Videogame Cats II: Van Kruglor

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Characters by Scott Ramsoomair

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By Aetre

Introduction:

Apparently, you people thought the first installment of my fanfiction for Scott Ramsoomair's comic, VG Cats, was pretty cool; I got lots of encouraging comments for it, both in email and forum post form.

So now I bring you this sequel. Again, it is done *with* Scott's expressed written consent (via email—hey, that counts as written), but I must include the standard fanfiction disclaimer nonetheless:

The characters Leo, Aeris, Scott / Pants Man, Krug / Van Kruglor, the Hobo, and the various cameo characters from *VG Cats* that appear in this story are Scott's creative property, not mine.

And I think that about covers it... So let's get started!

--Chapter One:

Toronto lay silent in the early morning hours, the city in a poorly balanced state between the nightlife and sunrise. What few people were out on the town by now were those with night jobs, and as such, the residential streets and sidewalks were completely vacant— well, not quite *completely...*

One shadowed figure crept his way through the side roads, every now and then stopping to hold a map up under a street lamp. He was careful enough not to expose his entire figure beneath the cone of light; he stood outside the boundary and simply extended his arm so that only the map and his hand (in a nondescript black glove) were illuminated.

He cursed to himself for not having studied the roads in daylight, but the Internet had street directions for every city in Canada, practically, and the simple printout had only led him astray twice in his search.

Now he was close... he could sense it. But with only an hour before the morning sun raised its yellow head, he would still have to hurry.

The apartment complex was two streets over. When the shadow got there, he checked the map again. The X was at Applegate Apartment Complex, Bldg. 1: Units 1A – 20A. This matched the sign in front of the building.

Good, thought the living silhouette. *Now to find 14A.*

When he saw that the main entrance required a key card to get in, he reached in his coat pocket and withdrew a metallic brick with several blinking lights on various parts of its exterior. On one of the long sides of the brick was the label, "Property of Dr. Daniel Doe, MD PHD DDS HTML PHP WMD ESQ. If found, please return to..."

The silhouette groaned. *Next time,* he mentally noted, *I've got to remember to lose the nametags. Secret missions are supposed to be secret, after all. Oh well. No point in turning back now...* He sighed. *I probably should just stick to lab work from now on.*

One of the two largest sides of the brick had lights, but the opposite side was flat metal. Dr. Doe touched this purely metal side to the access card swiper, and it deactivated instantly, unlocking the main door.

He had to go up a flight of stairs to get to 14A, but he found the apartment in less than a minute. The door was unlocked, but the hinges creaked a bit as he opened it.

Again, he took the brick and touched the metal end to the door. Suddenly, the hinges were as silent as if they had been oiled yesterday. Dr. Doe suppressed a chuckle to himself.

Only a very dim streak of light leaked into the room as Doe entered it, and this was only for a brief moment, since the mad scientist closed the door behind himself. He paused only to put on a pair of night-vision goggles, and then he surveyed the room.

Krug was asleep on a fold-out sofa bed. He was sprawled out on his back under a blanket, two cats resting their heads on him, one under each of the monster's arms, held close but not harshly to his chest as he snored.

Though nobody could possibly have been able to see Dr. Doe's facial expression in the dark, he smiled when he saw Krug. The doctor approached him in perfect silence, taking a nondescript collar from beneath his cloak.

He leaned over the bed, being very careful not to wake either Krug or the cats, and in a process that took about five minutes, snapped the collar below Krug's mouth. Once he was sure it was on, and that nobody had woke, Dr. Doe left the room as silently as he had come. Once outside, he snickered and took yet another object from his pocket: a remote control.

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Back inside the apartment, a red light blinked on Krug's collar. Next to that light, a small compartment opened, and a thin mechanical arm folded out. It had a speaker attached to its free end, and it maneuvered until it had placed this speaker in Krug's ear.

Krug was dreaming at the time... In his fantasy, all the fleshy ones of the world were praising him as he walked down a red carpet. A velvet robe hung from his shoulders, and a golden, bejeweled crown sat atop his head, between his horns.

The people broke into chant: "Krug! Krug! Krug! Krug!"

A man wearing a sash that read, "President," now came up to him and announced to the whole crowd, "Krug is now King!"

Everybody cheered.

The man then took off his sash and threw it over Krug, saying, "And President, too! Krug is now President!"

Everybody cheered again. Krug smiled, not only in his dream, but also on the sofa. How could this possibly get any better?

Then Krug heard a voice in his ear. "Krug," it said, "Come to me..."

Krug, not aware that he was speaking aloud in the real world, and also not realizing he was wearing a collar equipped with a speaker and microphone, said, "If Krug come, Krug be King?"

Dr. Doe was a bit surprised by this response, but he answered, "We'll see... But only very good monsters get to be King."

"Krug a good monster..."

"Then come to me. I will tell you where to go."

Leo and Aeris both woke up when Krug stood suddenly and walked out the door. The monster moved in a classic sleepwalking / zombie position, his arms in front of him as he repeated to himself in a low drone, "Krug is now King... Krug is now King..."

In the house's bedroom, Scott was having a dream of his own. When Leo and Aeris came in to try and wake him, he was talking in his sleep.

Scott: (*asleep*) Pants Man now King... Pants Man now King...

Aeris: (*whispering, but somewhat loudly*) Scott. Scott! Wake up!

Scott: (*waking up, looking with blurred vision at Aeris*) Are you the Panties Princess? Gonna be my Pants Queen?

Aeris: (*sigh, then sarcastic, no longer whispering*) No, Scotty, I'm just a Toad. Your Princess is in another castle. She's been kidnapped by giant turtles for God-knows-what reason, and it's up to two plumbers to save her.

Scott: Oh. Well, sucks to be her. (*falls back asleep, starts snoring*)

Leo: (*to Aeris*) Well? What should we do to wake him up?

Aeris: Hm, it'll take something drastic at this point...

Three minutes later, Scott has headphones on, which are connected to his computer on the desk beside the bed. Leo clicks a mouse button.

From the cats' point of view, they can both hear the muffled sounds of the headphones playing "Badger Badger Badger" on repetitive loop.

Scott: (*singing along as he sleeps*) Badger badger badger badger, mushroom mushroom...

A few seconds later, Scott leaps up instantly and yells:

"OH MY GOD! IT'S A SNAKE! KILL IT! KILL IT!"

Leo clicked the mouse again, and the music stopped. Scott realized he was wearing headphones and standing on his bed. The first emotion to hit him, of course, was confusion. He looked toward the computer, where Leo was rolling on his back, laughing his little feline head off, saying, "See? I told ya it'd work!"

"I'll admit, that was a good idea," said Aeris. She was on the floor, eying her owner with amusement, but at least not mockery.

Said Scott in a monotone, "There had better be an explanation for this, and I'm afraid April Fool's Day has already passed for the year."

Leo regained his composure and said, "Yeah, there's an explanation."

"Krug's gone," said the cats together.

Pause.

"Like, gone missing, or what?" asked Scott.

"He just got up and sleepwalked out the door," said Aeris. "He was saying something about being King."

Pause.

Said Scott decisively, "This does *not* explain the badger song."

"Sorry," said Leo. "But at least it woke you up."

Aeris: Shouldn't we do something? Y'know, chase after him? Call the police? He only left five minutes ago; we could probably catch up to him.

Leo: Yeah! Let's get him back here before he gets lost in the neighborhood.

Scott: (*yawn*) You cats have way too much energy for this time of morning. Tell ya what. Leo, call the Commissioner's office—it's speed dial 2—He won't be there, but at least I can say I left him a memo. Aeris, get my keys... We'll search for him for a little while. And in the future, let's get him some treatment for that sleepwalking thing, okay?

Cats, together: Okay.

--Chapter Two: The Experiment Continued

Krug listened to the directions from the speaker in his ear, and eventually the words led him to a car. He hopped in the back and closed the door. This whole time, he had still been sleeping. He woke up the instant the car sped off, though, now aware that he was no longer home—and there were no cute kitties resting their heads on him, anymore.

He was in the back seat of a small four-door sedan, and there was only one other person there, as far as he could see. It took Krug a moment to recognize his old Master, but the lab coat eventually gave him away.

Dr. Doe had parked his car on the side of the freeway, not daring to let his license plate number be seen in residential streets. Now that he had Krug in the back, he sped off down the road and advised over his shoulder, "You might want to put your seatbelt on."

Krug did not even know what a seatbelt was, but he found this out in short order, since the belt wrapped around him automatically, locking itself—and the monster—in place with a simple click.

Doe took an offramp and went onto a quiet road that ran through the Canadian forest. The sun was just about to come up, and the mad scientist wanted to be safely away before anyone would have the chance to discover Krug's absence.

Without warning, Doe went offroad and wove his way through trees and underbrush. Eventually he stopped dead in his tracks and pushed a button on his dashboard. A mechanical whirring sound started, and the ground below the car lowered until it was in an underground tunnel. The second Doe drove off down this tunnel, the machine that had lowered the car reversed itself, thus keeping the entrance hidden.

Fluorescent lights led the way until the road reached a dead end at what would have looked, were it aboveground, like a garage—which was exactly its function to Dr. Doe.

When the scientist stopped in front of the steel garage door, he rolled down his window. A random voice, the source of which was not easily identifiable, said, "What is the password?"

"'This is not the police.'"

The door opened. Doe chuckled and looked back at Krug. "Heheh. Get it? 'This is not the police?' Because if it were the police, they would have to say so; it's required by law."

Evidently, the joke was lost on Krug, for he just sat still, expressionless as ever. Doe shrugged it off and drove into the garage, parked, and stepped out. When Krug's seatbelt automatically unfastened itself, the monster stepped out, too. The pair walked through a door that was labeled, "Main Laboratory." With the door still open, they stood at the entryway for some time.

"Here we are," announced the scientist at last. He turned around and asked Krug, "Remember the place?"

Krug remembered it, alright. For almost three years, he had lived there. He even knew that his own creation had been in this lab somewhere, though Dr. Doe had never told him the particulars of the scientific process that had spawned him.

Looking into the room from just inside the doorway, Krug surveyed the scene: fluorescent lighting, three large, metal tables, each covered with beakers and flasks full of different substances, curiously labeled with terms Krug did not understand—among them, "Nitroglycerin," "Retroglycerin," and several containers of a yellow liquid simply named, "Spooge $_{TM}$."

To the left of the experiment tables stood the large cage where Krug had spent his days when he first lived here. A door on the far side of the lab, through which the monster had never gone, was marked, "DANGER! Authorized Personnel Only."

"Why you bring Krug back?" Doe's creation asked.

"Because I had to save you," said the doctor, turning around and standing uncomfortably close in front of Krug. "Those people who kept you... They wanted to civilize you... They wanted to take away your primal instinct and turn you into something... closer to *human*."

Doe ignored whatever irony existed in his own disgust for *homo sapiens* and continued, "They wanted to remove everything animal about you—everything I slaved for three years to create!"

In a move that caught Krug rather by surprise, Doe embraced the furry creature and embedded his head in the red hairs, holding tightly.

"I can't let them do that to you, Krug. You're my most successful experiment ever—an even better invention than Spooge $_{TM}$. Oh, the amount of Spooge $_{TM}$ I would have given to have you back, my one, my only, my *baby*!"

