

# **Videogame Cats**

**Story by Aegel-maere Aetre**

**Characters by Scott Ramsomair**

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### Introduction:

Setting: Toronto, Canada. By day, he is known as Scott, comic artist and all-around nice guy. By night, he is the mysterious superhero known as Pants Man—the khaki crusader, the baron of boxer shorts, the sultan of Speedo... the possibilities are endless. Scott has a penchant for video games and all things digital, and unbeknownst to him, the constant barrage of radio waves transmitting through his house are in fact the source of his own super powers... more on that later. The waves also affect Scott's two cats, Leo and Aeris, who have become intelligent...

For now, this is all you need to know. We'll get to the part with Krug soon enough.

The next time I speak to you in second person shall be when I finish the story. With that said, here's hoping to see you on the other side...

### Chapter One: Flesh Bag... It's What's for Breakfast

--

*Leo: (in Super Smash Bros. Melee, dressed as Marth) You ready to die, Sheik?*

*Aeris: (Sheik) Bring it on!*

*(Leo attacks. Aeris grabs a fire flower and starts charring him)*

*Leo: AAH! NO FAIR! I thought I set the weapons off for this tourney!*

*Aeris: Missed a few, obviously. Now stop whining and fry like a good boy, okay?*

*Leo: Flames... searing... brain... Skin... extra crispy... Percent up to... 400...*

*Aeris: Oh, come on, you're only at 70. (The flower burns out)*

*Leo: Ah. Okay then.*

(Leo resumes attack. Aeris hits him lightly and he flies off screen.)

*Aeris: That's not to say I didn't put in a handicap or two...*

*Leo: (splats on the screen) Hey... I can see my house from—*

*Aeris: Of course you can see the house, Leo...*

“...You're in it.”

Aeris pressed the start button on the Gamecube controller and sighed as Leo recovered from his painful in-game experience. The former then tucked her arms confidently under her head and looked to the latter in mock superiority.

Leo smirked, hit the remote control power button, and left to curl up on a nearby rug. He yawned.

“Well, it's early... with a bit more rest I'll be ready for you next time.”

Aeris stood up on all fours and said, “Fine, but you know there has to be a next time. The score's tied... 48-48.”

Leo reflected the rule: first one to fifty wins. He wondered just why they had to pick that number, anyway; after all, if they had said, “First to seven wins,” he would already have been the champion. Same with “first to twenty-three,” or “first to forty-eight.” Then again, if the set number was anywhere from one to six, eight to twenty-two, or twenty-three to forty-seven, he would have lost... so all in all, the odds seemed to call the fairest shot at fifty. Still... what made forty-eight such a bad number?

Aeris noted that Leo had left the game console turned on, even though the television was off. She sighed and hit the console power button with her paw just as the sound of a door turned her attention to the apartment entryway.

Scott walked in, a pair of pants and boxer shorts flung over his shoulder. He slowly made his way to the living room and collapsed on the couch.

“What a night,” he said.

Aeris hopped up to the sofa and placed herself where her owner could easily pet her. She knew her place as official confidante of Scott, the comic artist in 14-A. Because of this, she also knew plenty of details about his nightlife... he was about to relate one of his stories to her right now, and Aeris only needed to wonder for a moment what the tale would be today: a robbery? An escaped felon? A stockbroker?

“So I was chasing this seventy-year old who used his false teeth to dig out of prison...”

And Aeris thought, *Ah. Escaped felon. Gotcha. Talk away, Scotty.*

“This guy was believed to be hiding out in a nearby retirement home. His crime? Dealing in underground prescription drug mailings to his family in New York. So of course, the police call for Pants Man to take care of the case.”

*That’s it, Scotty. Refer to yourself in third person... it’ll help you get that ego back in all its titanic glory again.*

Scott sighed. “Of course Pants Man caught up with him, but it turned out the old guy had made bail legally, and the police commissioner forgot to file the paperwork before I got the assignment. That whole thing about the false teeth... I don’t even know *what* that was all about. Probably a joke or something.”

*And the world is safe once more from senior citizens on bail.*

The superhero closed his eyes. “Just once I’d like to get my hands on a real challenge. All these assignments the police give me are nice, and I get the reward money from catching crooks, which ain’t bad... considering the life of a starving artist isn’t as glamorous as people think.

“Maybe it’s time I scoured the city and started actually looking for crime, instead of waiting for the commissioner to hand me whatever assignment ends up on the bottom of the pile. I mean... there’s got to be *something* out there that’s worth fighting the good fight for.”

Aeris purred lightly; best not to let Scott get too worked up about this. He sighed again, moving his hand to stroke her back.

“You should be glad you’re a cat,” he said.

*I am.*

“You’ve got it easy, Aeris... No bills to pay, no clients to see, and no double life to live...”

Aeris purred again. *Well, I guess two out of three ain’t bad, Scotty,* she thought.

Scott grabbed the remote control from the carpet and turned on the TV.

“So... let’s see if I made headlines today... though I doubt it.”

