights, and the stacking chastity penalties are no joke.

Only with my iron will do I barely manage to keep my FTH positive.

---

For the perfectly understandable reasons outlined above, despite being forced to pray twice as much as the other Initiates, my current stats are:

NAME: Murphy

RACE: Human

CLASS: Cleric

LVL: 3

HP: 21/21

STR: 7

INT: 7

FTH: 4

AGI: 7

EQUIPPED: Initiate Chime, Initiate Robes.

Needless to say, I am not in the healthiest of mental states.

---

Plun and Vant, neither of whom I managed to heal, finish off the last two bandits.

Plun merrily loots the bandit's corpses.

Vant chugs a blue potion.

A gold LVL UP! circle spirals up around Tess, making her the first of us to reach LVL 5.

And that was the last straw.

---

*But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.*

The fighting spirit of our Founding Fathers still shines through these words. Dear reader, I hope you find the generosity in your heart to understand, if not to forgive, the crime I am about to commit. Know that I am compelled to this act by my duty as an American to right a long train of injustice, and by forces of nature beyond my control.



What act of defiance can right the abuses and usurpations delivered me in this inhospitable reality? There is no ocean into which I can dump tea. No redcoat I can tar and feather.

Only one crime is equal to the task.

I tiptoe down the sleeping corridors towards the chapel, driven by the certainty that Fate herself is out to get me, animated by the will to take revenge against her.

Past the dorms, where my fellow Initiates sleep soundly.

Past the priests' quarters, from which snores prayers emanate.

Past the silent monk, who crosses himself when he sees me.

Past the point of no return.

## Chapter 6: Perverse Incentives

How did I end up here?

Let's review the facts.

First.

From Class Choice to ROT13, from Harry Potter villains to this chastity cult, from XP sharing to judgy old men, this world is out to get me.

Second.

I have despaired of living the good life and decided to take revenge.

Third.

There is a little-known law of biology which states that the male gaze, rapacious as it normally is, doubles in rapaciousness for each day ungratified. By my count, this makes me 32 times as visually susceptible to the female form as the average 16 year old male.

Fourth.

The only remotely feminine thing in this church is the life-sized Goddess statue in the chapel.

For these four reasons I find myself, just before the stroke of midnight on the 17th of February of the 2014th year of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, standing half-naked on the preacher's podium in said chapel, facing said statue, relieving said ungratified urge.

## Chapter 7: Outside the Box

“I need to pee.”

...

“I need to pee.”

...

“I really need to pee!”

Father Penitence prays louder to drown out my requests, “Goddess above, lead this forsaken soul back to the fold.”

“Father, I really need to pee!”

He replies through gritted teeth, “You went ten minutes ago.”

“I’m sorry, I drink water obsessively when I’m bored!”

Father Penitence heads upstairs, leaving me alone in the darkness.

“Hey wait! I really need to pee!”

A half hour later, he brings me a chamber pot.

---

The number on my wrist has been decreasing steadily since The Incident. As far as I can tell, it ticks down by one every minute.

FTH: -936

There it goes. It’s pretty useful for keeping time down here.

I wonder when it’ll stop.

FTH: -937

I wonder if it’ll ever stop.

---

Nobody ever talks about how boring jail is. Thankfully, I have Father Penitence to keep me company.

Although he’s not much of a conversationalist, he has a way with words.

“Dear Goddess, grant this wayward youth the wisdom to repent.”

I’ve never heard a man express the same sentiment in so many different ways.

“Mother in Heaven, may your infinite grace ...”

FTH: -2144

---

*When you hit rock bottom, there’s nowhere to go but up.*

My strength and motivation are returning. A boy my age can only mope around for so long.

The way I see it, there’s only three ways this can go:

- (A) Plun rallies a rag-tag but loveable rescue squad to break me out of jail.
- (B) Demons invade Beltine and I’m freed in the ensuing chaos.
- (C) I’m hauled in front of an impartial jury of holy folk and convince them to set me free with an impassioned speech.

“Father, may I have pen and paper?”

I might as well prepare my speech for option C.

*Respected Elders, let me pose one simple question. The word ‘sin’ derives from the Greek word ‘hamartia,’ which means ‘to miss the mark.’ I stand before you to beg forgiveness for my sins. Yet what is sin the unfailing sign of aiming high? Should a man be punished for missing the mark because in his devotion to the Goddess he sets his sights too high? My fate is ...*

FTH: -4723

---

Another day, another catastrophe.

Last night I knocked over the chamber pot whilst getting up to pee. The shards of ceramic on the ground bring to mind two options that I missed:

(D) Hide a shard, kill Father Penitence as he approaches and steal his key.

(S) (for Shawshank.) Dig for twenty years.