Krug's eyes opened a bit wider. "Uh, Master..."

"Yes?"

"Krug don't swing that way."

Doe laughed and released Krug from his grip, taking a few steps toward the marked door across the room.

"No no no, I didn't mean anything like that," said Dr. Doe. "But Krug, I had to get you back somehow. You see, I had not truly finished my experiment before The Firm asked me to—ahem—lend them your services. I still have work to do, and you are a most important factor in the completion of this project."

Dr. Doe opened the door and said, "Come with me, if you please."

Krug followed, saying as he walked, "But that is the Forbidden Room."

Doe laughed yet again. "So you remember! I did order you not to go in there, now, didn't I? Well, let's see... It says 'Authorized Personnel Only' may enter, so from now on, consider yourself authorized to come and go as you please through this room."

Krug always appreciated it when Master gave him permission to do new things; it was usually a reward for being good—

Then Krug remembered the lesson he had learned, though: the Fleshy Ones who claimed to be "good" in his recent adventure had in fact been evil. Could Master possibly be an Evil Fleshy One as well?

Krug shook his head as he entered the No-Longer-Forbidden Room. He did not know the answer to the question in his mind, but he would keep this concern as somewhat of a precautionary measure, anyway.

This room was much bigger than the main laboratory. The door actually opened out onto a bridge—more of a catwalk, really—that spanned the distance across several boiling vats one story below them. On the other side of the bridge was a large mainframe computer.

Doe spread his arms out to indicate the vats on either side of him as he strode across the catwalk. "Look at all this, Krug. This is where my latest materials are developed— sometimes they hold chemicals, other times lifeforms... You were born in one of these vats, in fact.

Krug examined the vats closer. All were uniformly sized: circular, about three meters in diameter, and at least a meter off the ground. Though the steam rose well above the catwalk, there was no odor from any of the containers.

Dr. Doe reached the mainframe computer and voiced his access code through the microphone.

"Still not the police," he said.

Lights buzzed everywhere as the system turned on. Doe looked back at Krug, who was still only halfway across, leaning over the railing to inspect the vats.

"Come now, Krug," said Doe. "Let us finish this experiment."

Krug looked up. "What you going to do to Krug?"

"I'm going to give you the one thing you never really had: scientific intelligence."

This was not enough; Krug had to know whether the plan was good or evil. "Why?"

Dr. Doe sighed. "So that you can replace me, Krug."

The monster looked confused, so the doctor explained, "Like most mad scientists, you see, I am a misanthrope at heart. I know there are two animals on the face of this earth whose *removal* would be beneficial to nearly every other creature on the planet. The first of these is mosquitoes, and the second is humankind. If either of these two were to disappear completely from existence tomorrow, the rest of Earth would be grateful for their departure and would not suffer any ill effects in the food chain. So I have concluded that, for the greater good of life on this planet, all humans must die."

He sighed a second time, then went on. "Unfortunately, I am myself one of the same species I mean to terminate, and so I must terminate myself at some point. And that, Krug, is where you come in.

"I am going to give you intelligence in the matters of science, but that is not all I will give you: I will give you a taste of my insanity. It will make you ambitious beyond reason. You will want to achieve great things, and you will start by overthrowing your own Master.

"Every one of these vats is now filled with a strong acid. If and when I should fall into one of them, I will die... The death will be slow, painful, and, if I may say so, reminiscent of quite a few cheap superhero comic books."

"But Master would be dead and I would not get to eat him..."

Doe concealed something behind his back with his left arm and walked up to Krug. "You wouldn't want to eat me, Krug. I'm all skin and bones, with a little bit of cancer on the side from all those years I spent in radiation study. Trust me, you'd better throw me over the railing."

Without warning, Dr. Doe took his left arm from behind his back and planted a syringe in the middle of Krug's forehead. Krug had no time to react, because the chemical injection took effect immediately, causing his brain to spin until he no longer felt like himself...

Krug came to in a matter of minutes, amazed to find he was still standing on the bridge.

Dr. Doe was standing quietly two meters away, smiling his asymmetrical grin for the last time.

"Well?" said the scientist.

"That HURT!" said Krug.

"Think fast," said Dr. Doe. "What is the fifth element on the Periodic Table?"

"Boron," said Krug, not flinching until after he had said it.

"And how many species does it take to genetically engineer a Krug?"

"Ninety-two." Krug gasped at his new-found knowledge.

Dr. Doe took three steps toward Krug and stopped right in front of his face. "And what are you going to do now?"

Krug thought about this for a second. "I'm going to breed an army of Krugs and destroy humanity. Then I will be King of the Krugs! Krug will be KING!"

Dr. Doe blinked, thinking, *Maybe I gave him a bit of an overdose on the "ambition" part. Oh well. Should make things more interesting, even if I'm not around...*

"But what must you do first?" asked the mad scientist.

Krug picked him up by his shirt collar with one hand. "First, Fleshy One, you die."

Dr. Daniel Doe had about one second of airtime to appreciate the success of his now-completed experiment. Then he landed in scalding acid.

Krug walked toward the computer, contemplating whether Master's scheme were really good or evil. No, he decided, the whole thing was neither good nor evil, since in the realm of insanity, the concept of morality has no place.

One of the buttons on the computer read, "Press to Start," so he pressed it.

The computer's voice, which was identical to the one that had greeted the car outside the garage previously, said, "Welcome. Who is this?"

Krug forgot the password and said, "I Krug."

Said the computer, "Is Dr. Doe deceased?"

"Yes."

"Good," said the pleasant, mechanically androgynous computer voice. "I never liked that

fucker anyhow."

Krug raised an eyebrow. *What kind of computer* is *this?* he thought. "Pardon?"

"Nevermind. Anyway, Dr. Doe wanted me to tell you that once you have attained superior knowledge of science, you were no longer to be known as 'Krug.' Your name is now 'Dr. Van Kruglor.' It sounds more professional, and yet it's still evil in that East-European mad scientist style."

Krug liked the sound of this. "Does Dr. Van Kruglor get a lab coat and nametag?" he asked; he had always thought those things came with the title of Master, much like a crown befitted a king...

"Naturally. You'll find them in your new closet. Up the stairs, first door on the right."

Krug was about to ask where the stairs were, but a set automatically lowered itself from the ceiling.

"I operate all the machinery here," said the computer. "And I am at your beck and call, should you ever need anything."

The monster walked halfway up the stairs, turned around, and asked, "What did Master do to you that make you not like him?"

Said the computer, "Well, you knew the guy, didn't you? Wasn't he just crazy beyond all explanation?"

Krug could not argue with that, so instead he said, "Kruglor going to try to take over the world. That not make Kruglor insane, does it?"

"Oh, I should think it's perfectly normal for an inhuman red furball of doom such as yourself. But a forty-something human with countless degrees of academic merit, who then goes and tries to end human life as we know it by creating said inhuman red furball of doom and then committing suicide? You've got to be fucking kidding me. The guy was a loon."

"Mm." Krug nodded and continued up the stairs. He was confused right now, but soon he would be planning... There were so many things for him to do...

--Chapter Three: Darjeeling

(The Toronto City Police Commissioner is sitting at his office desk, yelling into his phone's intercom. A pink iMac has replaced his normal computer.)

Commissioner: WHAT THE HELL IS THIS, BERTHA? When I said we needed new computers to replace the Windows 95 crap, I didn't mean I wanted PINK IMACS! Who ordered these?

Bertha: (*almost monotone, over the speaker*) These used to belong to a local elementary school. They donated their old supply when their new computers came in, and the government said it'd be better to recycle.

Commissioner: Are you telling me that the state gives *elementary* schools priority over Toronto's Finest?

Bertha: That's what you get for voting a liberal in office.

Commissioner: Oh, now don't even get me started on politics…

Bertha: (*nonchalant*) I know, I know. It raises your blood pressure. However, there's a bit of good news.

Commissioner: I'm listening.

Bertha: Because a lot of the police officers have already been complaining about the new computers, the mayor said we'll get new ones in three weeks or so, and he promised they'd be Windows. In the meantime, we'll just have to use these ones, I guess.

Commissioner: What happened to the older ones?

Bertha: They were donated to some kindergarten program the city library's doing.

Commissioner: (*sigh*) Whatever. Just as long as all the confidential reports and stuff were erased.

Bertha: Yeah, Dave took care of that.

Commissioner: Good. Anything else you'd like to tell me this morning?

Bertha: Pants Man sent an email and said he'd be in to see you soon. He didn't specify an appointment time, though.

Commissioner: Okay. I'll go tell the guys about the computers and be back in five minutes.

Bertha: Sounds like a good idea. They're all waiting outside the office for an explanation.

Commissioner: (*stands up*) Crap...

The Commissioner walked out of the office, passed Bertha's secretary desk—she looked up over the rim of her glasses and gave him a smirk as he strode by—and finally, out into the hall.

Fifty police officers crowded the small space, all of them talking amongst themselves

until they noticed the Commissioner.

"Okay, everyone. I guess you're all wondering about the new computers."

Various words to the affirmative greeted this statement.

"We're getting new ones in a few weeks. Right now, we'll all just have to work with the iMacs."

There were several groans, until one random voice shouted, "Can I keep the pink computer when the new ones come? I kinda like it..."

Answered the Commissioner, "Shut up, Julian. And no."

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A few minutes later, the Commissioner was back at his desk, mumbling to himself and turning the computer on. It took him a while to get used to the new interface, but eventually he got to his email. There was a message from pantspantsrevolution at coldmail.com, which contained a .zip file of 15KB.

The Commissioner raised an eyebrow. "Only fifteen kilobytes? Hmph, must be losing weight..."

He downloaded and unzipped the file, whence a tiny sprite of Pants Man appeared on his screen. The Commissioner turned on his speakers.

Pants Man looked around. "Love what you've done with the place. New mac?"

"Yeah. So what's the news?"

"One second."

Pants man leaped out of the screen, flew over the Commissioner's shoulder, and landed next to the back wall. He straightened his cape and turned around.

"You've gotta show me how you do that," said the Commissioner.

Pants Man looked at the computer and laughed. "Ha! Nice color choice, Chief." Then he took a hint at the groan response and moved to the other side of the desk.

"I came here because Krug is missing, and I'd like to run a general search of the Toronto area. But keep it discreet, okay?"

"Missing? Krug? Pants Man..." His voice was rising in volume, but he lowered it to emphasize his point: "I told you that monster was too unpredictable."

"Relax, it's just a sleepwalking thing. He got up in the middle of the night and left. At any moment, he could just come back, for all I know. Or he could be lost somewhere. I thought you should know, of course, but really... it's not like he's going to go on another killing spree anytime soon."

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(*Krug sits back in a swivel chair in front of the mainframe computer. All of the vats in the room are bubbling. Krug is reading a book titled,* Recipe for Diabolical Monstrosities, by Dr. Daniel Doe. *Krug flips a page.*)

Krug: This book is fascinating. Directions for making whole Krug in here!

Computer: Yes, that was kind of the point.

Krug: Wait... Master wrote here, "I think this is all that is necessary, but I cannot help but think I'm missing an ingredient." What does that mean?

Computer: Probably means he didn't include sanity.

Krug: Ah. Well, that make sense.

