

Toad Town?

1 — Reborn?

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

Then?

Darkness, but only for about five minutes.

After that?

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

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

A honking roar followed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What the Hell?” it said.

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

“Why are you *so* small?”

Is this giant speaking to me?

“Yes, I’m speaking to you.”

It can read minds??

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"...What?"

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

"What kind of pathetic human were you?"

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

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

"I am serious!"

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm still pretty lost."

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

"Deathheim?"

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

“Sorry.”

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

“I am still very lost and confused.”

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

“What exactly *are* you?”

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

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

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

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

The giant was surprisingly good at predicting my questions.

“I’m supposed to grow stronger?”

“Preferably.”

“How?”

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

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

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

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

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

“...Look what you did...”

“What?”

“My name is now officially ‘Boi’...”

“Why?”

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

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

“I am Toad!”

“Oh, for Hell’s sake...”

2 — Getting Started?

“What do I do now, Boi?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’ll be able to create whomens!?”

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

“So how does it work, this process?”

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

“That sounds complicated enough already.”

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

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

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

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

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

“It isn’t?”

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

“Emu?”

“I-M-U!”

“Imu.”

“Yes!”

“Emo Boi?”

“...”

“Boimu??”

“No... that’s not—”

“Emu the Boi!”

“Oh for Hell’s sake...”

“What is a Squire-Lord?”

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

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Pray you don’t find out.”

“Imu..?”

“Yes...” Boi replied.

“What’s a Squire-Lord?”

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

“I’m confused.”

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

“I’m Toad!”

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

“What do I do?”

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

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

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

“I have wings?”

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

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

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

“Hey Boi!”

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

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

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

Then a loud snap brought me back into the cave.

“Alright, enough playing around.”

“Aww.”

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

“Are we going to be under attack!?”

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

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

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

3 — Blueprint?

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

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

“What does it say?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I did it!”

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

“Curse it!”

“What? Is it wrong?”

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

“Why?”

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

“So I should make a whomen now?”

“Yeah.”

“How?”

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

“What’s a biscuit?”

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

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing!”

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

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

“Frogs and toads don’t get along?”

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

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

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

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

“What the Hell is *that*?”

“A whomen?”

“Why is his face so...?”

“Handsome?”

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

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

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

“No.”

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

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

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

“The tongue thing?”

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

“Hmm. Isn’t it better this way?”

“Absolutely not.”

Whomen, stand, I demanded with my thoughts.

“...Why is it doing a handstand?”

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

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

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

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

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

“How can you tell?”

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

“Why can’t I see my own essence?”

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

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

“I can see it now.”

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

“*For being a toad?*”

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

“Thank you.”

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

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

“Stop!”

“What’s wrong?”

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

“Hopping is superior.”

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

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

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

“I don’t think he knows what to do.”

“Hell damn it.”

“What?”

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

“So I have to chop down trees?”

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

“Why’s that?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Hey, are you okay?”

“I’m tired.”

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

“I’m gonna take a nap.”

“Cores don’t sleep.”

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

“Toad! Toad! Wake up! Toad!”

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

“What’s wrong!?”

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

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

“What happened??”

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

“Not again...”

4 — Goose'd?

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

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

“With tools, you imbecile!”

“That was uncalled for.”

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

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

“Aw shit, not again! Run!”

“I’ll make my whomens fight it!”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea...”

“It’s really strong,” I remarked.

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

“Scope? Level?”

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

“I need to make tools, you said.”

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

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

“Just do it, please...”

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

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

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

“Maybe they’re neither?”

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

“How do we make those?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Well that’s useful.”

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

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

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

[Crafting List]

>Items>Tools

—Stone Axe (Workbench)—

Grants Woodchopping skill and increases minion Harvesting XP by 10%

Required Materials: Stone & Wood

—Stone Hammer (Workbench)—

Increases minion Building Speed and XP by 15%

Required Materials: Stone & Wood

—Stone Pick (Workbench)—

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

Required Materials: Stone & Wood

—Stone Scythe (Workbench)—

Increases minion Foraging Speed and XP by 15%

Required Materials: Stone & Wood

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m above all that now.”