I try to block these thoughts out of my mind, but the damage has been done. By noticing these alternatives, I’ve significantly reduced the chances of options (A)-(C).

No more thinking for me.

FTH: -6120

---

I wake to the sound of an alarm clock.

8:00AM.

*I'm late for the bus!*

I throw on some clothes and hop downstairs.

“Honey, don't forget your lunchbox!”

Mom hands me a heavy box as I run out the door towards the approaching school bus. I make it just in time. I take my usual seat at the very back.

The bus is empty except for three other passengers: the sweeper monk, a blind crone, and a one-eyed raven.

*That's strange.*

I search my mind for the source of that note of confusion. What's different about the school bus today?

*My lunchbox sure is heavy.*

I open it to find ... an atomic bomb.

The timer is set to 6:00. The countdown starts immediately.

*I read somewhere that an atomic bomb has a blast radius of one mile.*

My mile time is 7:43.

I run back down the aisle, faster than I've ever run in my life.

*Is this what a 6 minute mile feels like?*

So fast I start worrying about special relativity.

*Isn't it funny that with respect to the Earth's frame of reference, I'm running faster than the bus is moving?*

*Wait...*

*Shouldn't the bus be shrinking instead of stretching?*

The faster I run, the longer the bus stretches.

I run past the one-eyed raven, who caws at me: “Murphy! Run to the Valley of the Dead, Murphy! Find Mencius in the Valley of the Dead, Murphy!”

Past the blind crone, who points at me with fingers laden with jewelled rings: “Murphy! Run to the Valley of the Dead, Murphy! In the Valley of the Dead, philosophers are kings, Murphy!”

Past the silent monk, who crosses himself before opening his mouth to speak to me for the first time: “Murphy! Run to the Valley of the Dead, Murphy! Only one road leads to the Valley of the Dead, Murphy!”

Past the point of no return.

---

I wake up back in my cell with a shriek.

*It was just a dream. Just a dream. Just a dream.*

I shiver and check the time.

FTH: -7200

Midnight. As I calm down, I notice a figure at the door.

*Oh god!*

I scramble away in terror.

It's the silent monk.

He unlocks the door to my cell. Every bone in my body wants to scream. He gestures for me to leave.

I blink. This monk is my savior?

As I walk out of the cell, he whispers: “Murphy! Run to the Valley of the Dead, Murphy! Only one road leads to the Valley of the Dead, Murphy!”

I sprint for dear life.

## Chapter 8: False Pentachotomy

There's a powerful incantation employed by the leaders of my old world called the Dichotomy. It goes something like this:

1. Pick two unfortunate phenomena.
2. Make an Either/Or statement as if the two phenomena are mutually exclusive.

Famous examples include:

*“Either the One Percent are greedy bastards with way too much money Or funneling money to the poor has no net effect on poverty.”*

*“Either America spends too much money on healthcare Or due to lack of proper healthcare, thousands of babies die every year of easily preventable causes.”*

*“Either systemic racism throws an unfair number of minorities in prison Or minorities commit more crime than the average citizen.”*

The Principle of Dichotomy is:

*Although bad things happen, two bad things cannot happen at the same time.*

By this Principle, the Dichotomy incantation forces reality to pick a side, reducing the number of tragedies in the world by one.

Earlier tonight, I laid out five mutually exclusive ways I might break out of jail.

Unfortunately, the Principle of Dichotomy doesn't hold in this world.

---

*(A) Plun rallies a rag-tag but loveable rescue squad to break me out of jail.*

I tiptoe down hall after hall, looking for the way out of the inner cloister.

There's a commotion in the front courtyard.

*Are they onto me?*

The clash of steel. Spells being cast. Someone's fighting.

My curiosity takes over and I sneak towards the noise.

Four hooded figures stand in the center of the courtyard, surrounded by twenty-odd priests and initiates in various states of undress. The intruders are doing about as well as one can expect to against a team of healbots.

“We need to retreat! Rogue, cast smoke bomb!”

*It's Plun's voice!*

“I can't, I'm silenced!”

I identify two of the other intruders as Tess and Vant, but the last - a hooded shadow the size of a five-year-old - I don't recognize.

The voice of a young girl emanates from the cloak, casting powerful Dark magic.

Soon, the clergy knock out Plun, Tess, and Vant, leaving only the child shadow, who makes a valiant effort. From her miniature staff she casts a continuous torrent of Shadow Bolts.

Footsteps ring in the corridor behind me.

----

*(B) Demons invade Beltine and I'm freed in the ensuing chaos.*

“Finally, your majessty, after yearsss of ssstudy, I have completed the teleportasssion devisse.”

Evil laughter emanates from behind the obsidian throne.