(*An egg timer goes off on a table next to the vats below.*)

Krug: Coolies! Krug army almost done, ready for last stir!

(*He runs to the regular lab and searches through the cupboards.*)

Krug: One last thing necessary: Fur Powder, for that furry cuddliness Krug so know and love.

(*The bottles in the cupboard are labeled, "Mercury," "Spooge," "Chicken Pox," "Fur Powder," and "The Missing Ingredient."*)

Krug: (*picks up the last two on the list*) Hmm...

He put Fur Powder in every vat and stirred well. Then, in the last vat, he added a handful of The Missing Ingredient. He would only put it in this one for now... just to see if it turned out differently.

After two more hours of preparation, the egg timer dinged for the last time that day.

"Okay, it is time!" he shouted to the computer. "Drain the vats!"

The steaming liquid lowered in all of the vats and eventually disappeared. In the middle of each one, all that remained was a very small, wet, but nonetheless unmistakable Krug, lying so still as to be lifeless.

"Give them the injection of life!"

Amid a loud whir of machinery, thirty syringes lowered on mechanical arms from the ceiling. Each one fine tuned itself to match up with a Krug, and when the whole thing was over with, the arms retracted themselves into the ceiling.

Eventually, all of the monsters stood up and looked around themselves, confused. Krug noticed that the one that had been given The Missing Ingredient looked no different from the rest.

Granted, each one looked a little unique, if only because their fur appeared in different colors. Some were blue, some were yellow, some were green... but interestingly enough, none were red, like the original Krug. The Missing Ingredient one was the only purple monster in the room.

Krug addressed his minions from his perch on the catwalk, and they all looked up at him to listen.

"Greetings, fellow monsters! You are all my creations, and I am Krug, your King!"

Instantly, every monster chanted in unison, "Krug is now King! Krug is now King!" Well... almost every monster chanted. The purple one just looked confused. Krug decided to ignore this for the second.

"We will train for a great mission, and we will kill all the fleshy ones! Fleshy Ones bad! But they tasty to eat."

The chant rose up again. "We kill Fleshy Ones!" Again, the purple one abstained from the chorus.

Krug: Why Purple One no answer?

(*All the monsters look in the corner at Purple.*)

Purple: (*British accent*) Oh, I just find this rather barbaric, really. You are saying we should eat the flesh of living beings... Isn't that cruel? Why don't we discuss this over a nice spot of tomato soup and Darjeeling, hmm?

Krug: (*squints*) This no son of mine... (*checks the label on The Missing Ingredient jar*). Oh, no wonder; this is artificial sweetener... (*walks back toward mainframe computer*).

Purple: Well now, I honestly don't see why you should disown me for speaking common sense. Tsk tsk, old chap; don't count it against a li'l guy like me that I got heart. All I'm saying is, we monsters have a grand opportunity to help all lifeforms exist in harmony and peace, and—

(*Krug presses a button on the computer. A flame shoots up in Purple's vat, and the next moment, he's nowhere to be seen.*)

Krug: So what are we going to do?

Monsters: Kill Fleshy Ones!

Krug: And who is your King?

Monsters: Krug! Krug! Krug is now King!

Krug smiled. If there were four greater words in any language, he did not know them.

--Chapter Four: The Kingdom

Krug prepared more of the recipe, until there were no more ingredients left with which to make the furry monsters. In the end, there were fifty-seven of them, plus Krug. For the next two weeks, this army developed and grew.

The laboratory cage Krug grew up in was far too small for all of the monsters, so they moved the vats into a storage area one room over and used the Creation Room, as it was now called, to eat, sleep, and train.

Dr. Doe had constructed the room so that the computer could automatically morph the place to activate different "training simulations." The whole setup really was impressive; with one press of a button, gears would whir and props would rotate and descend from the ceiling until the entire room resembled a certain environment the army might come across in their travels.

At the moment, the Urban Simulation was implemented, and all fifty-seven monsters were crammed on a monorail tour through would-be streets and alleys while a tape recording played in the background.

Said the computer's voice on the playback, "And to your right, you will see what's called a 'parking lot.' It is best to avoid attacking here, because it is a wide, open space where you will not be well protected."

The creatures let out a chorus of "Ooh's" and "Aah's." One of them even took a flash photograph. Then the monorail continued forward on the street and eventually rounded a corner. It stopped next to a sleeping hobo with a paper bag on his head and a flask of whiskey in one hand.

"This is a homeless bum," said the recording. The hobo woke up and looked straight at the monsters. "These are a terrible source of food, but the good news is, they won't fight back unless you try to take their drink."

The monster wielding the camera took a photo of the hobo, just as the bearded man stood

up and wondered aloud, "Wha's goin' on? Have-eh Martians come fer mah booze?"

Every member of the army shook its head emphatically, not wanting to scare the hobo into fighting.

"Oh, okay. Carry on, then." He laid back down and went to sleep, snoring loudly as the monorail continued.

Above them, Dr. Van Kruglor stood in full laboratory uniform, watching their daily exercises as he talked with the computer.

"Where did that one get the camera?" the machine asked when another flashbulb went off.

"Krug give to him so they can study pictures later."

The monorail cart pulled up on a human who was tied to a pole, hands behind his back and head in a burlap sack.

"This is Billy Everyteen," said the recorded tour guide.

The entire cart full of Krugs waved and said, "Hi, Billy."

From beneath the sack, they heard a muffled, "Where am I? What's going on?"

Said the recording, "Billy has a problem right now. He's tied up, or in-ca-pa-ci-ta-ted." The recording paused while the monsters took out their notepads and simultaneously wrote their own misspelled versions of the word, "incapacitated."

"Isn't that right, Billy?" asked the tape.

"Yeah..."

A green monster at the front of the cart pointed at Billy and announced, "You have taken big first step and admit you have problem."

Then the tape continued. "Fleshy Ones are best eaten when they are incapacitated like Billy, here. So if you see a Fleshy One and want to eat him or her, first try to tie them up, knock them out cold, or otherwise make them unable to fight back.

"Now, who wants to be our first volunteer to eat Fleshy One incapacitated?"

Every monster raised his hand, jumped up and down, and shouted in chorus, "Ooh, me! Me! Me!"

Krug turned to face the computer and said, "They very good students. Chip off the ol' Krug, in fact."

Computer: You mean, "Chip off the ol' Van Kruglor," Doctor.

Van Kruglor: Yes, yes. Of course.

(*In the background, a door on the side of the monorail cart opens, and the monsters spill out of it in a rush toward Billy on the pole. There is much screaming, but the computer and Van Kruglor continue their conversation as though nothing is happening.*)

Computer: It is important you remember your role in this, you know... If you want to succeed, that is.

Van Kruglor: But Krug thought Shiny Computer thought scheme was crazy...

Computer: Y'know, I did. But then again, I'm looking at these little guys and thinking about the only "human" I've ever known, and I have to think, a little bit of destruction and chaos might be necessary. Besides, even though my eyesight is limited to the security camera input, I think these li'l fellas are kinda cute.

(*Below, one of the yellow monsters gets out from under the pile of fur and runs off carrying something with both hands, screaming "I've got an arm! I've got an arm!"*)

Van Kruglor: (*beaming with pride*) Yeah, they're adorable, aren't they?

Computer: So have you thought ahead to how you're going to take over the entire world with only fifty-seven soldiers?

Van Kruglor: Krug only not make more because Krug run out of ingredients. So when Krug take over Toronto, Krug find more ingredients, and army become bigger.

Computer: You know, you *could* just make some female monsters. Did that ever occur to you?

Van Kruglor: But there no directions for how to make female Krug in recipe book.

Computer: Theoretically, you should be able to do it; just add one X chromosome, take out one Y, and that's it.

Van Kruglor: Okay, when Krug get more ingredients, Krug try that.

Computer: So do you think these guys are ready to handle downtown Toronto?

Van Kruglor: Krug not see why not. All they have to learn is how to beat police, who have guns.

Computer: More easily said than done, probably.

Van Kruglor: That why Krug attack police station as first target. Big surprise! They never suspect a thing!

Computer: Good. And with the police out of your way, is there anyone who could stop you?

Krug squinted in anger and tensed his entire body as he said, "Pants Man would be only one left. Last time, Pants Man prove even match for Krug, but this time..."

The computer waited in anticipation. "Yes? This time?"

"This time, Krug know where Pants Man lives!" He smiled evilly, his fangs protruding over his lower lip.

Asked the computer, "Do you plan on taking your army there after you see the police, then?"

"No... This... This is personal. Krug go today to teach Pants Man lesson. Krug drive over at nightfall—"

"It's almost nightfall now."

"Good. Krug going to drive over, then. Meantime, Shiny Computer keep little ones occupied."

"Gladly."

The simulation changed to a forest setting on the floor below, and new props dropped in to replace the old ones. Only the monorail stayed in place, once again refilled with the monsters, each waiting eagerly for the next lesson.

--

Leo and Aeris looked out the bedroom window in shock. They saw the car doing circles in the grass, and both by now had recognized the driver.

"Why... is Krug wearing a lab coat?" ventured Aeris.

"I... have no clue..."

The voice from below cried out, "WOO! KRUG DO PROPERTY DAMAGE! KRUG REALLY TEACH FLESHY ONES LESSON NOW!"

Then, just as suddenly as Krug had appeared, he left.

"I got the license plate letters," said Leo.

"So did I. 'KRGSKNG.' But what could this all mean?"

Scott came home and walked straight up to the circle, noticing a partly crumpled post-it note that had been left on the scene.

He was just thinking about how two weeks had passed with no sign of Krug, and how the search would continue regardless, and how Toronto nightclubs had really gotten better lately...

But then he picked up the note.

"KRUG KEEL FLESHY ONES (that means j00.)"

Scott blinked and thought aloud as he entered the apartment and was greeted by two very confused cats at his feet.

"This can't be good," he said.

--

Meanwhile, back at the lab...

Computer: You did car circles in the apartment lawn?

Van Kruglor: Yep. Krug see that on Simpson's episode. It very funny and cruel at same time.

Computer: So wait, wait, wait. You *didn't* kill him and eat him?

Van Kruglor: Nope. That not good supervillain form. (*Holds up Dr. Doe's book*) Here is whole lesson: supervillain must foolishly announce plan to hero and give him chance to fight. Otherwise, things get boring.

Computer: But that's just Dr. Doe's directions; Doe was an idiot!

Van Kruglor: Please do not insult Master...

Computer: Feh. Trust me on this, Doctor: if you want to win, you have to be ruthless. You have to be a *monster*.

Van Kruglor: So should Krug go back and eat Fleshy One?

Computer: Not now, no. He's probably hiding somewhere or at least has a defense system set up. You won't get a second chance of attacking him at his home.

Van Kruglor: (*nods*) We attack the police tomorrow. If Pants Man show up, then I be ruthless.

--Chapter Five: Bad to the Bone

(*8-bit Leo's face appears on a green screen background a la* Bad Dudes *[NES, 1986]. His mouth opens and a series of "blip" noises follows. Leo's words pop up on the screen above his head.*)

Leo: The mayor has just been kidnapped by evil furry monsters. Are you a bad enough dude to rescue the mayor?

"Well? Are you?"

Aeris looked straight into Leo's eyes, though her paw strayed over to the remote control and muted the television.