“Revenge is healthy for your soul.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

[*Crafting List*]

>*Items*>*Clothes*

—Simple Pants (Loom)—

Increases minion Charisma by 2

Required Materials: Yarn

—Simple Sandals (Loom)—

Increases minion Movement Speed by 25%

Required Materials: Yarn

—Simple Tunic (Loom)—

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

Required Materials: Yarn

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

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

[*Crafting List*]

>*Structures*>*Crafting*

—Anvil (Workbench & Forge)—

Enables Metal Working, but lowers minion motivation in nearby structures

Required Materials: Iron

—Firepit (Workbench)—

Enables Simple Cooking

Required Materials: Stone & Wood

—Simple Loom (Workbench)—

Enables the Crafting of Simple Clothing

Required Materials: Wood (sticks / timber)

—Stone Forge (Workbench)—

Enables Ore Smelting, but lowers minion motivation in nearby structures

Required Materials: Stone

—Workbench [1/∞ Constructed]—

Enables Crafting

Required Materials: Stone & Wood

Builder whomen, craft a Loom and Firepit!

Immediately, the Builder looked around, confused.

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

“Oh, right.”

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

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

“Can I craft clothes now?”

“Nope.”

“Aww.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Why didn’t your book tell you that?”

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

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

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

And my promotion to Knight.”

“What was that last bit?”

“Nothing.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Builder: build, that, house!”

The minion ran over, and immediately looked around confused.

“*Frog-it*, what now!”

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

I brought up the crafting entry:

[*Crafting List*]

>*Structures*

—House (Workbench)—

Increases the maximum available minions by 4

Required Materials: Stone & Timber

“It says it needs ‘*Timber*’.”

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

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

“How did he do *that*??”

“Magic?” Imu replied.

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense.”

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

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

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

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

5 — Farm?

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

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

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

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

“I could build more houses,” I replied.

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

“I’d forgotten about that.”

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

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

“They died early more often than not.”

“Oh...”

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

“Not all cores die though?”

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

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

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

“You’re really old.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Gross.”

“That’s what I said!”

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

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

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

“We can move them?”

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

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

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

“Babies don’t walk, they swim.”

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

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

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

“I know.”

“So, what next?”

“Make a Farming Plot where I indicated.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then another System message appear:

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

>Items>Tools

—Stone Rake (Workbench)—

Grants Tilling skill and increases minion Farming XP by 10%

Required Materials: Wood & Stone

—Stone Shovel (Workbench)—

Grants Digging skill and increases minion Farming XP by 10%

Required Materials: Wood & Stone

—Stone Trowel (Workbench)—

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

Required Materials: Wood & Stone

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

“Oooh, now we can make clothes!”

“Finally.”

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

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

“We can do that??”

“That's what farms are for...”

“Oh.”

“What did you think the farm was for?”

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

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

“I’m still a toad! In my heart!”

“You don’t have a heart...”

“In my core then!”

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

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

“I name thee, Farmer!”

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

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

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

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

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

“They’re getting smarter!”

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

“Have you seen the Forager?”

“I thought you noticed.”

“What?”

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

“Why didn’t you tell me!?”

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

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

“Huh.”

“What?” I asked.

“I didn’t know you could do that.”

“Really?”

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

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

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

“I’ll make do for now.”

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

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

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

“This makes no sense.”

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

“How long before they’re done growing?”

“A few hours, I’d say.”

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

“That’s weird.”

“What is?”

“My minion count is still five.”

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

“Frog-it!”

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

“Oh no! Now it’s down to four.”

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

“Ah, turd,” Imu said.

6 — ¿Goose'd Again?

“Why does *this* keep happening??”

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

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

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

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

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

“That's really bad!”

“Yeah... obviously...”

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

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

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

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

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

[*Crafting List*]

>*Structures*>*Walls*

—Garden Fence (Workbench)—

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

Required Materials: Wood

—Stone Dyke—

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

Required Materials: Stone

—Simple Wall (Workbench)—

A simple wooden wall for keeping predators away from your buildings

Required Materials: Wood

“Make the wall,” Imu advised.

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

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

“It did?”

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

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

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

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

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

“What now?” I asked.

“Now we should build the barn.”

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

[*Crafting List*]

>*Structures*

—Barn (Workbench)—

Enables Material Storage and Sorting

Required Materials: Stone & Timber

“Where should I put it?”

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

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

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

“What do you mean?”

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

“Oh... Sorry.”

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

Sorry...

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

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

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

“Soon that excuse won’t work.”

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

“This is too gruesome to watch...”