He clicked to the local Toronto news station. The channel, unfortunately, was in the middle of an ad.

Commercial Announcer: Are you tired of your old couch? Come over to Sofa King, and check out our selection! Remember, we're not just cheap... we're *Sofa King* cheap!

As quickly as he had turned the TV on, Scott turned it off again and said to himself, "You know, on second thought, it might be better to just get some shuteye and restore some of my sanity. Lord knows that ad won't do anything to raise my IQ."

Aeris inwardly chuckled. She loved it when her owner resorted to more intelligent humor. Not like Leo... who, for that matter, was currently entertaining himself by looking cross-eyed at a beetle crawling across his nose.

Yes, sleep would probably do Scott good, considering he would have to showcase some of his art at a convention in only a week. The artist would have to be in top form for creating auction pictures and prints for the con. She cuddled next to him as he dozed off on the couch. There was a busy day ahead.

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Meanwhile, somewhere in a darkened boardroom in a Toronto skyscraper...

*(Shadowed figures sit around a conference table. At the front of the room stands the only figure not shadowed, using a pointer to indicate figures on a presentation chart.)*

Number One: *(at the head of the table, with a deep bass voice)* So now Number Twelve may enlighten us with his report.

Number Twelve: *(clears throat)* It is my unfortunate duty to inform all of you that Operation Rx failed last night, when at the critical moment of escape from prison, Number Twenty was apprehended at his hideout in the Cedar Lake Retirement Village. Police found in his hideout more than twenty-five million dollars, American. We managed to save the three million that was wire transferred to the Cayman Islands account, but the rest of the money, sad to say, is lost forever. *(deep sigh)* And so is Number Twenty. He took his suicide capsule rather than face questioning from the feds.

Number One: *(after a moment's silence)* To what do we attribute this... failure of the operation. Bad luck? Unusually talented police work?

Number Twelve: We have reason to believe that a special agent was placed on the trail of Number Twenty on the very night of his escape from the prison.

Number Three: *(near the head of the table)* Is it someone we know, or someone new? Local, federal, or international?

Number One: Patience, Number Three. I am sure Number Twelve came prepared to divulge that information, as well.

Number Twelve: (*gulps nervously*) Ah, yes. Well, the signals Number Twenty gave us just before his death indicate that this was the work of someone new... a local agent, but ah, not the normal donut-eating variety. This one is rather... odd, to say the least.

Number Three: In what way, “odd?”

Number Twelve: He... wears a mask and cape, for one. Enters through the window rather than the door, and his weapon of choice is a squirt gun that shoots industrial-strength laundry detergent. Highly unconventional.

Number One: It would take something very unconventional to subdue and capture Number Twenty single-handedly...

Number Three: Yes, but clearly we are just dealing with a local psycho.

Number Twelve: But we have confirmation from our spies that this man was indeed in the employ of the police. So it would appear that the police are hiring psychos now.

Number One: Does this local psycho have a name?

Number Twelve: Yes, as a matter of fact, although it is probably a pseudonym. He goes by the title of a superhero: “Pants Man, defender of truth, justice, and, um, pants.”

(*silence*)

Number One: Do you expect us to believe this, or are you joking, Number Twelve? You know I hate jokes...

Number Twelve: (*takes something out of his pocket*) We found his business card on the scene of the capture, sir. I was just quoting the card.

Number One: (*extending a shadowed hand*) Give me that.

Number Twelve handed him the card. The man at the head of the table could barely make out the type on the front. He quoted: “This place has been secured by Pants Man, defender of truth, justice, and, um, pants. Yeah.”

He silently placed the card in his own pocket and said, “Of all the unfortunate things I’ve seen in this firm—and though such events are rare, I’ve seen a few of them—I must say, Number Twelve, that this is by far the stupidest one I have ever

seen.”

“But—”

“Silence! Now, please step aside, but still in the spotlight. This meeting is moving on to other matters, and I’ll need you there for a demonstration.”

Number One: (*continuing*) We have received some new clients, gentlemen. These people who hire us now are very rich... and powerful. I want top priority on this mission, so I am charging Numbers Two and Three with carrying it out.

Number Three: (*confident*) We shall not fail you, sir.

Number One: Indeed... but as much as I would like to trust you, I’m afraid I also had to enlist outside help. You see, under normal circumstances, our humble firm works for the good of society. We keep money from being wasted on those who make poor use of it. We rid the world of its own political traumas by stepping over the laws of the land, wherever that land may be. Numbers Two and Three have shown exceptional expertise at... ahem... making the world a better place. But this time...the mission before us is, for lack of a better word, evil. Sure, it helps the rich at the expense of political justice, which is all well and good, but the methods we take here might involve some more creative thinking than we’re used to.

Number Three: Hm, unconventional methods, would you say?

Number One: (*clearing throat*) There are a few times when unconventional methods are the best kind to use. This is one of those times.

Number Two: (*across from Number Three*) So where is this help coming from?

Number One: An old friend... Dr. Daniel Doe.

Number Three: Ah, yes. (*laughing*) Typical mad scientist.