"First of all," said she, "I'm not a dude. Secondly, that parody is horribly cliché. Thirdly, at a time like this, I'm far more worried about Scotty than any Mayor."

They had just heard the local noontime news: Police headquarters and City Hall were now overrun with flesh-eating miniature versions of Krug.

Pants Man had gone immediately in the morning—meaning, he sent himself in another email—to tell the Commissioner about Krug's message. Neither of the cats had seen or heard from their owner since...

--

Meanwhile, at police headquarters, three monsters—yellow, orange, and green—stood in front of one of the iMacs. The orange one clicked the mouse at random.

Computer: (*talking in a pleasant female voice via the speakers*) Welcome, Commissioner. What would you like to do today?

Monsters: (*in unison*) Ooooooooh...

Computer: There is one new email in your inbox.

(*Orange clicks a few times and tries to read.*)

Orange: "Download ThePants.zip..." (*clicks again.*)

Pants man came up on the screen and said, "Glad ya finally got around to it. Running a little slow today, are we?"

Then he looked up and realized he was not speaking to the Commissioner.

"The heck... Who are you guys? Did Krug get a family or something?"

Yellow: (*to Orange*) What is this thing?

Green: He cute little guy...

Orange: He look like he has shape of Fleshy One... Maybe we could eat him.

Pants Man: Uh... No. And if you don't mind my asking, where's the Commissioner?

Orange: All Fleshy Ones are in underground cages. We going to have barbecue. You want to join?

Pants Man: Wow, uh, no thanks. But while you're here... you wouldn't happen to know where Krug is, would you?

Orange: King Krug is at Mayor man's building. There going to be second barbecue and parade.

Green: (*cheerfully*) Little pixel man sure he does not want to come with us? There going to be free beer...

Pants Man: That does sound nice... but I gotta run. See ya later!

The hero dove into a file and sent himself through data block after data block until he reached the building's network. He had to find a way to reach the Commissioner... Presumably, the old man would still have some form of computer on him; the guy never traveled without a few electronic gadgets under his sleeve. Pants Man reached the communications center of the building and looked at what machines were connected to the main server. He saw more than fifty iMacs—ignored these—and one cell phone.

Gotcha, he thought. He did not want his body to exit out of the cell phone, though, lest he end up in the same physical predicament as the Commissioner—whatever that was. So he simply called out, and his voice registered as a buzz and a page on the Commissioner's phone in his shirt pocket.

The Commissioner risked a glance at the message; the monsters who had locked the entire station's officers in jail cells were now distracted, six of them looking over a book, six others brandishing sporks and waiting...

The message was simple. "PM to C. Are you okay?"

The Commissioner typed his message quickly. "C to PM. We are all in cells, locked. Our weapons were confiscated a while ago. I can get us out, but I don't have a way of fighting them to get free."

"Really? How did they catch ya?"

The Commissioner let out a deep sigh. "All I know is, one minute I was at my desk, and the next, twelve of these guys jump me and put me in handcuffs."

"Which you've gotten out of by now?"

"Of course. Half the officers have picked their locks by now. Nobody taught these monsters about 'keys,' apparently. The only reason we're locked in now is because the cell doors lock automatically when closed."

Pants Man wondered for a minute... the Commissioner was getting an awful lot of text across to him... These weren't exactly the brief "help, get me out of here" messages he had expected...

"Are they distracted now?" he asked.

"They're deciding how to cook us."

The Commissioner listened in on the debate for a second. The discussion was down to a Grill vs. Raw debate, since the votes for Deep Fry were clearly outnumbered.

"Ah. Well, if you can hold them for about five minutes, I could whip up something..."

"Don't bother. I've called in the army already. We'll be fine. But I'm hearing the monsters talk about the mayor... You might want to head over to City Hall. If what I'm hearing from these creatures is true, Krug's planning on taking the mayor hostage. If that happens, even the army won't be able to advance on them. You'll have to get in there and stop them."

"Okay. I'll do that."

"Oh, and one more thing."

"Yes?"

"Please don't keep any more monsters. This time, let's just kill Krug and get the whole mess done with."

"Yes, sir."

--

The Internet news feed was already reporting that the mayor's office had been taken, and there was a live public address in progress. Krug was using the Emergency Broadcast System, one part of which was accessible from City Hall, to override every television station and make a speech. Pants man had tuned in a few minutes late, but Krug was still speaking.

"Dr. Doe," he said, "had a vision, and Dr. Van Kruglor have vision, too. Krug going to be new Mr. Mayor man. All citizens of Toronto bow down before Krug! Er, that is, bow down before Dr. Van Kruglor! *King-Mayor Dr. Van Kruglor!* Yes, last version is best.

"Krug minions have Mr. Mayor man put away for the moment. But Kr—Van Kruglor going to eat Mr. Mayor man unless changes are made.

"First, all Fleshy Ones must come to big parade and barbecue in front of City Hall. There they will all line up and be eaten. Van Kruglor tired of Fleshy Ones who not want to be eaten." He pointed straight at the camera. "Fleshy Ones gonna get eaten and like it!

"City have twenty-four hours to comply."

Then the screen went blank.

Pants Man thought up a quick strategy, but for it to work, he would need some help...

--

Aeris was hard at work trying to find the "sent file" Pants Man had made on his email, but she was not having much luck.

Then, just when she thought the search was hopeless, an instant message popped up from PantsMan5000, and Aeris accepted it.

Pants Man sent himself as a file and jumped out of the computer screen, into the bedroom. Aeris turned around and stood on all fours on top of the desk.

"Scotty! Are you okay?"

"Yes... Where's Leo?"

"Playing on the old NES. Though how he can play games at a time like this is beyond me..."

"Oh. Well, I'll need you both for this..."

"Did you hear about the mayor? Krug came on TV after the news..."

"Yeah, and I gotta stop him, but I won't be able to do it alone."

Leo was in the middle of a random battle in the original *Final Fantasy*, thinking about how having a Level-40 Black Belt going into the second dungeon might be a bit extreme on the hours of sidequest—not to mention overkill on the forest imps—but one of these days, he was going to set foot across that bridge the king had just built... in what was supposed to be the first five minutes of gameplay.

Pants Man approached him from the side and said, "Save it and turn it off, please. I need your help."

"What with?" asked Leo as his character beat the daylights out of a spider on the screen.

Pants Man folded his arms and said, "The mayor has been kidnapped by evil furry monsters. Are you a bad enough dude to rescue the mayor?"

Leo gasped. Aeris rolled her eyes, but Pants Man winked at her. If anyone could put things into a context Leo could understand, it was him.

--Chapter Six: The Tangled Web We Weave, Part One

"I'm going back on the net," said Pants Man. "I'll try and hack into City Hall, or at least someplace close to it."

"But who'll open your file attachment when you send yourself this time?" asked Aeris.

"Nobody; I can always get in there myself, though, when I have to. How do you think I usually get back here when I don't leave by car? It's just an inconvenience, is all, to get past the firewalls in public servers."

"So what do we get to do?" asked Leo.

"I need help, and the police are busy, so that means you guys have to come with me."

Aeris began, "But..." and stopped herself there; it was Leo's job, not hers, to point out the obvious.

Leo picked up her thought immediately. "But we don't have your superpower. We can't just warp into the web like you can."

Pants Man knelt and patted each of the cats on the back.

"Sure you can," he said. "You've had just as much radiation as I have from the electronics in this house. Just do as I say: Close your eyes..."

The cats did this.

"Tap your hind heels together..."

Tap tap.

"And repeat after me: 'There's no place like homepage... There's no place like homepage...'"

Three seconds later, when they all still had their eyes closed, Aeris said, "I don't

remember you doing anything like this the first time you went into a computer. In fact, wasn't there a massive explosion?"

Answered Pants Man, "Well, back then, I just clapped my hands together and said a bunch of phrases I thought were either magic words or battle cries. Y'know, like, 'Ala Kazaam,' and, 'Remember the Alamo!' I think it was "For the porno!" that did it, but I'll never know for sure... The web works in mysterious ways."

Aeris was still confused, but she dropped the subject and asked, "Can we open our eyes now? I feel kinda weird..."

Pants Man opened his eyes first. "Yeah, go ahead."

The cats almost screamed when they saw each other. They were actually... *humanoid!* Leo wore jeans and a blue shirt with a jingle bell around the collar. Aeris also had jeans, and her top was a lavender turtleneck.

Pants man, standing next to them, was their same height. He offered an explanation before the cats even had the chance to ask any more questions. "I Made the clothes in Photoshop for ya. Hope you like 'em. We're on the desktop now, and we'll go online in a second. The things you see there may seem strange, but remember: none of them can harm you. Don't worry, I wouldn't bring you two into any situation that'd be too dangerous; I only ask your help right now because I really, really need it."

"We understand," said Leo.

Pants Man continued, "So remember that: the online world can't kill you. Can it cause excruciating pain? Maybe. Tear a limb off? Happens all the time. But none of the damage is permanent, and you'll be your old selves the second you come offline again. You *must* remember that."

Aeris raised both eyebrows—then wondered for a moment, because she never remembered having eyebrows before...

"Ooh, it's just like a videogame!" said Leo.

"Yes," the superhero agreed. That's a good way to think of it."

Aeris was about to point out that their mission was not a "game," and there were very real lives at stake... But Pants Man interjected before she could speak.

"Now, follow me, guys. We'll have to hurry through the Internet to stop Krug."

They ran across the desktop to where the Internet Explorer logo lay. It was big enough for all of them to stand on it, so they did this and looked down. Pants Man jumped and pounded the ground twice, and suddenly the logo turned into a vortex and sucked them in.

The world around them went black except for a computer keyboard image that hung in the air before them, easily within reach. Besides this, they could see only each other and what looked like an occasional shooting star in the distance.

"We're in the data stream," said Pants Man. "From here, we can access any server in the world. I've got to look up the number for City Hall's connection, but that won't take too long..."

He typed in a few search terms, and a series of possible entries appeared in white, serifed text in the space above the keyboard. Once he had what looked to be a true server number, he typed that in, and off they went to that address—it seemed a giant wind gust pushed them from behind, though actually, they were being pulled forward as if by an invisible magnet.

They came to a halt in front of an enormous (and very literal) firewall.

Pants Man: Okay, now we just have to get on the other side of that thing. Or rather, I do. You can see why I usually prefer people downloading and opening my file for me...

Leo: So if we're not going to go with you through the firewall to fight Krug, then what are we supposed to do?

Pants Man: I want you two to find out where Krug's hideout is. He has to have one, or else he wouldn't be making all these monster replicas of himself.

Aeris: How are we supposed to do that?

Pants Man: Krug used a very advanced computer to override the Emergency Broadcast System when he made his speech. The City Hall computers can access that system, but they can't do a total override of all the local networks. There has to be another system he's working from. See if you can use the Internet to trace the source of the earlier override. No doubt it's encrypted, but we're so embedded in the data right now, codes probably don't stand a chance against you. Good luck!

The hero ran off and jumped through the wall of fire. The cats could see him on the other side of the wall, rolling on an invisible ground to smother the flames.

Aeris and Leo looked at each other in confusion, neither one knowing where they should even begin...