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

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

“What’s the next step?”

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

“Yay!”

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

“Not again!” I whined.

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

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

“Oh Hell! It evolved!” Imu announced, as he observed the Monstrosity through his bubble scope *thing*. “It’s now something called a Goose²!”

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

The Goose² paused its menacing roar and fire-breath combo to observe the minion, then its fire-breathing head reached down and grabbed one of the squashes, before flinging it high into the air and catching it on the way down, chomping greedily and violently, so the juices flew all around. It

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

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

And then it was blessedly gone.

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

7 — Evolution?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That’s disgusting.”

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

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

“Okay!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What? What is it??”

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

[*Evolution Requirements*]

Hamlet => Village

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

“Wow...”

“Yea...”

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

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

“What should I do first?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Well, actually... I... erm... hmmm.”

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

“That's weird.”

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

“What's that mean?” I asked.

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

“Is that good or bad?”

“I have no idea.”

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

Three of my youngest minions ran from the barn with their arms full of vegetables, tubers, and berries, all of which now grew in abundance from my fields and could be harvested twice per day. The short fence I'd made before evolving still stood awkwardly reaching out into the forest for five metres, and, for some strange reason, the monstrous Goose² had decided to perch on the wall every time it came seeking food in exchange for leaving my settlement alone.

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

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

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

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

“Uh oh.”

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

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

“If we give that Goose² *that* as an offering, we might get rid of it for good!”

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

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

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

8 — From Stone to Iron Age?

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

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

“Can’t I just make more?”

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

“Okay...” I replied, defeated.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Breeder!” I exclaimed excitedly.

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

“Okay...”

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

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

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

“Imu.”

“Yes?”

“I’ve changed my mind.”

“I know,” he replied sagely.

“Mayor’s House, here we come!”

[Crafting List]

>Structures

—Mayor’s House (Workbench)—

Unlocks the ability to evolve your oldest minion into a Mayor

Required Materials: Stone, Timber, & Wrought Iron

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

[Crafting List]

>Structures>Crafting

—Stone Forge (Workbench)—

Enables Ore Smelting, but lowers minion motivation in nearby structures

Required Materials: Stone

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

“Motivation? What’s that?”

“You really are a tyrant.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What’s wrong!?”

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

“I hate this System.”

“Me too, Toad. Me too.”

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

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

>Items>Tools

—Iron Forge-Hammer (Anvil)—

Grants Metal Shaping skill and increasing Forging XP by 50%

Required Materials: Wood & Iron

—Iron Metal-Cutter (Anvil)—

Grants Precise Forging skill and increases Forging Output by 25%

Required Materials: Iron

—Iron Tongs (Anvil)—

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

Required Materials: Iron

New Versions:

—Iron Axe (Anvil)—

Grants Woodchopping skill and increases minion Harvesting XP by 30%

—Iron Hammer (Anvil)—

Increases minion Building Speed and XP by 40%

—Iron Pick (Anvil)—

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

—Iron Rake (Anvil)—

Grants Tilling skill and increases minion Farming XP by 30%

—Iron Scythe (Anvil)—

Increases minion Foraging Speed and XP by 40%

—Iron Shovel (Anvil)—

Grants Digging skill and increases minion Farming XP by 30%

—Iron Trowel (Anvil)—

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

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

9 — Last Minion Standing?

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

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

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

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

"It's okay, I reabsorbed him."

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

"Why are you being so weird about this?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why do they keep dying?"

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

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

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

"Oh... They need water?"

"And something more than squash and cucumbers!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Only about half raised their hands.

“This is very depressing to watch.”

Raise your hand if you’re two days old!

About one-fifth raised their hands now.

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

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

“How do you plan to choose?”

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

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

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

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

“Erm... I can’t.”

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

The now-definitively-oldest of my minions walked casually towards the door of the house that was soon to be his, but before he went through the wooden door, he turned and looked at all the gathered minions who had been cheering him on moments prior. They all took a synchronised step back in blatant fear. They hadn't even feared the Goose² like this!

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

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

"I will hold you to that promise."

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

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

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

"How?"

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

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

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

"Nothing's changed," I said.

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

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

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

Get comfortable, you worthless scum!

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

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

“Imu... what *was* that?” I asked.

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

“Is that going to become a problem?”

“Let me try and contact their Support Staff.”

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

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

“What?”

“...It’s a human.”