Number One: The same. Our doctor friend has been experimenting with genetic altercations of various species... after a combination of more than ninety of them, he has ended up with this:

*(He presses a button on the table. A sliding door opens behind the spotlight. A shadow of abnormal shape stands just out of the light’s reach.)*

Number One: Behold the ultimate image of evil, gentlemen. He has an IQ of seventy-one, and while his motives are a mystery, he eats absolutely anything on command. He represents greater brute strength than all of us gathered here combined. He will even eat humans... handy, wouldn’t you say, for disposing of evidence? Just don’t get on his bad side, no pun intended.

Number Two: And his name?

*(Krug walks into the spotlight, blank but evil expression on his face, most evident in his eyes, which glow bright yellow. His full figure—red furry mass with feet, arms, and small horns—is now visible to all. From the look in his eyes, the shadowed group members think he might be able to see them, too, despite the light configuration. Number Twelve is visibly nervous at being only an arm’s reach away under the spotlight.)*

Krug: *(voice even deeper than Number One’s)* Filthy flesh bags call me Krug. I Krug.

Number One: Welcome, Krug. The directors and I would like to see a demonstration of your skills... You can start by eating Number Twelve here, the man to your left.

Krug: *(looks at Number Twelve, pulls a spork from behind his ear)* Krug want breakfast...

Number Twelve: *(backing away)* You... you can’t be serious! *(as Krug advances)* No... NO! *(screams, but by now he has backed out of the spotlight. Krug pounces him, and while various sounds are heard, the struggle is in complete dark. After some silence, Krug walks back into the spotlight. He has a human heart on his spork.)*

Krug: Mm... taste like chicken. *(eats the heart whole. Everyone in the room cringes, except for Number One.)*

Number One: Very good, Krug. You will fit in well here, I’m sure. We have an assignment for you now—if, that is, you are willing to accept it.

Krug: It involve keel fleshy ones and I eat them?

Number One: It involves eating many, many fleshy ones, Krug.

Krug: *(twisted smile)* This mission... Tell Krug more...

Chapter Two: A Taste of Things to Come

*Leo: (in Worms, carrying a miniature drum of napalm) DIE, FELLOW INVERTEBRATES! (Throws the drum. It scatters the gas among several enemy combatants.) HA! Gotcha, suckers! Victory is mine!*

*(Krug’s foot lands on the ground, causing the mud to collapse, crushing all the worms.)*



“Eww, ground squishy...”

Krug brushed the dirt (and a couple of flattened earthworm carcasses) off his foot and walked carefully back to the pavement. At one a.m., and in disguise, he was not one to gain too much attention in downtown Toronto. Any passers by who thought his body-length frock coat and oversized hat were odd for the recently warm weather did not bother to question him or stare too long.

Still, Krug did as he was advised, avoiding overexposure on the streets by walking mainly through grassy shortcuts. The first part of his mission was simple: Go to a computer store and eat all the merchandise in aisle seven. The store he had been directed to was now across the street. The monster waited for the road to clear, then crossed and peered in the shop window. Little did he know that his actions were being watched...

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High atop a nearby building stood Pants Man, scouring the city through binoculars, talking to himself in classic superhero fashion.

“Somewhere out in that malaise of lights lies evil; I just know it. And where there is evil, Pants Man will thwart it. Ooh, what’s this now?”

His binoculars brought him to look at a figure in full-length coat, peering into a large computer store’s display window. Pants Man zoomed in on the subject just as Krug punched a hole in the glass, shattering the window.

“Vandalism, possibly burglary... this is bigger than anything the police have ever assigned me to!” In his excitement, the hero instantly gave chase... meaning, of course, he ran back to the roof elevator and pressed the 1\* floor button, hoping his target would not make a fast break before Pants Man could arrive on the scene.

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Krug knew not to go down certain aisles of the computer store; he had not been told the reason for that, though: to keep from tripping the motion detector alarm. Winding his way through, he found aisle seven.

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Pants Man surveyed the scene from outside the broken glass and wondered why no alarm had gone off.

“Strange,” said he, peering his head inside. There were muddy footsteps on the floor, barely visible in the light. Then, a loud crunching sound coming from the front of the store confirmed his suspicion that the criminal had not yet run for it.

The Khaki Crusader stepped inside, cautious of the glass shards surrounding him. They made a light crunch under his feet as he entered, but the louder sound from the front aisle made this noise negligible.

Pants Man followed the footsteps in a zigzag pattern until he knew the crunching was coming from just around the corner. *Time for a dramatic entrance*, he thought.

Krug, meanwhile, was intently and indiscriminately chugging metallic objects and therefore oblivious to his follower. He wondered for a moment about the possibility of getting too much iron in his diet, but it passed as he grew an acquired liking for the various alloys in front of him.

Then a flash of light to his left made the monster turn his head. He was probably just as surprised as Pants Man was at what he saw.

On the one hand, Krug found himself staring at something that looked like a Fleshy One, only with some not-so-fleshy object on its head, its hands pointing a Super Soaker 200 in his direction.