--

Krug wore the "Mayor" sash over his lab coat with pride. It would go nicely, he decided, with the crown, once he got that. He sat in the mayor's office, leaning back in the swivel chair, thinking about the feast he would have that night when all the Fleshy Ones came for the ceremony...

Little did he know, at that very moment, most Toronto residents were leaving the city as quickly as they could, since Krug neglected to close the highways and streets leading out of the metropolitan area before making his public address.

His minions, however, were beginning to catch on to this, since they had found quite a lot of entertainment recently watching a television in the City Hall lounge, tuned in to an international news station covering the breaking crisis in Toronto.

A blue minion knocked on Krug's office door.

Van Kruglor: (*taking his feet down from the desk*) Ahem. His Majesty, the honorable mayor Dr. Van Kruglor bids you enter.

(*Blue walks in, a jester hat atop his head. He is carrying a bucket full of plastic balls.*)

Blue: Sire, there's news you should probably know about—

Van Kruglor: Wait, stop! What did Krug tell you about job of court jester?

Blue: (*sighs, puts down the bucket, picks up some of the balls, juggles, and dances.*) The Fleshy Ones still don't want to be eaten, Sire. They're leaving the city in droves, and the monsters are complaining there'll be a shortage of fleshy meat pretty soon.

(*He does some really impressive juggling, cascading the balls through his legs, over his back, even off the wall. He drops the balls, though, when he sees Krug's shadow loom over him as the larger red monster stands up.*)

Van Kruglor: (*yellow eyes aglow*) Tell the minions, it is time to hunt!

"Not so fast!"

The voice came from behind, so Krug turned around. Then, out from the monitor, jumped Pants Man, wielding a belt in his left hand and his signature Super Soaker 200 in his right.

"Panty-head Man!" Krug yelled. He backed up a step and said to the blue monster next to him, "Van Kruglor take care of this... Tell others, we begin hunt together when this Fleshy One is dead."

The blue one scurried off and closed the door behind him, leaving the bucket and balls in the room.

Krug took a pair of science lab goggles from one of his pockets, put them on, and said, "Dr. Van Kruglor have been making very special plans for you..."

--Chapter Seven: Neo and Trinity, Eat Your Hearts Out

Pants Man leaped over the desk and onto the central rug so that the furniture would not inhibit his movement. Then, he and Dr. Van Kruglor stared straight into each other's eyes as they stood in the middle of the rectangular room.

"What happened to you, Krug?" asked Pants Man. "You walk out of the apartment one night, and now this?"

"Krug not 'Krug' anymore," the monster ironically stated. "Krug is now 'Dr. Van Kruglor.' And now I am mayor and king of many little Krugs!"

"What do you want, 'Dr. Van Kruglor?' Why put Toronto through all this misery?"

"Van Kruglor glad Fleshy One asked that. Ahem:"

(*Krug goes to the wall and turns a dimmer switch until only a single white spotlight shows above him.*)

Van Kruglor: Krug was called by Master to come to Secret Hideout. There Krug learn he was made for special mission: to rid the world of Fleshy Ones! Krug eat many fleshy ones, but many Krugs eat many many Fleshy Ones! Master's dying wish was for Krug to rule over world and eat all Fleshy Ones. Dr. Van Kruglor now lives that dream, and it starts with Toronto! Van Kruglor is now mayor... Soon Van Kruglor will be King of all!

(*Dramatic pause.*)

Pants Man: Are you done yet?

Van Kruglor: Quite. (*turns the dimmer switch back to full lighting.*)

Pants Man: Good. (*lassos him with the belt, thus confining Krug's arms*) Now, come with me.

Van Kruglor opened his jaws and bit the belt in two pieces. Pants Man looked sadly at the remains of his lasso on the floor.

"That was genuine leather," said Pants Man. "Oh, you are *so* going to pay for that."

"Bring it, Briefs Boy," said Krug, adding to himself, "haha, Krug is awesome with quips."

Krug opened his mouth all the way and jumped toward Pants Man, covering the distance between them in that single bound. The superhero got one shot off from his squirt gun before he had to dive out of the way, recovering neatly with a roll while Krug smacked flat into the ground.

When Krug looked up, he saw his face in the reflection of a steel file cabinet and shrieked.

Pants Man patted his squirt gun. "Filled it with bleach this time," he said.

Krug, half of his face white from the shot, desperately held onto some form of reason as he stood, taking a few steps back from Pants Man. "Krug try to attack with brute force... But that is not the way of Dr. Van Kruglor. Fleshy one must be Pwned by Science!"

Krug reached into his lab coat and pulled out Dr. Doe's metal brick, touching the unlighted side to his face. The white fur turned red again in a matter of seconds.

Pants Man: What the hell...

Van Kruglor: It Dr. Doe's invention: The Deus Ex Machine. And Krug find it come in very handy!

Pants Man: No way...

Van Kruglor: Yes way!

Pants Man: No way!

Van Kruglor: See for yourself. (*tosses him the brick*)

Pants Man: Hm... (*touches the belt on the floor. The pieces come back together, and instead of leather, the belt is now made of chain links.*) Wow...

Van Kruglor: (*beaming with pride*) Told ya so. (*holds a hand out*)

Pants Man: (*puts the brick in his pocket*) Thanks!

Van Kruglor: Hey! Krug not say Fleshy One could keep it!

(*Pants Man lassos Krug again. Krug cannot bite through the chains. Pants Man then rapidly loops and ties the chain around one of the desk's legs and runs to the door. Krug gives chase but the chain pulls him back.*)

Pants Man: (*opens the door*) One down, who-knows-how-many to go.

(*Pants Man steps into the hall and closes the door. He is in a large circular parlor with dual staircases leading up to a balcony. Along the staircases and against the walls are several statues holding various weapons. Kudos to the reader for seeing the* Matrix: Reloaded *parody coming. Just when Pants Man takes a step, five monsters—blue, white, orange, and two green ones—enter through double doors below the balcony. They are all equipped with flame-thrower-like devices over their shoulders, and on the back of these devices—though Pants Man cannot see their backs yet—are the words, "Spooge* $_{TM}$ Shooter 5000."*)

Blue: Hmph. It is an ordinary Fleshy One in weird clothing. Shoot him!

(*The Krugs shoot a rapid-fire succession of thick yellow liquid spurts. Pants Man holds up the Deus Ex Machine, and the Spooge $_{TM}$ stops in midair in front of him. When the monsters find they are running low on ammunition, they stop firing, and the wall of Spooge $_{TM}$ falls to the ground in one disgusting SPLAT. The monsters then take the shooters off their backs and prepare for a more hands-on fight.*)

Blue: Okay, so maybe he has some skill... Or at least the Deus Ex Machine.

Pants Man: Let's call it "both."

Blue: Get him!

Pants Man took aim with his Super Soaker and hit one of the green monsters in the eyes with his first shot. The creature dropped to the ground immediately, giving in to the searing pain of industrial bleach against his cornea.

The rest of the monsters pulled out their trademark weapons, the sporks, and lunged after him. Pants Man flipped and lassoed the overhead chandelier with a spare belt from his cape, and he used this to swing over to the staircase on his right.

When he turned around, he saw twenty more monsters flood in through the doors on either side at the bottom of the stairway. Pants Man tried to hold up the brick to stop his pursuers, but a stray furry arm knocked it out of his hands, and it shattered into hundreds of pieces on the floor.

Pants Man had a split second to appreciate the irony in a "Deus Ex Machine" picking the perfect moment to destroy itself, but in the face of the monster before him, he had to think quickly.

He shot for the eyes at point blank, and the monster fell backwards, screaming in pain, causing a domino effect with the other monsters trying to climb the stairs. One after another they collapsed, unable to get up because they were trapped under each other's weight.

One of the blue monsters, however, had been smart enough to run up the other staircase, and now he wielded an ax taken off one of the displays along the walls and attacked Pants Man from behind.

Pants Man jumped the railing, but the ax swung and chopped off part of his cape before embedding itself in the wall. On the ground below, Pants Man took a brief look at the jeans wrapped around his neck, one leg of which was half as long as it had been seconds ago.

On the staircase, the blue monster smiled. "You see, friends, he is only... *Fleshy...*"

But at that moment, the police, led by the Commissioner, busted in through the doors above the balcony.

"Where is the mayor?" Pants Man demanded. Most of the monsters still had not gotten up.

"You will never find him!" answered one of the creatures on the floor. "Stupid Fleshy One will never guess that Mayor Man is in the cellar, through the meeting room, down one floor!"

All of the other monsters groaned in unison at their comrade's stupidity.

"What?" said the monster, "Was it something I said?"

"Thanks!" said Pants Man. He ran through the double doors below the balcony, leaving the police to take care of the monsters. He heard the first few gunshots fired as the doors closed, but he tried not to pay attention to all the screams.

He was in a large conference room, apparently laid out for some sort of celebration. Glasses of wine still lay on the table untouched—well, one was spilled. At the head of the table were the wine bottles, but seemingly out of place next to them, was a vodka cooler... Apparently one of the attendants had requested a different taste for the occasion...

Pants Man's eyes began to twitch, and his knees started shaking. He blinked a few times, and suddenly he was in the middle of a hallucination.

(*Cartoon vision. The cooler bottle hops down the table toward Pants Man. It talks by flipping its cap up and down as a mouth.*)

Vodka Cooler: (*deep, feminine voice*) Well hi there, sugar. You look parched...

Pants Man: (*takes a few steps back, shakes his head and closes his eyes. The hallucination goes away, and the room is in normal view again.*) No... No, I can't drink now... I have to save the mayor.

(*Pants man walks over to a door marked "Cellar" and cracks it open. The cooler voice calls over his back, though, and when he turns around, cartoon vision is restored.*)

Vodka Cooler: Aw, come on now, hon. You can't just up n' leave me for the police to take away. Just have a little sip...

(*The bottle flips its own cap off and jumps at Pants Man's face. He puts his hands up and says, "NOOOOOOOOO!" but the bottle lands right in his mouth, colliding with such force that it pins him against the door. As he gulps the liquid down, he sinks to the floor until he's sitting down, legs somewhat apart. The empty bottle drops to the ground in slow motion, and each bounce on the carpet resounds in an ominous "Thud." End scene*)

with a close-up of the bottle as it stops on the floor.)

--Chapter Eight: The Tangled Web We Weave, Part Two

The cats stayed outside the firewall for some time after Pants Man had left. Aeris fiddled with the floating keyboard and tried random searches, while Leo further acquainted himself with his new body...

"Check it out, Aeris! I can do a cartwheel!"

Sigh. "I'm so proud of you, now would you stop playing around and help me think? I need to know where to find the computer that hacked into this system..."

"Wouldn't it leave some sort of trail?" Leo asked while attempting a backflip—and winding up flat on this back as a result.

"Anyone smart enough to hack into this place is smart enough to cover their tracks..."

Leo got up and walked off the pain in his spine. "Well, that's all I got for ideas, so I guess I'll just walk around a bit and check this place out, if you don't mind."

"Don't go too far; if I find anything I'll yell for you."

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHH!"

"Yeah, like that, only with actual words..." Aeris then stopped typing and said, "Wait..." She turned around. "Leo?"

The gray cat was nowhere to be seen. The firewall gave surprisingly little light to the bleak surroundings, but Leo should have been visible anyway...