“If I may, perhapsss we might tessst it out firsst on a sssmaller target.”

After a pause, the presence behind the throne speaks, “Leave no survivors.”

“Exsssellent point, your majessty, we musst maintain the sssecresssy of the teleportasssion project and keep the element of sssurprisse. I know exsssactly the beassst to sssend.”

Three servants walk into the throne room, dragging chains as thick as their arms. Wrapped in these chains is an enormous snake, twice the length and girth of the largest natural anaconda. Its night black skin is patterned with red-gold stripes.

A clawed hand extends from behind the throne: you are dismissed.

---

*(C) I'm hauled in front of an impartial jury of holy folk and convince them to set me free with an impassioned speech.*

The five of us - Plun, Tess, Vant, the hooded child, and I - kneel in chains.



“Sorry for dragging you into this, Plun.”

“What are friends for, Murph?” He manages a pained smile. “We heard about what you did, pervert.”

Father Penitence walks down the aisle towards us.

To Plun, Tess, and Vant: “You break into the consecrated heart of the Goddess and attack her faithful.”

To the hooded child: “You dare to wield the foulest of magic in this holy place.”

To me: “And you, you defile -”

For once, words escape Father Penitence.

“Have you anything to say for yourselves?”

That’s my cue! I rise to my feet:

“Respected Elders, let me mmpghg”

Father Penitence smacks me back to my knees and gags me with a length of cloth, in blatant violation of due process.

“For such crimes, there is only one punishment. I sentence you to purification by Holy Fire!”

I hang my head. The others’ faces are ashen.

*Only one road leads to the Valley of the Dead, Murphy.*

Is this what the silent monk meant?

---

*(D) Hide a shard of my chamber pot and use it to escape.*

I’m shaken out of my contemplation of mortality by screams.

“Look out!”

“Snake!”

A mesmerizing shadow darts into the chapel. It takes down an Initiate in one bite, crushing the boy’s spine.

“Impossible!”

“Where’d it come from?!”

Clergymen rush in to surround the beast, casting spells and auras I don’t recognize.

The five of us, bound and gagged, struggle pointlessly. The hooded girl is the only one who can speak. The Fathers must have been unable to take off her cloak to gag her.

Her voice is shrill and baby-like, “Please, let me out! I can help you! I can kill it!”

One of the Initiates glances away from the fight momentarily. This proves to be a fatal mistake; the demon snake pounces on him.

“Please untie me!”

The remaining clergy ignore her cries.

One or two more Initiates are picked off, but on the whole the team of healbots forms a solid defense against their venomous enemy. Because the snake is a living creature, however, holy spells deal no damage. It’s a stalemate.

Something cold touches my hand.

I twist around to see the silent monk right behind me.

“Mmmphhg!”

He slips a sharp something into my hand and walks away. I already know what it is.

I furiously saw at my bindings with the chamber pot shard. After an eternity, the rope finally come off.

Plun and the others shuffle towards me, eager to be freed.

“Wait here. There’s something I have to try.”

I pick up a still-lighted Chime from a fallen Initiate.

I check my stats:

FTH: -7311

“Brace yourselves.”

Heal!

---

*(S) (for Shawshank) Dig for twenty years.*

In the magic mirror, a massive ball of purple envelops the battle, vaporizing several of the clergymen and the snake demon on contact.

The throne room falls into dead silence.

One man drops to his knees.

“Your majestssty, pleassse! It wasss a missstake! Give me another chanssse!”

The clawed hand makes an ominous sign, which a courtier interprets:

“For your failure, you are hereby sentenced to twenty years of hard labor in his Majesty’s mines.”

“No! Merssy!”

## Chapter 9: Double Crux

“Level Up!”

“Level Up!”

“Level Up!”

Could I have predicted this?

Did I expect the Heal orb to grow massive and deal damage on extreme negative FTH?

“Level Up!”

“Level Up!”

Father Penitence. Father Temperance. Father Generosity.

All gone. Forever.

*Because of me.*

And I feel nothing.

“Level Up!”

“Level Up!”

Is this what I wanted?

Mechanically, I untie Plun and the others.

The world spins faster and faster. I feel so - far away. Like I’m watching my body from the chandelier.

Dimly, I’m aware that Plun tries to shake me to attention. I watch as Tess tries to slap me awake.

I watch as the hooded child throws me over her shoulder like a ragdoll and starts running.

“Level Up!”

She runs with inhuman speed. Plun’s shouts fade into the distance.

Where is she taking me?

“Level Up!”

---

The girl removes her hood to reveal a face completely wrapped in bandages. Peeking through the cloth are two lidless eyes and a tuft of striking purple hair.

“Wake up.”

I hear a long-lost part of me thinking, *Core Party Member Get!*

“Pull yourself together, Murphy.”