On the other hand, Pants Man found himself in front of a red, furry mass in a coat that looked like the upper part of it had been eaten away. Its eyes glowed yellow, the main light of the room, and its mouth was propped open by a cd-rom drive box that it was apparently eating.

Pants Man recovered from the initial shock before Krug did. The hero yelled out, "Hold it right there! You're under arrest for destruction of property... and... stuff."

His voice trailed off as Krug stood up straight, swallowed the cd-rom box whole, and gave him a look that was comically evil, and yet had no intended humor in it.

The monster's response was simple: "You got three seconds before Krug eat you."

Pants Man pumped the Super Soaker rapidly in anticipation. He later reflected that there must have been a timer built into Krug's head, because it was exactly three seconds from the end of that last spoken sentence that the red mass attacked.

The hero ducked and rolled to the side, recovering in fighter stance and shooting the gun. An intense wave of bleach struck Krug in the face, but the villain responded by simply swallowing the alkaline liquid and licking his lips, as though he actually liked it.

His weapon rendered useless, Pants Man had to think fast. He ran into the next aisle for temporary cover, setting off the store alarm in the process.

"Well, at least the police will come now," said the hero, thinking aloud. Inwardly,

he kicked himself for not calling them earlier; at the time, he felt it necessary to catch the vandal first. In retrospect, staying away from the vandal would have been a better course of action.

The alarm initially stunned Krug, giving Pants Man ample time to make a full escape. The monster covered its ears with both hands, closed its eyes and ran away from the noise, straight into the Macintosh aisle. Seeing this from the checkout area, the hero got an idea. He looked around for the Employees' Office, and once he had found it, he ran in.

A nearby Janitor's closet contained the circuit breakers and power switches for the store. Pants Man turned all of the switches on. The lights turned on in the store, thus driving the red monster even more insane. The hero returned from the office area just in time to see Krug start throwing random objects at the ceiling lights in vain retaliation. Unfortunately, one such object started an odd chain reaction:

The projectile hit a ceiling sprinkler, which started spraying water. The water landed on the computers and ground, inadvertently rolling into some carelessly uncovered floor sockets... cuing a massive chain of electric explosions.

After an unspoken exclamation crossed Pants Man's mind, he ran for the front doors and kicked them open. Krug also ran, his eyes and ears now mostly adjusted to the change in surroundings. He knew he had eaten most of the assigned aisle, so he could still technically tell his masters he had been successful. But it was instinct that told him to run now, and he jumped out of the broken window and ran around the corner to retrace his steps back to headquarters.

Pants Man was still concentrating on the building when five city police cars rolled up on the street, sirens blaring. The electric fire then blew out the remaining windows.

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*(Five hours later, in the Commissioner's Office)*

Commissioner: *(slamming an early edition of the city paper on his desk)*  
DAMMIT PANTSMAN! You and your heroic stunt tonight cost almost a half million dollars in damage! What the HELL made you think you could just go AWOL and blow up buildings for a living? Huh?

Pants Man: *(tired, dejected look, sitting in a small chair in front of the desk)*  
Well, I saw a crime in progress, so I tried to stop it, and—

Commissioner: You saw a guy smash a window. So did you call the police? NO! Did you tell us what was going on? NO! You ran after him with a SQUIRT GUN and nearly got yourself killed! There's a reason I don't assign you to live-action

cases like this, Pants Man. Your unconventional meddling may have its place in following detective leads, but it has no place in a fight against a conventional robbery. Period!

Pants Man: But it wasn't just a robbery! I saw that suspect *eating* a whole *aisle* of computer hardware. Whatever that thing was, it wasn't *human*.

Commissioner: The security camera got a shot of a figure in long coat and hat. We didn't get the face, but everything the cameras saw it do was normal criminal behavior. There's no evidence anything in the store was eaten, given that there isn't anything left in the store that isn't completely FUBAR. So don't even try to pull the wool over my eyes. The suspect even ran away from the crime scene like a normal criminal would! All this destruction, and you weren't even able to make an arrest!

Pants Man: (*shaking head*) I'm telling you, Commissioner, that thing I saw was red, furry, had big yellow eyes, and ate metal stuff. If *that's* human, then I'm a freaking dairy cow.

Commissioner: I won't have you disrespecting me in my office any longer, Pants Man; you are now officially off the force. If you meddle in this or any other investigation of the Toronto City Police in the future, you will be arrested. Now hand in your badge and gun.

Pants Man: (*lays the Super Soaker on the table*) Here's the gun. I'm afraid I can't give you a badge, since I never had one to begin with.

Commissioner: (*takes the gun and stows it under the desk*) Whatever. Just get the hell outta my office.

Pants Man: Oh, I'll get out, sure. But the next time that monster goes loose on part of the city, see for yourself how far *conventional* methods get you. He'll probably eat the very police car you lock him in.

Pants Man left with his back turned to the desk. The Commissioner sighed and looked at the squirt gun. Perhaps he should have told the superhero the real reason for the manhunt last night... or the reasons behind scores of other missions, for that matter. If Pants Man knew just how much most of his work was appreciated, he might not have tried to strike out on his own and without a given assignment. Then this whole night never would have happened...