She tried again. "LEO?"

This time a soft voice answered. It sounded like an echo. "I'm down here."

"Down where?"

"I don't know, just follow my voice."

Aeris had by now picked up on the direction, so she started walking.

"Watch your step," said Leo, but too late.

Aeris fell right into a hole twice as deep as she was now tall. Feline instinct made her try to land on all fours, but this only succeeded in bruising her knees against a hard surface that cracked when she hit it—well, cracked a little more, because Leo's weight had already penetrated it.

"I think we found the hack," said Leo. "It's a huge tunnel."

Aeris stood carefully and brushed a few shards off her clothes and fur. "What *is* this stuff?" she asked.

Leo shrugged. "What would you expect an electronic world to be made out of?"

"Well, silicon..." and then it hit her. "This is hardened sand..."

"Probably made it easy to dig through." Leo smiled, reveling in his discovery of the hack.

"It doesn't make sense, though," said she. "Why wouldn't the computer on the other end of this connection dig through to the *other* side of the firewall? And why is the hole still open?"

"Hey, I think I found something else... But I can't see what it is. It's long, feels like a tube of some sort... Ooh, there's something at the end..."

A gush of water flew out at Aeris, washing every grain of sand from her in an instant, not to mention drenching her from head to foot.

Leo turned off the hose and put it back on the ground. "Oops. Sorry..."

Aeris: (*grunt*) That explains how whoever dug this tunnel got past the firewall... Let's follow it wherever it leads and hope we don't run into anyone in the dark. Oh, and one more thing.

Leo: Yes?

Aeris: Mind if I dry myself off real fast?

Leo: Be my guest.

Aeris: (*after brief hesitation*) Um... Could you turn around? I need to take my shirt off a sec."

Leo: (*squinting one eye*) Why would I need to turn around? You never had a shirt in the real world and it didn't bother you.

Aeris: (*unsure*) But... I don't know, it's just... different now. Please?

Leo: (*shrugs and turns around. Camera view to his face.*) Fine, but I still can't see the point. I mean, it's not like the shirt's hiding anything but fur. And no offense, but even though Scott made us humanoid, he didn't exactly give you enough 'feminine' humanoid features to warrant 'hiding' anything, anyway. In fact, I think you're as flat as I am—

(*Goosh*.)

(*Aeris, her shirt slightly drier than Leo's, drops the hose back to the ground*.)

Leo: Hey! What was that for?

Aeris: For not knowing when to keep your mouth shut. (*starts walking down the tunnel*) Come on.

(*They walk, camera view looking at their faces. The area is so dark, soon only the eyes are showing. For a moment, Leo's eyes disappear as if closed, but in fact, he is taking off his shirt to wring it out. Aeris sighs and looks away when she hears the* squish *of the water coming off the shirt, but they keep walking. Leo slows down for a second, then catches up with Aeris when she looks back for him. A second* squish *is heard*.)

Aeris: Didn't you dry your shirt already?

Leo: Well, you got my pants, too...

Aeris: (*looks away, angry-eyed*) Ew, Leo! That's just sick!

Leo: Don't worry, Scott gave us underwear, too.

(*Ten seconds later, a third* squish *is heard. Aeris, still angry, looks Leo straight in the eyes*.)

Leo: (*feigning innocence*) Whaaaaaaaat?

Aeris: Leo, if we survive this godforsaken tunnel to stop Krug's godforsaken plan somehow, remind me to kill you when we get home.

Leo: Fair enough, I'll put them back on. (*sounds of him putting on the three articles*) Sheesh, you act like because we're humanoid in a simulation, we suddenly have to have human decency laws. Might I remind you, this isn't even the real world.

Aeris: And *you* keep acting like this whole thing is a game! Might I remind *you*, there are people possibly *dying* right now in Toronto, and we might be Pants Man's only chance at success!

Leo: Well...

Aeris: (*snaps*) Well, *what?*

Leo: You're right, I have been acting like this is a game. I was just going to say, if I may, that to Krug, this probably *is* a game. You know him as well as I do... All he wanted to do last time was "be a good monster." Tell him how to do that, and he acts like a slave to every command. It's like he thinks he's scoring points every time he eats something... or

someone, whichever. If we're going to beat him, we'll probably have to find out what his end objective to his actions is, and whoever or whatever is commanding him this time. Then we can either stand in his way to reaching that objective—which I don't recommend —or we can explain to him that he cannot fulfill his ends by current means. I'm just afraid that if we do the latter, Krug may one day slip back into this "rampage mode," for lack of a better term, and we'd be doomed to repeat this process of explaining the concept of what a "good monster" does, every time this happens.

Aeris: (*a little calmer*) Wow, that... actually... sort of makes sense. But I don't think Krug is working for anyone other than himself this time. All the people who used to control him are either dead or in prison.

Leo: Good point. So what would Krug want himself that would make him do this?

Aeris: Hmm... Think back to the night he left the apartment. Didn't he say something about being King?

Leo: That's it! Krug wants to be King of Toronto, and he's asserting rule over the Fleshy Ones!

Aeris: (*her eyes move in such a way that it's clear she is shaking her head*) That's insane, but then, so is Krug... There has to be more to it than that, though...

Before she could finish that thought, the room lit up in pale blue. Both cats stopped walking, squinted, and held a hand up to shade themselves from the light, which came from a central pedestal in what looked to be a large circular room with hundreds of tunnels, each just like their own, scattered around the edge of the space.

Unfortunately, the hose that ran down their tunnel ended at a spigot attached to the pedestal, so there was no indication which of the many tunnels the cats would have to follow next to get to Krug's link. Upon further inspection, however, the "pedestal" was actually a thin, circular sales desk of some sort.

The cats walked up to this luminescent desk. It was indeed a small circle, with room perhaps for a person to stand within it, but no apparent entrance or exit. A small bell with the words, "Ring for Service" lay atop it.

--

Meanwhile...

(*Johnny Evilguy talks with Ternaldo in an online* Final Fantasy *server.*)

Johnny: You know very well I'm an N-W-N character, so this out-of-game experience costs you double, my friend.

Ternaldo: Bah, it eez worth eet. So many peoples cheat in thees game, if I do not keep up

with them, it eez game over for Ternaldo...

Johnny: So I trust you have the payment?

Ternaldo: Yes, here are ze testes. Zere are two of them, according to payment.

Johnny: Fool! This is not a secure location! Do not say the "T-word" here... Remember: they're "salty pleasure balls." (*takes a small bag from Ternaldo, pulls out one nut and inspects it*) By Jove, this is huge! (*inspects the other one, which is identical*) These are simply amazing! Who the hell did you defeat to get these?

Ternaldo: (*deadpan*) De... feat?

Johnny: Surely you must have cut these from a mammoth!

Ternaldo: (*looks down and scratches behind his head*) Oh. Yeah. Well... Ternaldo make do with what Ternaldo could find...

Johnny: (*something beeps in his pocket, so he pulls out his pager with his free hand*) Oh, well, I've got customers at one of my proxy servers, so I'm afraid I've got to run. However, since you've paid in full, here's your cheat code. (*puts pager back in pocket and extracts a sheet of paper, giving it to Ternaldo*) Put it to good use, friend. And someday you have *got* to tell me where you found these, okay?

Ternaldo: Well... If you really want to know...

Johnny: Gotta run! (*fades out of view*)

--

(*Johnny Evilguy reappears behind the counter, in front of the cats.*)

Johnny: Well hello there, and welcome to Honest Johnny's Proxy. Where in the world would you like to go today? We offer complete confidentiality to all our customers, so don't worry about any nasty hackers tracking you.

Leo: Actually... We're hackers, and we're trying to trace the person who broke through the Toronto City Hall firewall.

Johnny: Oh! (*not missing a beat*) Well in that case, the price for forfeiting the customer's confidentiality is four million American dollars, or two nuts.

Aeris: Nuts? Like almonds?

Johnny: No... not like almonds.... See, I have a collection of sorts. I also deal in them, as a side business...

Leo: (*still oblivious*) Ooh! Got any pistachios? I like those... kinda.

Johnny: Erm... Y'know what? I'm pretty sure you two don't have the means to pay, so I'm sorry for wasting your time. (*starts to fade out*)

Aeris: Wait!

Johnny: (*stops fading*) Yes?

Aeris: (*makes sure the spigot attached to the hose is turned to the Off position, then detaches the hose*) We have proof here that this hose leads directly to Toronto City Hall. If you don't cooperate, then instead of finding the original hacker, we'll hold you directly accountable. (*waves the hose in front of Johnny*) It's very rare to get this type of hard evidence on a proxy server for assisting in illegal activity, you know.

Johnny: (*sigh*) Fair enough. It's not that I couldn't trounce your so-called "evidence," since that hose could have come from anywhere and was not necessarily my own doing... But due to my... exploits... undue attention from any authorities whatsoever is much appreciated.

Leo: So which tunnel do we go down?

Johnny: That one. (*points, and one of the tunnels lights up*) The people who came from there were digging quite ferociously, so don't be surprised if you run into a security system of some sort.

Aeris: (*squint*) And how do we know you're telling the truth?

Johnny: (*as he fades out*) Please, cat-woman! I'm "Honest" Johnny Evilguy! Why would I ever lie to my customers, hm? (*is now gone completely*)

The cats, not seeing any other option, went down the tunnel suggested. Each wondered what "security" they could possibly come across... But they did not have to wonder long, as it turned out.

After only a few minutes of walking, a flashlight turned on, aimed in their direction. The cats covered their eyes with their paws-turned-hands.

"Well, looks like we have a pair of intruders!" said a voice, high-pitched and nasal. When these words were said, about fifty other flashlights turned on right in front of them.

"Don't move!" said the voice again. Then, it spoke to the other lights around it. "Take them... to the Master!"

"The Master!" cried fifty impish voices in unison.

Aeris and Leo looked at each other, the same confusion evident on both their faces. A

moment later, tiny hands grabbed each of them by the wrists and led them further down the corridor amid their captors' screeching laughter.

--Chapter Nine: Random Data

In the glow of the flashlights, Aeris and Leo could make out the shapes of their captors, though neither cat could believe what they saw: at least a hundred little walking zeros and ones led them through the corridor until they stopped in a wide open space in front of a second firewall.

The zeros walked about more or less aimlessly—and no wonder, since they had no eyes, only little hands and feet to aid them as they stumbled across the floor. The ones did have sight, though each was a cyclops.

Ten ones led the cats through a crowd of what must literally have been millions bunched together on a vast plain. Meanwhile, a one and a zero chatted with each other on the side...

Zero: Well this is random...

One: Tell me about it; there were never any ones or zeros in any of the comics, but here we are in the story! You know what this is: originality in fanfiction! What next? A decent odd-numbered *Star Trek* movie?

Zero: That's not what I meant... I'm sensing some weird data input...

One: Oh, well that's because The Patrol just caught two intruders to our realm.

Zero: Ooh! What do they look like?

One: (*turns to face Zero*) Why would it matter to you? You're blind.

Zero: I'm just curious if they're zeros or ones.

One: They don't look like either... And they have two eyes, each of them.

Zero: Like Master!

One: No, they are not Masters... At least, I don't think so. But The Patrol's bringing them to the Master, anyway, since they came in as intruders.