Old Murphy wonders, *How does she know my name?*

She shakes me with surprising strength, but gets no response. With a sigh, she slings me back over her shoulder.

---

Father Penitence. I hated his guts. I wanted him dead. Right?

Father Generosity. He was stern, but he had kind eyes. Did he deserve this?

Father Temperance. He loved his work. He was a good cook.

He was a good man.

What does that make me?

---

“Murphy, wake up.”

I do not move.

“It’s not your fault. You couldn’t have known.”

I do not move.

“You saved all our lives. You did what had to be done.”

I do not move.

The girl pinches my arm.

I do not move.

She dumps a bucket of freezing water on my head.

I shiver but do not move.

She screams in my ear.

I shake her off.

She tickles the underside of my foot.

“Leave me alone.”

“So you’re not completely broken, huh?”

The girl stares into my eyes, unblinking. I look away to the left, but she hops over to meet my gaze. I close my eyes, but she peels my eyelids open.

“Leave me alone!”

“No time to mope, Murphy. You’re a wanted criminal. See those torches in the distance? The whole town is out to get you.”

“Let them.”

“No, that won’t do.” she digs her nails into my arm, “I need you to do something for me first.”

I know she’s trying to troll a response out of me, but rage still boils under my skin.

Her nails sink deeper, drawing blood.

“Go away, little girl, before I get angry.”

“Ooh, is the big, bad murderer gonna hurt an innocent girl?” She giggles, “I’m sooo scared!”

My fist is still clenched around the dead Initiate’s chime. I lift it menacingly to her face.

She stares me down, “Do it, coward!”

A tense silence ensues.

*I can’t do it.*

She mutters a spell and knocks me out.

“Let’s get you to the destination first. I’ll *persuade* you on the way.”

---

I wake up in a carriage. The purple-haired bandage-wrapped dark warlock girl stares at me with lidless eyes.

Reflexively, I check the time:

FTH: -8139

*That makes it 3:39PM. Why is it dark outside?*

“You gained 280 points of FTH from levelling up. That makes it 8:19 in the evening.”

The cloth on the *mind-reading* purple-haired bandage-wrapped dark warlock girl’s face twists upwards in a way I can only interpret as a smirk.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Can’t you guess, Murphy? They told me you’re a smart one.”

*Overpowered dark magic.*

*Vocabulary way above her grade level.*

*Unfazed by my negative FTH Heal.*

*Wrapped in bandages.*

*Everything adds up to -*

“Murphy!” She cackles in delight. “Run to the Valley of the Dead, Murphy! That dream is my best work yet.”

---

The mummy girl continues to stare, presumably reading my mind.

*So you’re gonna read my mind, are you?*

*One, two, three, four. I’ll keep counting ‘til you get bored.*

“Oh, cut that out!”

*Five, six, seven, eight. I never cooperate with people I hate.*

“Stop that! If you agree to hear me out -”

*Nine, ten, eleven, twelve. Not until there’s ice in Hell.*

“- I’ll show you how your friends are doing.” She pulls out an obviously enchanted mirror.

*...Fine.*

“See, that wasn’t so hard, was it? Sorry we got off on the wrong foot,” she extends a tiny hand.

I shake it with some hesitation.

“Let me introduce myself. Name’s Nyra. I was brutally murdered at the age of six.”





## Chapter 10: Gears-Like Understanding

“Show me my friends.”

“Ask nicely.”

I swallow what little remains of my pride. “Show me my friends please?”

Nyra draws out the enchanted mirror.

Tess and Vant sleep around what remains of a campfire. Perched precariously in a nearby tree, Plun keeps watch.

“You have loyal friends, Murphy. They visited establishments of - poor repute - to find help to rescue you.”

“Is that where they found you?”

“No, I made sure the three of them had no luck finding aid. I also sent them - *fun* dreams - about being rescued from terrible fates by yours truly. So they practically begged me to join their party when I passed them on the street and *accidentally* showed off a touch of street magic.”

“Fat help you were.”

The girl bristles. “There were complications. If anything, it’s your fault we got caught.”

“*My* fault? I was stuck in a cell!”

“Your friend Pluneth insisted we take a detour into the main chapel to check out your - handiwork. Against my better judgment, I agreed. We were found out immediately - that Goddess statue is blessed by a high level detection spell even I can’t see.”

“Shit! So that’s how they caught me that night!”

We share a silent moment of commiseration, two souls defeated by the same block of marble.

“The monk and the snake - you sent them, too?”

“The monk, yes ... I Charmed him to scout the grounds out and find you. We were already surrounded by those pesky priests when the idiot finally found you. I thought I might as well try getting you out of there while the attention was on us. As for the snake, I have no idea...”