Ah well, now that the poor guy had been brought to the point of blaming make-believe monsters for his own shortcomings, it was probably best for him to stay away from the Force. *Seriously*, thought the Commissioner. *Next time, he would have told us the Bogey Man was loose.*

--

Pants Man drove home and walked straight to his room, shutting the door behind him before Aeris could follow. The cat, thinking she had just been snubbed, sat outside the door and waited for her owner to come back out so he could tell her about his adventures. Scott went to sleep right away, though, not giving a single word to his pet.

Eventually, Aeris lost interest, thinking the artist/superhero was simply more tired than usual. After a day had passed, though, without any major action from Scott, she began to worry again.

--Chapter Three: Feeding Art

*Aeris: (in Jet Force Gemini, multi-player mode) You had to get the N64 out from the closet, didn't you?*

*Leo: (shooting as he runs) Oh, come on, it's not such a bad system; kinda underrated, really.*

*Aeris: (ducks behind a building, hit) I know what you mean, but still, there are better fighter games out there than the 2-player mode for Gemini...*

(She turns a corner, only to find Leo has a rocket launcher held to her face.)

*Leo: Eh, I spent so long mastering the N64 controller it's not funny. Shame for all that practice to go to waste, right?*

*Aeris: I guess...*

(Leo blasts her health to zero.)

*Leo: Thought you'd see things my way.*

Aeris put down the controller with a sigh. She never was good at N64, since her preference at the time was the Dreamcast. Had they been playing a Sega game, Leo definitely would not have fared so well against her. "Say, Leo?"

"What's up?"

"Have you noticed anything strange about Scotty lately?"

Leo pressed the power button on the TV remote. Aeris silently noted that, for the second time in a row, Leo had forgotten to turn off the game console along with the television set.

Said he, "I never really notice too much about Scott. He puts food in my bowl and fresh stuff in the litter box; I don't ask questions. Why, is something wrong?"

Aeris was genuinely concerned, an emotion that she rarely had to deal with. “He hasn’t been talking to me lately... he got ousted from the police two days ago, and now he just shuts himself in his room... I’m worried. I mean, he’s got that convention in a few days, and he’s all depressed and whatnot. Whatever happened that night must have really shook him up.”

Leo gave a light shrug. “I don’t know what to say... but on the bright side, you know that old adage that says ‘suffering feeds art?’ Well, maybe this could be a blessing in disguise.”

Aeris shook her head lightly. “Suffering fed VanGogh, but Scotty’s a cartoonist; humor feeds his work, not pain.”

“Wait: suffering fed Van-who now?”

Aeris sighed, switching off the power on the Nintendo. “Nevermind.”

At the same time, Leo turned the TV back on. “Wait, I wasn’t done yet; don’t you want to get some revenge on me?”

A sound came from Scott’s bedroom. Aeris reached for the remote to turn the TV back off. “Look,” she said in a whisper, “Scotty just woke up. He’ll be out here in a few seconds. Keep the game console off and try to act like a normal cat, okay?”

“Meow.”

“Good kitty.”

Their owner entered the room before Aeris could hit the power button. Scott, who was going to watch some news anyway, sat down on the couch with a melancholy plop. He looked genuinely ragged and tired, hair uncombed and face unshaven. It took him a few seconds to realize that the television was already on. Then it took another few seconds to realize his cats were both watching it intently.

*How cute*, he thought. Then he noticed the N64 that should have been in the closet. *Wait... I don’t remember bringing that out lately...*

Aeris hopped up on his lap, diverting his attention for a few seconds. In those seconds, Leo quietly unhooked the console from the back of the TV, then shoved it under the couch. When Scott looked back, all he saw was Leo, eyes glued to the screen, which still showed the blue “Video 1” symbol on black background.

“I must be seeing things,” said Scott aloud. He petted Aeris gently as he reached for the remote. “All this sleep has my mind playing tricks on me.”

Aeris risked a quick wink to Leo, who responded with an innocent and perfectly

natural “Meow.”

Scott turned the station. He was just in time to see the five-o’clock news start.

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Anchor: Hi, I’m Mary-Beth Marianne, and this is Toronto Action News. Our top story tonight: utter devastation at several computer retail stores citywide. With more on this story is Action News field correspondent, Tom Thompson. Tom?

Tom: *(stands in front of a demolished store)* Yes, Mary-Beth, the past two nights have been filled with random attacks on retailers. Storeowners learned this morning that their shops had been burglarized, much of the merchandise either missing or destroyed. A security camera tape revealed this video:

*(A video starts playing. Krug’s face shows up for two seconds, looking close-up directly into the camera lens. Then his mouth opens, closes on the lens, and the screen goes to snow.)*

Tom: Police are still trying to interpret these findings, and at this time they have no prime suspects.

--

Aeris did not particularly care what was on the news right now; her attention was on her neck collar, which Scott had gripped with increasing intensity during the broadcast.