(*Another Zero comes up to them.*)

Zero 2: Hey, you guys notice anything weird in here? I'm sensing some odd input...

One: Well, The Patrol just caught two intruders...

And so, the situation would be explained again. In fact, ones were explaining it throughout the room to all the millions of blind zeros in their midst. Leo and Aeris were very much aware they were the center of attention, but neither knew why.

Thought Aeris, *Ones and zeros... How droll. We're clearly in some server or system, but why didn't we see any of these guys before? All the data in the world has to be in ones and zeros, and if this server has them...* She looked to her right at the enormous firewall *...Then why are they only here?*

Evidently, Leo was thinking the same thing. He, however, was naïve enough to voice his question out loud.

"How come we didn't meet any of you guys at the City Hall server?" he asked.

Though none of the ones leading them slackened their pace or grip on the cats' arms, the one in front answered Leo courteously.

"This is not a server," answered the number. "It's a mainframe computer, and you two hacked pretty deep into its operating source code. You don't belong here, so we're kicking you out to the desktop for inspection."

"Why are you telling us this?" asked Aeris.

The one looked confused. "Because you asked," it said. "No one gets this far into the code and doesn't get any information, after all."

Before the cats could ask anything else, though, the numbers backed off suddenly, and the ground rose like an elevator, leaving the ones behind. The elevator stopped in a room completely black except for a faint glow from above.

Aeris: Does this make any sense at all to you?

Leo: No, but at least we're in the right place.

Aeris: How do you even know that?

Leo: Look up.

Aeris looked, and there in the sky were pixel images of two faces. One was a rather ugly human she did not recognize, wearing glasses and a lab coat. The other was easy to recognize: Krug, with goggles and a lab coat. In the middle of the image was a cursor under the words, "Enter password to start."

Leo: A shame this adventure in the Internet couldn't have been more fun; I mean, here we are at the destination, and the only people we've met are friendly. The way Scott described this place, you'd think we were in for a real adventure, with enemies and battles and whatnot.

--

Meanwhile, the computer in Dr. Van Kruglor's lab was supposed to be on standby, but it needed more than just the picture on its own screen to keep it from total boredom.

Computer: (*singing along to an .mp3 just finishing*) ...and it opened up my eyes, I saw the sign! (*just talking now*) Oh, Ace of Bass... I love you so. (*computerized sigh*) Well, Kruglor's late... I think I'll play an emulator. (*various lights flash*) Ooh, this one looks interesting: the latest release from Japan's "Super Giant Monsters of Doom" series. I'll play that...

--

(*The room lights up around Leo and Aeris, and suddenly both are facing a 16-bit pixel Godzilla.*)

Leo: (*smiling*) Now THAT'S more like it!

Aeris: (*wide-eyed, worried*) You IDIOT, let's get out of here!

Leo: Aw, you're no fun.

(*Godzilla roars and charges past the cats, not paying attention to them.*)

Aeris: Good. While it's going that way, let's run.

Leo: Wait, I think that guy might need help.

(*A sprite hero is battling Godzilla behind them. He wins after several strokes.*)

Leo: Woo! Nevermind, he's good enough on his own.

(*After Godzilla disappears, the Hero sprite approaches them*)

Hero: (*Computer's voice*) Who the AO-Hell are you? NPCs, or enemies?

Leo: NPC, I guess.

Aeris: Look, we're not supposed to be here. Can you show us a way out of the game?

Hero: Wait a minute... You're those two spies my security picked up on.

Leo: (*gasp of realization*) Then you're the Master?

Hero: Hold it, no more information for you until I've had you virus scanned. (*holds out a hand, touches Leo's forehead*) Hm, little hackers, eh? Brainwaves say you're searching

for a location of Krug's hideout and maybe "master plans" of some sort.

Leo: (*looking up at the hand*) I feel violated...

Hero: Well, I'm afraid you don't belong here.

(*The Hero unsheathes his sword and slices for the neck.*)

--

(*A news Reporter, Mary-Anne Smith, stands in front of Toronto City Hall next to the Commissioner. In the background, police officers carry out several mini-Krug-sized body bags to be put in a paddy wagon.*)

Reporter: Hello, Commissioner. We understand that the situation in City Hall is finally under control?

Commissioner: We have successfully retaken City Hall and freed the mayor, who is safe and sound, although this is clearly not over yet, because the one who calls himself Dr. Van Kruglor is on the loose. Toronto Superhero, Pants Man, had him contained, but he escaped, and we are as of yet trying to determine just how.

Reporter: How large a role did Pants Man play in this success so far?

Commissioner: He set up a distraction that was simply invaluable. Don't know how we could have done this without him.

Reporter: Is he available for comment right now?

Commissioner: (*emphatically*) NO! Er, that is to say, he's still working to find Dr. Van Kruglor.

Reporter: Understandable. Well, I know you still have work to do, so I wish you luck, on behalf of all Toronto's citizens.

(*From inside City Hall, Pants Man's voice yells, "PARTY! WOO!"*)

Commissioner: Thank you and goodbye for now.

Reporter: (*to the camera, while the Commissioner runs back into City Hall*) Mary-Anne Smith, reporting for News Canada. You heard it here first, folks. The only station with the balls not to evacuate Toronto when it's overrun with flesh-eating monsters.

--

(*In the middle of the City Hall rotunda, where the battle was earlier...*)

Commissioner: (*to several police officers, all looking up*) Have you gotten him under control yet?

Officer 1: Nope. He's still on the chandelier.

(*Above, Peter Pantsless swings from the lights, singing.*)

Commissioner: Dammit! Pants Man, get down already!

Peter Pantsless: (*sings*) Oh no it's the COPS! What ya gonna do! Whatcha gonna do when the come for you, bad boys bad boys...

Commissioner: (*to the police*) It's gonna be just like the New Years party all over again. If only there were something to reverse the effects of vodka cooler on a superhero...

Peter Pantsless: I would walk five hundred miles and I would walk five hundred more...

Commissioner: Wait a minute, I think I've got it! Get me a ladder that'll reach the chandelier and a full pot of McDonald's coffee. Quick!

Officer 1: (*raises an eyebrow*) Sir?

Commissioner: Don't ask, just do it.

Officer 1: Yes, sir.

(*He and a few others leave.*)

--Chapter Ten: The Art of the Narrow Escape

Every superhero has a weakness. For Superman, it was Kryptonite. For Pants Man... vodka cooler. Once intoxicated, Toronto's hero would revert to Peter Pantsless, a helpless, raving party maniac. Fortunately, the effect of this alcoholic beverage would wear off over time, though for a more premature effect, certain shocks to the system could—

"AAAAAAAH! IT BURNS!"

—well, could do that, for one.

Pants Man looked in a direction he thought was up, though he quickly realized that since he was hanging upside down from a chandelier, he was in fact facing a marble floor.

The Commissioner, standing below the chandelier with a pot of coffee, looked sideways at the brown liquid. "But you haven't even drunk any yet..."

Pants Man realized what had happened. He knew about his weakness ever since the last

Police Office Party, on New Year's Eve. He also knew that he snapped out of it with the smell of morning coffee.

"The vapors are a start..." said Pants Man. "But let's have with that cup for good measure."

(*Commissioner pours a cup and hands it to Pants Man, who drinks. The theme from* Popeye the Sailor Man *plays in the background for no reason whatsoever.*)

Pants Man: That's more like it! (*lowers himself gracefully to the ground on a series of belts hung from the chandelier*) Sorry everyone here had to see that... Did you get the mayor and Krug?

Commissioner: (*climbing down the ladder*) The mayor's fine, and we killed all the furry guys we could find, but I'm afraid there's no sign of Krug. We were wondering if you'd care to show us where and how you left him.

Pants Man: (*walks through the office door*) Well he was right in... (*the room is empty, the chain link broken from the desk leg*) ...here...

Pants Man walked cautiously into the room, noting that none of the windows were broken, so Krug could not have left that way.

Then he saw it: underneath the desk was a trap door, open. It led to a tunnel just barely big enough for Krug to crawl through. Pants Man noted a few discarded red hairs where Krug had scraped the sides during his escape.

"This is probably how he got in here to begin with, too," the superhero observed. As the police came into the room, he said to them, "I'm going to check out this tunnel alone. Best if no one else comes; it's probably a trap. If there's a tunnel here, though, then there had to be one back at police headquarters, too. See if you guys can find that. And keep a few guards at the entrance here in case Krug decides to return."

The Commissioner nodded and signaled all but three of the officers to leave the room.

--

"LEO!" Aeris yelled into a blank space where the gray cat had been a second earlier.

"Oh, shut up," said the hero sprite, waving his sword triumphantly. "He was bad data and deserved to die. Speaking of which, you're next, Pinkie."

He swung the sword again, but Aeris ducked and rolled to the side. Without a weapon, she was unsure how to fight this hero, but as luck would have it, the hero's pixel sword had enough momentum in the swing so that it flew a little farther than the sprite may have wanted. Aeris took the opportunity to claw both his face and exposed left arm—thanking in her mind the makers of whatever game this was that they did not design a hero with

body armor.

The hero yelled in pain, but he hung onto the sword with his right hand. Aeris looked to her right while he backed up for a few recovery breaths. There were several meters at the top of the screen, one of which indicated the hero's health status. It was a quarter full. With one well timed hit, she could—

She dodged the sword a second time and now aimed low when she countered his move. One massive clawing of the hero's midsection, and the sprite disappeared.

He had been in the middle of a third swipe, though, and when the sword came around to Aeris, she had to leap this time to get out of the way...

--

Krug crawled out of the tunnel and back into his lair, onto the metal balcony next to the mainframe computer. His plan, he knew, had failed. But that was why any competent villain had a Plan B, after all. Dr. Doe had laid it all out in the instruction book, so all the monster could do was to follow the directions and hope for the best.

First, though, he would have to destroy his escape tunnel. The Deus Ex Machine would have come in handy here, but a convenient substitute, a wall lever marked "Tunnel Collapse," did the job just peachy. It set off a chain reaction of explosions in the tunnel. Certainly, nobody could enter the hole after it had been destroyed. Plus, any pursuers right now inside the tunnel would surely die in the implosion.

--

Pants Man was about a kilometer into the tunnel, though the lack of distance markers in the crawlspace made that impossible to tell. *Krug couldn't have made this overnight*, he thought. *This was a very well-planned operation.* He crawled quickly, knowing that time was of the essence in catching the monster, using his emergency flashlight to make his way a bit easier.

He thought of his cats. If they had found Krug's hideout by now, they would be more helpful by telling the police about it than by telling Pants Man. Still, Pants Man could relay any message they gave, so should they deliver the location, it would still help greatly.

About two kilometers in, Pants Man heard the rumble behind him. He looked back, and at first could not see anything. But he knew soon enough that he would have to crawl much faster in order to get out of the tunnel alive; the rumble got a little bit closer with each passing second.

Pants Man rushed as quickly as he could, putting his flashlight away so that his hand was free to grasp at the dirt to pull himself along.

He saw a light ahead: he was almost to the end of the tunnel. If he could make it just a little further...

--

Krug flipped a second switch on the other side of the mainframe computer, collapsing the tunnel to police headquarters. With his back to the computer, he cupped a hand to his left ear and listened for the sound of the tunnel collapsing.