“My friends, will they be OK?”

“They’re alive, aren’t they? Want me to send them a message?”

“You can do that? Sure!”

“Write them a note on this. Keep it short.”

I jot down a few words.

“Not much of a poet, are you?”

I shrug.

“Well, here goes.”

She whispers something, and the parchment disappears. In the mirror, the letters appear in crimson on the sleeping Tess’s forehead.

*Dear Plun,  
It’s Murph. Thanks for trying to rescue me.  
Don’t look for me. I’ll be fine.  
Take care,  
Murph*

“Hey!”

“What? You told me to *send them a message*, didn’t you?”

I can’t help admiring her style.

---

“Still hung up over those pesky priests?”

“They didn’t deserve to die.”

“If it’s any comfort, I woulda killed them anyway.”

“It really isn’t.”

“Worse things have happened to better people.” Nyra pulls back the bandages around her chest to reveal several missing ribs under dry, peeling skin. “See?”

I try not to gag. “Stop!”

“It still itches, you know.” She inserts a finger into the cavity where her heart should have been and starts scratching. “Ahh, that feels better.”

“Cover that up! I feel much better now!”

---

“If you can read minds, send dreams, and mind control people, what do you need me for?”

“Hah! Those parlor tricks only work on low INT enemies and are easily blocked by all sorts of spells and trinkets. Check out my stats.”

She reveals them briefly.

*Holy!*

“Even with my INT I can barely read your mind. As for the mind control spell, it’s called Charm. Wanna hear its secret?”

I nod eagerly.

Nyra leans in with a conspiratorial whisper.

“Charm was invented by the first Dead King, Charmer. Charmer figured out that among the living, a rare few *have no soul*. They look like the living, they move like the living, they talk like the living, but they *feel nothing*.”

“Woah...”

“Charmer called them philosophical zombies, or p-zombies. Living dead, as opposed to Undead. The Charm spell allows a Mage specializing in Dark Magic to take over the mind of a p-zombie. I scoured your town and only found one - that useless LVL 1 monk.”

“So your skills are smoke and mirrors and you need me to do the real work.”

She ignores my jab, “the Valley of the Dead is under attack -”

“Let me stop you right there. You’ll never convince me to fight a war for the Undead.”

---

To make a long story short, the mind-reading mummy girl convinced me to fight a war for the Undead.

To be honest, Dark Warlock Emperor Murphy was chomping at the bit to accept her quest.

Did I mention she can enter dreams in a ... rather pleasing ... form?

The flesh is weak.

---

The next three days on the road are almost as monotonous as prison.

Punctuated only by my regular bathroom breaks, Nyra explains the state of affairs.

The current Dead King Mencius is on the losing side of a long defensive war against the Inquisition - a militant faction of the Church. Their Holy magic completely neutralizes Undead powers. They only survived this long by guerrilla warfare and constant retreat.

Nyra travelled to Beltine undercover to investigate an old rumor that FTH can drop negative and reverse Holy spell effects, damaging the living and healing the Undead. Her plan was to find and “enlist” some low-level clerics, until she learned of my incident.

From her bags, she shows me a number of powerful FTH spellbooks, all of them useless for me. Most are buffs that would turn to debuffs given my stats. The rest are aura or AoE heals that affect the caster and would insta-kill me.

I’ll be relying on the basic Heal spell to save the Valley of the Dead. FTH is a percentage modifier on its size and power, so 10 FTH corresponds to a 10% larger orb that heals 10% more damage, while anything below -100FTH starts dealing damage instead of healing. The orb’s speed scales off INT in the same way, and it lasts a fixed 1 minute in duration which can only be increased with consumables.

Nyra decks me out in level-appropriate Mage gear to increase my INT.

My stats are now:

NAME: Murphy

RACE: Human

CLASS: Cleric

LVL: 31

HP: 595/595

STR: 35

INT: 217

FTH: -13643

AGI: 35

EQUIPPED: Salamander Cloak of Knowledge, Salamander Vambraces of Knowledge...

“Mencius will explain the rest.”

---

“The only road to the Valley goes through a narrow pass in the Ghoul’s Teeth mountain range. The Inquisition set up patrols all along it, but in that cramped space they should be sitting ducks for your Heal spell.”

As the word “should” leaves her embalmed lips, my stomach sinks.

The carriage jolts to a stop.

“What the - ”

## Chapter 11: Resolve

As far as the eye can see, the ground is lit up by white-gold runes, tongues of blue flame, and roving God Rays. The mountains ahead look like someone applied a “Heaven” filter to a demonic hellscape.

“Consecrated Ground. I’ve never seen a patch this large.”

“I’m guessing it’s not Undead-friendly?”