*Ow. Scotty—ack. You’re choking me—*

She growled loud enough to grab her owner’s attention. He let go of the collar and pointed to the TV.

“That... thing...” was all he could say at first.

Leo tried to help him out. “Mrowr?”

“That’s the thing I saw two days ago...”

Aeris wheeled her head back to the news as the station finished the story with one more showing of the security camera video.

*What? You mean you saw a dark figure with beady yellow eyes?*

“It tried to eat me—said its name was Krug—it was eating everything in the computer store.”

Without warning, Scott started laughing. “The commissioner said I was crazy, but there it is again! A big red monster eating computer hardware.”

Leo and Aeris exchanged blank glances. His contained a smirk; hers did not.

Scott sighed. “Ah, but the commissioner doesn’t want me back yet. He’ll try and have his own guys take care of the situation. He has no idea what he’s messing with.”

The artist went to put on his shoes, coat, and Maple Leafs cap. He left behind the Pants Man costume. To somewhat of his surprise, he found two curious cats watching him as he opened the door.

He looked down at them and said, “I’ve got some stuff to do. If I’m not back by tomorrow, you guys know how to get the food box off the shelf and feed yourselves.”

This was true enough; the cats had taken the liberty of helping themselves to a treat every now and then—darned if Scott knew how they did it, though.

When their owner had closed the door, Leo and Aeris walked together back to the TV set, still on, now showing the current weather conditions for downtown Toronto.

--

At the same time, the twisted face of Dr. Daniel Doe was under the spotlight in the skyscraper boardroom. Krug smiled and stood next to him.

Number One said, “We hear part one of our scheme has been successful, Dr. Doe. On behalf of the Firm, I extend to you my congratulations in creating this... creature. He is truly a work of art—”

“Krug eat things that go crunch!”

“...Er, abstract art, but art nonetheless. He’s been very... useful.”

The doctor clasped his hands behind his back, and gave the type of smile only a mad scientist could give: completely asymmetrical, with one eye behind the lens of his glasses, and one eye perched above the upper rim. It was not so much that the glasses were crooked; rather, the eyes themselves were askew. Greasy, combed-over hair was tucked behind his ears, and it was a miracle that his lab coat showed absolutely no signs of the random chemical residue that lingered on his face, pants, and shoes.

“Glad I could be of service,” he said in a voice that would have made Igor proud.



“Our only question is as to what happened in the first robbery. Apparently there was even more damage than expected.”

The furry red monster proclaimed, “Krug will answer this question! Krug ate what he was told to eat, when flesh bag find Krug and point big plastic thing at Krug, and Krug say Krug eat flesh bag, and Krug tried to eat flesh bag, but flesh bag run and turn on bright energy sources and Krug go crazy and run and escape.”

Silence. Then, Number One put a thoughtful hand to his chin. “Do you have any idea what he’s talking about, Dr. Doe?”

The doctor nodded and took a business card from his pocket. “Krug told me that some human found him out on the first night. This person has not shown up since, fortunately, but he did leave behind this business card. It looks quite intriguing to me, but then, I find many things intriguing...”

Number One took the business card from Dr. Doe and eyed it with increasing anger. It was a card he had seen only two days ago in this very room.

“Pants Man,” he said, under his breath. “Never before has the same agent tried to foil the Firm’s plans twice and lived to tell about it... We cannot let this person continue to jeopardize our success.”

“Krug’s mission successful,” the monster insisted. “Krug ate everything in the aisle. Krug do good job.”

Number One took a deep breath. “Very well. But Krug, if you ever see this person again, you absolutely must eat him on sight, understand?”

Krug’s smile widened. “That what Krug do best.”

“Good. In that case, now that the city’s computer stores are taken care of, it is time for us to move on to phase two.”

--Chapter Four: Sport

*Leo: (in Mario 64, Level 13, small) I’m so glad I got this N64 out again. It’s like a blast to the not-really-so-distant past! (He starts swimming) Now, let’s see if I remember how to get the stars here... step one: swim across the lake to the cannon. Step three: go around and—hey, wait... why would I remember that as step three, not two? There must be something I’m forgetting—*

(A giant fish with sunglasses eats him whole.)

“Leo? Are you still playing that thing?”

The gray cat switched off the TV, and on a gesture from Aeris, he hit the console button, too.

Leo sighed. "I guess it's time to move on. Wanna help me get this back in the closet?"

"Sure."

Aeris could easily pounce up and twist the closet doorknob. From there, the system was more or less pulley-based, the console's original box and yarn set around on a coat hook acting as the chief mechanisms. Leo, on the ground, would take the yarn by his teeth and pull the console (by now pushed into its box) up to the appropriate shelf level. Aeris used her claws to climb up the shelves until she could gently push the N64 box into place. The last step was simple enough: Aeris would bite off the yarn attachment, to be wrapped and tied another day, then jump to the ground and land in the standard feline feet-first motion.

"There's only one thing I don't get," said Leo, after the procedure was complete. "How do you tie those knots in the yarn? We don't have opposable thumbs."