He did not see Aeris as she popped out of the computer screen and landed on the balcony, though he subconsciously thought a "clunk" was an odd sound for dirt walls caving in.

Aeris did not realize how high she had jumped to avoid the sword until she stood up on all fours, positioned in front of the computer but facing away from it. The cat was once again her normal size and shape.

To her left was Dr. Van Kruglor, hand still cupped face still turned to the far wall, but if he were to turn around, she could only imagine what would happen. He had been nice to Furry Ones before, but his actions lately demonstrated anything but predictable behavior, so there was always a risk of him losing his friendliness toward "kitties."

A tiny bolt hit Aeris from above, and she looked up. Leo waved at her from an overhead metal rafter. As joyed as she was to see her companion alive, Aeris made as little noise as possible while she pounced and climbed up the computer to reach him.

When both cats were on the rafter together, Aeris whispered, "I thought you were dead there..."

"Nah," Leo whispered back. "Pants Man said we couldn't be killed online, remember? I just got booted out of the system. Did you die, too?"

"No, I just jumped."

Before they could say anything else, though, the whole room shook as the first tunnel completed its collapse. The cats looked instinctively to the source of the jackhammer-like noise, not knowing what was happening but wanting to see, anyway.

A very dirty Pants Man tumbled out and rolled toward the computer, and just in the nick of time, because seconds after he had done this, a great stream of dirt and dust entered the room, clearing moments later to reveal the tunnel closed forever.

Krug turned to look at Pants Man and said, "Ah, Panty Head Man... You had advantage last time with Deus Ex Doohickey. This is no longer the case, yes?"

Pants Man, breathing heavily from his escape, did not answer. Krug nodded and stepped toward him. He waited there in suspenseful silence until the second tunnel was entirely gone.

Van Kruglor: So. Fleshy One is now without powerful weapon. (*brandishes a spork from an inner coat pocket*) Now that you have penetrated Krug secret laboratory, you must pay. (*ominous, stepping toward Pants Man once*) And Krug only know one way to make Fleshy One pay... Computer!

Computer: Yes, Master?

Van Kruglor: Give me Dr. Doe's Completely Random Patented Jetson propelled escape pod!

(*A hovering car, like the ones in* The Jetsons, *floats down from the ceiling and rests next to the railing, near the corner where the catwalk across the room meets the computer balcony.*)

Van Kruglor: Good. And now... Computer!

Computer: (*annoyed*) What now?

Van Kruglor: Activate five-minute laboratory self destruct sequence!

Computer and Pants Man in unison: What the fuck?!

Van Kruglor: (*jumps in the car*) It all according to Dr. Doe book, you see. If Hero find lair, villain must flee or else face certain stereotypical demise. And so... I flee!

(*And with that, he takes off, flying to the door on the other side of the catwalk, opening it, and closing it with a loud bang. Without warning, a steel partition slams itself down in front of the door, sealing the others in.*)

Pants Man: (*to the Computer*) You're not seriously going to follow that command, are you?

Computer: Y'know... Why the hell not? Maybe I'll meet *smarter* beings in the digital afterlife. (*a timer starts ticking on the monitor, from 5:00 counting down*)

(*Aeris and Leo jump from the rafter and land on their feet in front of Pants Man.*)

Pants Man: (*looking down at them*) You—oh man... I'm sorry, I didn't think Krug would do that.

Leo: Neither did we, but at least we can escape through the computer.

Computer: Fat chance, Fluffy. I'm dying here, and I'm taking you with me!

Pants Man: (*rolling up his sleeves*) Looks like it's time for some hacking... (*he touches the computer and gets a large electric shock*) OW!

Computer: Wouldn't try that again if I were you.

Aeris: What about me?

Computer: What about you, Pinkie?

Aeris: (*smug*) Don't talk to me like that. I just owned you at your own game, noob.

Computer: (*brief pause*) What did you call me?

Aeris: Noob.

Computer: (*Imagine a computer voice speaking with its teeth clenched. Yeah, that's what this sounded like.*) Oh no you didn't...

Aeris: (*who has real teeth to clench and is making use of them thusly*) If you heard it, I said it!

Computer: (*brings up a battle screen with the Hero and an Aeris sprite*) Okay, bitch. Rematch time. If you win, you and your friends go free.

(*Aeris looks at the timer. It is at 3:28, still ticking.*)

Aeris: And the clock?

Computer: All part of the game. I'm waiting...

(*Aeris jumps on the keypad and gets a minor shock.*)

Pants Man: Hey, Aeris! You don't have to do this. I don't know why I didn't think of it earlier, but we can all get out on my cell phone. It connects to the Internet—

Computer: Ha! Try it, and I'll send your precious cell a power surge it'll never have time to forget before it explodes! Besides... (*the Hero sprite approaches Aeris's character on the screen*) this is *personal.*

Aeris set to battling the computer one on one. Leo and Pants Man debated what they should do for the next three minutes, and after about twenty seconds, they reached the following conclusion: Pants Man would setup a connection with his cell phone so that, if and when the time came when they would be allowed to escape, they could do so in a minimum amount of time.

Leo, meanwhile, made use of himself by searching the room for anything obvious, such as a plug to pull or a secret exit. He found none of these, but he did come across a discarded book beside the vats on the floor below. Krug had apparently dropped this book from one of his pockets when he jumped in the escape vehicle. The cover read, *Recipe*

for Diabolical Monstrosities, by Dr. Daniel Doe. Leo picked this up with his mouth and hopped back up the staircase to the computer.

When he saw Aeris and the machine in battle, though, he stopped in his tracks, opened his eyes as wide as they would go, and dropped the book to gasp in surprise.

The computer was shocking Aeris multiple times, but she, in turn, was relentlessly pounding on the computer's keys. It didn't even matter what the characters were doing on the screen, since the fighting game was an obvious button masher. Anyway, the real world battle of cat vs. machine was much more fun to watch.

Computer: THAT ALL YA GOT, BITCH? (*shocks Aeris five times*)

Aeris: (*pressing random keys with furious speed*) I HAVEN'T EVEN STARTED TO FIGHT! I'M JUST ROUGH-HOUSING! (*pounds several keys at once*)

Computer: (*still shocking*) HA! ROUGH? DADDY *LIKES* IT ROUGH!

Aeris: (*still pounding, her hairs sticking up from all the shocks*) WHY WON'T YOU SHUT UP AND DIE ALREADY!

Computer: (*by now, covered in a visible electric field, about to overload*) WHY DON'T *YOU* SHUT UP AND TAKE IT LIKE A BITCH ALREADY!

Aeris: (*jumping, a new syllable with every pounce*) I—DON'T—TAKE—IT—I—DISH—IT—OUT!

Computer: YEAH RIGHT! YOU TALK TOUGH, BUT YOU'RE JUST A PUSSY!

Aeris: GUESS I JUST GOTTA HIT HARDER THEN!

Computer: HA!

(*Aeris leaps and comes down hard.*)

Aeris: HARDER?

Computer: YES!

Aeris: (*jump*) HARDER!

Computer: YES!

Aeris: (*jump*) HARD- (*jump*) ER!

Computer: FUCK YES!

(*After a few seconds, the computer overloads its circuits and partly explodes, knocking Aeris off. She lands on the ground below while the machine smokes, voiceless now. Her hairs are still all on end. Leo, right in front of her, opens his mouth wider as if to say something.*)

Aeris: (*breathing very hard, her on-end hairs still sending miniature lightning bolts between each other*) Not. One. Word.

(*Leo snaps his mouth shut, into an anime feline smile that resembles a "3" lying on its back.*)

Leo: (*speaking very softly and quickly, against his better judgment*) So was it better for you or him?

Aeris: GAAAAAAH! (*raises her front claws and opens her mouth ferociously, about to strike*)

Pants Man: GUYS! Stop it! We only have twenty seconds left!

The cats looked up toward the computer. Sure enough, even though no voice remained in the damaged system, the clock was still counting down.

Leo picked up the book he had dropped, and then he and the others rushed into Pants Man's cell phone and got out of the area as quickly as possible.

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Meanwhile...

(*Closeup of Krug's right eye, camera slowly panning out away from him.*)

Van Kruglor: It very unfortunate that Krug lose his book... and that Fleshy Ones kill all of Krug furry friends. (*the camera pan is such that now Krug's whole face is visible*) Dr. Van Kruglor will have his revenge, though! If Pants Person survives, Krug will find way to thwart him! (*the rest of the interior of the escape vehicle is now visible*) No matter how many Fleshy Ones Krug must kill, Krug will one day be King of All! And all people will praise Krug and bow before him! (*the camera now shows that the entire craft is floating in water*) And they will all want to be eaten and Krug will eat them and be happy! It will happen! MUHOOHAHAHA!!! (*full scene now visible: Krug is in the middle of a lake in some part of the Canadian wilderness. A moose is quietly drinking next to the apparently crash-landed vehicle. Krug then speaks, in a calm but confused voice, to the moose.*) Of course, first Krug must find out where Krug is. You, Big Furry One: do you know nearest way to get to a new secret hideout? Because Krug could sure use one right now. (*the moose grunts and walks away; Krug lowers his head in despair*) Nuts.

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(*Days later, Leo and Aeris are playing on the Gamecube. Camera angle is on the floor, looking at the cats' faces, so the television is not in view.*)

Leo: (*after several seconds of deadpan silence, excepting the sounds of the game*) Still don't want to talk about it?

Aeris: (*after a pause, in nonchalant voice*) It was great, and I'd do it again, except, of course, the computer's dead, so you're the only alternative. And we both know you're neutered.

Leo: (*as the game plays a discouraging "Game Over" sound*) Ouch.

(*At this same time, in the kitchen, Pants Man is on the phone with the Commissioner.*)

Commissioner: That book you picked up seems to have all the info we need to solve this case; Dr. Daniel Doe has been on our Wanted list for years, though we never knew him capable of such a large monstrosity as Krug. If what he writes is true, and he really did plan his own death, then frankly, that's one person I don't miss all that much. Krug, however, as we both know, is still loose. His future plots are as likely to be against you, personally, as they are against the city, so I'd encourage you to watch your back, and I'd especially recommend moving to a new apartment. I'll find you one on the other side of town, make it the same rent and similar size, okay?

Pants Man: Sounds good.

Commissioner: Thank you for all your work in stopping this monster. Even though I'm still kinda sore about you keeping Krug at your home in the first place, you really pulled through. Look, I have to go now. Police work to attend to, and thankfully, it's the usual stuff this time. Take care, and keep on making our city a safer place.

Pants Man: I'm touched, dude. Usually you're all crotchety and irritable... There has to be something else that's making you happy right now.

Commissioner: Well, if you must know, we got rid of the pink iMacs today.

Pants Man: And?

Commissioner: And the new ones run Linux.

Pants Man: (*laughs*) A nerd like you would be happy about that.

Commissioner: I am. Never you mind that, though. I'm sure you have work to do, too.

Pants Man: Of course. Lots of stuff.

Commissioner: Then I'm off for now. Goodbye, and keep that squirt gun smokin'.

Pants Man: Bye. (*hangs up the phone and walks into the living room with the cats*) So...
(*sits down cross-legged between them and grabs a controller*) Room for one more?

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THE END