“You could say that. Wait here.”

Nyra walks up to the boundary of the Consecrated Ground, whispering spells under her breath.

She darts through the traps, dancing and weaving past the patchwork of holy flames, seals, and rays of light. A thousand feet in, she’s visibly fatigued and the runes grow denser.

“Shit!” A slight misstep sets off a nearby rune, which explodes in a ring of blue fire.

Stymied, she dashes back to me.

---

“Go on without me. Consecrated Ground doesn’t hurt the living.”

“What? No way I’m going alone!”

“Put on these rings. This one will boost your HP, and this one will take you to Mencius when you arrive in the Valley. Show it to any Undead who trouble you.”

The girl begins slipping rings off her fingers, ignoring my protests.

“I’ll find another way.”

“Only one road leads to the Valley of the Dead,” I repeat her words back to her.

“Murphy, just go!” Nyra glares at me, “Cast Heal as soon as you see the enemy.”

*Think, Murphy! There has to be a way to get her through with me.*

“This is more important than me, idiot!”

*Think!*

The words - drawn from a distant memory as if by narrative force - stumble off my tongue.

“Curious is the trapmaker’s art, his efficacy never witnessed by his own eyes.”

---

“What?”

“Trapmaking, however effective, is almost impossible to learn because it lacks feedback loops. Trapmakers never witness their own creations in action. So they always miss things.”

I start stripping off my clothes.

“What are you doing, pervert?! Have you lost your mind?”

“I’m going to keep casting Heal in your direction. Keep contact with the orb and it’ll outheal the Holy damage.”

The plan dawns on her.

“Brilliant!”

I check my stats. With only Salamander Leggings of Knowledge on, my INT comes out to 85. Heal orbs will travel at the speed of a brisk jog.

“Ready?”

“Ready!”

---

What a strange sight we must have been. The purple-haired mummy girl jogging next to a moving dark-purple orb the size of a building. The shirtless youth running a cautious distance behind, pausing every so often to cast another orb.

The hill steepens and grass all but disappears underfoot, while Consecrated Ground continues to stretch up into the clouds.

While I’m soaked with sweat, Nyra shows no signs of fatigue.

Each five second pauses I take to cast Heal sets me further and further behind.

Holy fire tickles my legs gently, but lactic acid eats into them like lava.

“Slow down!” I croak.

Jogging in place, Nyra glances back in alarm.

*There’s no way to slow down without slowing down the orbs.*

There’s no turning back now.

Off come the pants.

---

You might think that coming up with such a clever idea would assuage wounded pride.

You might think massacring a dozen high-level Inquisition soldiers would heal a bruised ego.

You might think getting more exercise than ever is worth celebrating.

You would be wrong.

None of that compares to the humiliation of shivering in sweat-soaked underwear while a little girl rifles through her knapsack for your clothes.

Pride is a funny thing.

Just when you think you've lost it all, it turns out there's more to lose.

## Chapter 12: Meta-Contrarianism

*[Any resemblance to actual persons, intentional or otherwise, is entirely coincidental.]*

“Where’s Mencius?”

“In the old fort.”

Nyra leads me through the bedraggled Undead camp. Skeletons and embalmed dead make way respectfully, but they shoot me glares that send shivers up my spine.

As the creaky drawbridge to the fort lowers ponderously, she briefs me on the Dead King.

“Mencius is a wise and competent king, but he has *peculiar* ideas about government.”

“Such as?”

“He insists that a king is a public servant, and must be - what does he call it - democratically selected by his people on a regular basis.”

“That’s common where I come from.”

She shoots me a queer look.

“Follow my lead.”

---

“That’s him,” Nyra whispers as we enter the courtyard.

The skeleton she points to stands half a head shorter than his attendants, wearing sleek metal armor under a black cape. His left eye is covered by an eye-patch.

“Mencius, I’ve brought the boy.”

“Nyra, welcome home! And you must be Murphy!”

Just to be on the safe side, I bow. “Your Majesty -”

Two firm skeletal hands lift me out of the bow.

“Save the formalities. In this place we are all equals, living or dead. Call me Mencius.”

“Nyra told me all about you, sir.”

“Uhoh. You must forgive an old man his crazy ideas.”



The attendants laugh a little too genuinely. A shadow flits across the few remaining sinews of Mencius's face.

I take a leap: "We have a saying in my homeland: government of the people, by the people, for the people."

Mencius beams widely.

---

Before he can reply a raven swoops in from the heavens and lands on his outstretched hand. It has only one bulbous eye.

The courtyard falls silent.

"What have you learned, darling?"

Mencius strokes the bird with his bony fingers, and it dissolves into smoke, leaving behind the much-too-large eyeball. He pulls back his eyepatch and pops the eye into the waiting socket. With a flick of his finger, the eye spins it into place.