"Elementary, my dear Leo," said she with a note of pride. "But a lady's entitled to keep some secrets."

"Huh. Anyway, you wanna get some lunch?"

Aeris sighed. "Sure. And after that, I think we should go search for Scotty."

"Search? You mean outside? In downtown Toronto?"

"We have no choice. Scotty's been gone for two days, and our food supply is almost out... Yesterday would have been the grocery day."

"Hm. Okay, but I'd have no idea where to start."

"We start with his room," she declared.

"What, you think he's hiding under the bed or something?"

"No, Leo, but there might be some sort of clue there as to his whereabouts, like a journal or something."

If Scott had a journal of his crimefighting activities, Leo had never heard of it. Besides, the artist seemed to leave on a spur of the moment thought—not something one would write down beforehand.

"Tell ya what," said he. "I'll get the lunch together. You can search the room in the meantime."

“Okay.”

Fifteen minutes later, Leo had liberated the cat food bag from the kitchen cupboard. He went into the bedroom to tell Aeris the meal was served. She was standing atop Scott’s art desk, next to the computer. Leo jumped up to her via the bed.

“Find anything?” he said, not really expecting an answer in the positive. Aeris did not pay attention to him, instead looking down at some of the artwork on the table. Leo followed her gaze to a cartoon picture of a red monster with bright yellow eyes.

Leo laughed and said, “It looks like a hairy thumb with horns.”

“Read the caption next to it,” said Aeris.

The cartoon bubble coming from the monster’s mouth read simply, “KRUG EAT JOO!”

“What do you suppose it means?”

Aeris shrugged. “I think he’s out looking for this thing.”

“Ooh, really? Now there’s a fight I’d want to see!”

“Leo, this isn’t a video game. Scotty could get seriously hurt. I mean, he said he met this thing the night the police dropped him; it must have really shook him up in the head.”

“So what should we do?”

Aeris got up on all fours. “We could do two things: stay here with little food and water and wait for Scotty to return, or go out and try to find him.”

“My vote goes for waiting here.”

“Leo—”

“What? He could be anywhere in the city, or even out of it by now. We have no leads and no clues besides this cartoon. If we stay here, but we need more food, we can just beg next door or down the hall. For water, just work the sink like you do the doorknobs.”

“Okay, that solves two problems. But then what happens when the litter box gets full?”

Leo's face straightened soberly in less than a second. "We gotta find Scott. And fast!"

"There's that adventuring spirit." Aeris smiled and jumped back to the ground. "I'll turn on the TV. Let's see if this Krug character has shown up anywhere recently, and go from there."

--

Number Two and Number Three had plotted part two of their mission, and the process was already near completion. They talked in the former's office, but each one kept a wary eye on the other being in their presence.

If there were nervous tension looming over the room, though, Krug was indifferent to it, biding his time by nonchalantly cleaning his fingernails with his spork.

Number Two: *(mid-fifties, graying but not bald, shrewd wrinkles under the eyes)* we're ready to start planning phase three.

Number Three: *(younger, slicked-back hair, subtle-but-large scar across the left cheek)* Then we have confirmation that the entire list is in our possession, decoded?

Number Two: In our possession, yes. Decoded, no. The goons and computers are working it out. We'll have it in time, don't worry.

Number Three: Alright, we'll move to phase three.

Number Two: This won't be easy; we're bound to get a lot of press, unless we can come up with a big enough distraction.

The two simultaneously approached Krug. The monster stopped the motion of the spork under his hand, but his expression remained blank.

"How would you like to do us a favor, Krug?" said Number Three, trying to sound as congenial as possible.

The response was an ominous monotone. "Krug was promised he would get to eat Fleshy Ones. It been four days and Krug eat nothing but metal. Krug want eat flesh." His head turned slowly toward Number Three. "Krug *will* eat flesh."

Number Two was glad the glance was not in his direction. He tried to calm Krug down. "Well, now's your chance! Today you'll get to eat some of the fattest, juiciest humans in Canada..."

--

*(Two hours later at the Sky Dome, bleachers. Five fat guys sit in a row. One has a puffy Blue Jays hand, another holds a tub of nachos and cheese dip. The one on the end of the row is Fan 1. Other than these five, there are no people in the entire bleacher section—in other words, it’s not exactly a sold-out game.)*

Fan 1: *(hands cupped around mouth)* HEY, BEER MAN!

*(Krug walks over to them, wearing an apron and carrying a crate labeled “Molson’s.”)*

Krug: What you want now?

Fan 1: Beer me, Beer Man!

Krug: Four-fifty. *(The man hands him a five, and Krug gives him a tall plastic glass of beer.)* That all for now?

Fan 2: Dude, tell the nacho guy to come back here. This tub’s almost out.

Krug: Gladly. *(He walks away, talking to himself.)* Yes, eat and drink, Fleshy One... get fatter and juicier before the seventh inning stretch... Krug finally gonna enjoy some human rump roast today... mm... big juicy rump roast...