"I'm sorry, but there's no time for banter. The enemy will be upon us by nightfall. Will you shed blood with us, Murphy?"

In the eyes of the king of the Undead, I see what I can only describe as a triumphant call to life.

"With all my heart, sir!"

---

Nyra leads me from tent to tent, outfitting me with custom-made equipment. Had we been less pressed for time, I might have befriended the blacksmith brothers LeBrawn and LeBrain despite their heavy accents. I might have acquired a fetch quest or ten from the alchemist Solomon and learned from him the secrets to absinthe and wormwood.

One trip, however, could not be rushed.

The jeweller Penelope's tent stands out, twice the size of any other tent in the camp, decorated with gaudy silks and gems.

Penelope turns out to be the old hag from my dream. That explains why her skin looked like it was melting off.

Penelope unlocks a trunk and picks out a handful of brilliant diamond rings for me.

"You can wear more than two rings at once?" I blurt out in surprise. I expected this universe to prevent such an obviously exploitable mechanic.

“Try.”

Penelope waggles her right hand at me. Each finger fits three identical sapphire rings, for a total of fifteen.

I squeeze a diamond ring onto my forefinger. The next one - it refuses to go on my hand. It goes onto my other hand fine, but then the third ring won't go on either. No matter what I try, I can only equip one ring on each hand.

“You're in for a treat, darling.”

Penelope draws my eye to the pentagram on the floor. She whispers the procedure in my ear.

“- It only works with exactly identical rings.”

To say I rolled on the ground laughing would be an understatement.

---

Wear a Massive Diamond Ring on each hand.

Step into the Summoning Circle.

Chant the incantation and the Demon's name.

All my equipment is vanished by the spell.

A Minor Fell Imp appears in the center of the pentagram.

“Whaddaya -”

Chant the Cancel Summoning incantation.

The Minor Fell Imp disappears.

My equipment reappears.

The two Massive Diamond Rings are now together on my right forefinger.

Equip another Massive Diamond Ring on the left hand.

Repeat.

The Imp pops in and out of the pentagram.

“Whaddaya -”

“Stop -”

“Who da -”

“Again?!”

“Da fuck -”

“Not like -”

I kinda feel sorry for the little guy.

---

Before the final preparations, Nyra pulls me aside.

“Are you sure you can do it?”

“Don’t worry about me.”

“Not too long ago, you were awfully shaken up about murder.”

I struggle for words to explain how a sixteen-year-old might know anything about warfare.

“I was shaken up about killing good men. In war, there are no good men. Only monsters.”

---

The bells toll the alarm. The Undead gather in the courtyard, spilling out into the camp in a wide circle.

On the ramparts, the Dead King Menciis stands alone.

*Cinematic time.*

“Children! Brothers! Sisters!

“The Valley of the Dead is the eternal resting place of the Undead. The Inquisition dares to disturb our slumber with their blazing crosses and holy swords!

“With cowardly techniques and overwhelming numbers, they beat us back temporarily. But our enemy is blind! Blind men cowering under the skirts of a blind Goddess.”

“Blind men!” The crowd roars back.

“Yesterday, the Seeing feared the Blind. Yesterday, the Dead feared the Living. But that is not the way of the world. From this day forward, the Blind will fear the Seeing. From this day forward, the Living will fear the Dead!”

The crowd bellows.

“The Living will fear the Dead! The Living will fear the Dead! The Living will fear the Dead!”

Mencius's left eye flutters to life, shooting out of his socket in the form of a raven.

"I, Mencius, the One-Eyed Raven, have flown across the kingdoms of Demons and Men looking for the key to this war. Today, I found that key!"

Nyra prods me, and I run up the steps to Mencius' side.

"This boy will be the Ultimate Weapon in our war against the Blind Inquisition. Bring the prisoner!"

Skeletal guards drag out a man clothed in the red robes of the Inquisition.

"Our sister Skala, out of the kindness of her unbeating heart, nursed this cretin to health. For that mistake, he murdered Skala in cold blood.

"Today you face the judgment of the Ultimate Weapon!"

With a flourish, Mencius turns to stand next to the bound Inquisitor. He nods to me.

I hold up my Chime.

*Heal!*

The army of the dead cries out in alarm as a giant purple orb blossoms from my weapon to envelop the prisoner and their King. In the blink of an eye, it clips through almost half the fort, extending ten stories into the sky. The orb flies into the distance.

Mencius emerges completely unscathed. Of the Inquisitor, only crimson robes remain.

The Dead King lifts my hand to the sky.

"The Ultimate Weapon!"

"The Ultimate Weapon!" The sea of faces chants, "The Ultimate Weapon! The Ultimate Weapon!"

## Chapter 13: Existential Risk

FTH: -23335

The first battle is a rout.

Surrounded by a dedicated defensive squad, I pummel the enemy with gigantic balls of death. Negative FTH Heal deals an entirely new category of damage, completely bypassing Damage Reduction. I call it my Doom Bubble.

After the battle, we track the trails of my orbs for thousands of feet. Crimson Inquisitor swords, chimes and robes scatter across the ground in long rows. Entire platoon vaporized in place, their equipment laid out in neat, legible squares.

Some of the robes are fitted for children.

The reality of the carnage has yet to hit me.

“This place is a graveyard.”

Nyra touches my hand, “As it should be. This is the Valley of the Dead, after all.”

She’s still working on the whole comforting thing.

---

FTH: -27881

The enemy beats a hasty retreat, and we pounce.

The One-Eyed Raven scouts out group after group of isolated enemies left behind by the larger force.

At my insistence, Nyra sends each group a final message: one chance to surrender.

The idiots never take it.

According to doctrine, if they surrender they will be executed and banished to Hell. This way at least, the Goddess will grant their loyal souls mercy in Heaven.

I send them there graciously.

What is it that Oppenheimer said?

*I am become Death, destroyer of worlds.*

---

FTH: -29316

The Inquisition pulls out all the stops. We face a new enemy: a Phoenix Rider.

One Final Boss-level Cleric rides the flaming bird, raining Holy Fire upon us from far above. He flies too fast to hit with Doom Bubble.

“We’re taking too much damage!”

“We have to retreat!”

The army of the dead holes up in the old fort, waiting for an opportunity.

---

FTH: -30790

On the distant hilltops, well out of my range, the enemy sets up a ring of camps. They slowly begin to cast Consecrated Ground. A ring of light shrinks around us like a tightening noose.

The Phoenix Rider continues to take pot shots from on high. He begins to show frustration.

“Come out, cowards!”

The One-Eyed Raven is our only hope. Searching for a weakness.

If I have to eat any more consumables I’ll puke.

---

FTH: -31953

The enemy camps creep down into the valley, and Consecrated Ground surrounds us on all sides.

Even at midnight, it’s bright as day outside. Not as if the Dead need sleep.

Mencius orders me to switch into defensive gear.

Nyra unclasps her necklace and hands it to me. It’s a pink heart that opens up to show a tiny pencil drawing of a little girl.

“Keep this on until the day you die, and you will be reborn as Undead.”

When the Phoenix Rider rests,

When the Inquisition sleeps,

When the One-Eyed Raven finds the Grand Inquisitor’s camp,

The Dead will make their final charge.

---

FTH: -32745

The Phoenix Rider missteps. He flies back to camp, leading us straight to their central command.

The One-Eyed Raven spies the Grand Inquisitor watching over the Phoenix Rider as he sleeps.

Mencius says he's a boy my age.

---

We make the final preparations.

Our plan is to re-use the strategy I employed to protect Nyra through Consecrated Ground.

Nyra forces a Potion of Greater Extended Duration down my throat.

I cast a Doom Bubble.

Fifteen stories high, the purple ball blocks out the Sun, barrelling forward.

"The Living will fear the Dead!"

The army of the dead charges forward into the Doom Bubble. Inside, damage taken by the Undead is immediately restored.

A lump of coal sits in my stomach.

---

FTH: -32763

In three waves, the army of the dead fill out three giant Doom Bubbles, running at a breakneck speed towards the enemy camp.

I don my INT gear and follow behind as quickly as I can.

The enemy doesn't expect us.

We cleave through the startled guards, reaching the Grand Inquisitor's tent in a matter of minutes.

The lump of coal grows hotter. Hotter than it's ever been.

---

A whole war is decided in five minutes.

The army of the dead, practically invincible enveloped in my Doom Bubbles, cut through unprepared enemies like knives through warm butter.

Their spells and arrows shoot out from within the Bubbles, taking down everything in their way.

The Grand Inquisitor and the Phoenix Rider emerge from their tent just in time to be vaporized.

Within each Bubble, the relief is palpable.

The enemy ranks scatter.

*Did we win?*

My stomach is screaming.

I check the time.

FTH: -32768

---

“Get out of the orbs!”

The army of the dead is too far away to hear my screams.

They continue the wild charge towards the fleeing Inquisition.

Time slows to a crawl.

---

I fall to my knees.

*I'm sorry, Nyra.*

*I'm sorry, Mencius.*

*I didn't think of everything.*

---

FTH: 32767

Purple turns to gold.

Bones to ash.

With them, my dreams.



*Murphy, sometimes things just go wrong and it's nobody's fault.*