Announcer: *(over the loudspeaker)* It’s the end of the sixth, folks, and it’s time to find the official Toronto Fan of the Game! So everybody out there get up and show some love for your Blue Jays, because today’s winner gets a season pass to Chinatown!

Fan 1: Woohoo! Chinatown, here I come! *(He puts down his beer, takes off his shirt, and starts dancing on the bleacher.)*

Krug: *(looking back at him)* Aw, no, don’t do that, Flesh Bag! Exercise make you tired and stringy!

Fan 1: Yeah! Go Blue Jays! *(Swinging shirt over head)* Yeah! Alright! WOOO!

*(Krug sighs and puts down his beer case.)*

Krug: Guess Krug gonna have to do this a bit early.

The images flashed before the stadium’s jumbotron to the tune of the Rolling Stones’ “Satisfaction.” First there were some cute children holding up a crudely drawn blue jay sign. Then there were some older fans, waving pennants and cheering. By the time the camera shifted to show the fat man on the bleacher, Krug was just jumping on top of him, tackling him to the ground. All over the stadium, people saw the slaughter live, as the monster, spork in hand, took to

eating the man raw.

The corpulent victim's four friends looked on in shock.

"Do you think we should help him?" asked one.

"I think we should get out of here..." said another.

The third was the voice of reason. "Guys, get a grip of reality, would ya? There is a whole case of Molson's just sitting there on the ground, and the Beer Man's distracted!"

The first pointed at the struggling victim and said, "But what about—"

The third patted him on the shoulder. "In distracting the Beer Man, he took one for the team. Now get over there and grab the beer."

--

The news was all over Toronto by nightfall: "Carnage at the Sky Dome," read the evening newspaper headline, beneath which was written, "Case of Beer Stolen On Scene."

Number Two slapped the paper down on his desk and said, "Mission accomplished. That'll keep the press occupied for months."

"How did Krug manage to escape?" asked Number Three, ever the pressing one for details.

"He used the smoke bomb we gave him. He was able to steal a car and ditch the cops."

*(Flashback image: Krug pulls a guy out of his car à la Grand Theft Auto, gets in, slams the door, and starts running over pedestrians on the sidewalk. He yells, "Outta Krug's way! It been six innings and Krug have to pee!")*

Number Three shuddered at the mental image, but he knew how important this was for the mission, so he kept his professional composure. "Are we going to need that monster after this, or can the law team clean up?"

Number Two smirked. "We'll keep him around. Just in case, you know."

"Good thinking."

Number Two allowed himself to appear more cocky than he actually was. "All my thinking is good, Number Three. Like the thinking that saved you from Krug's wrath earlier in this very room. Learn from my reasoning, kid. You'll find it comes

in quite handy.”

“No doubt it’s a useful trait. Well, I’ll be going home, then. The final planning has to be done tomorrow.”

“Indeed.”

Number Two watched his partner leave the room. Still gazing at the door for a few minutes after Number Three had left, he wondered just what the young crime lord meant when he said, “useful trait.”

“Useful to whom?” Two asked himself. He could all too easily imagine Number Three plotting to increase his own status at the Firm by making sure a senior member had an accident... perhaps, just when the mission was through, there would be a mysterious gunshot from nowhere... Three did come across as the young, overly ambitious type who just might be stupid enough to try such a stunt in the vain hope of climbing the ladder. Well, if indeed he did try something, Two was not without his precautions. He genuinely felt that, should the need arise, his old age and treachery would prevail against most any foolhardy attempt on his career—or life.

He looked back down at the newspaper’s picture of the scene on the jumbotron and reflected, “Fools get what they deserve in the end, anyway.”

## Chapter Five: The Hunt Is On

*(Leo, as Cloud from Final Fantasy VII, talks with Aeris (as her namesake) about the group they’ve assembled to save the world from Sephiroth.)*

*Leo: Alright, time to decide which two of you go in my party.*

*Aeris: Okay. Who were you planning on picking?*

*Leo: Well, let’s see... your main skills are with magic and defense. Sure, that could be useful, but I don’t think this next mission will specifically require it. I’ll take Barrett along, since he’s got a gun for a hand and all... and for the other member, I’m still undecided.*

*Aeris: Why not pick Cait Sith? He’s been getting pretty powerful.*

*Leo: Please, that guy’s a cream puff. I mean, come on; his main weapon is a megaphone. What’s he gonna do, yell his enemies to death? That’s not exactly what I call a winning strategy.*

*(Cait Sith stands behind him with a megaphone. He holds the device right up to Leo’s head.)*

*Cait Sith: ARE WE GOING TO KILL SEPHIROTH YET?*

*Aeris: (after Leo falls to the ground in panic, to Cait Sith:) I think our leader's just rethinking his strategy.*

"Why does the subway announcer have to be so loud?" asked Leo, backing away from the speaker.

Aeris lent him a paw while his inner ear regained its sense of normalcy. The two were walking along an upper rafter in the Toronto subway system. It was hard enough, even for cats, to keep their balance on the thin steel, and loudspeakers directly above them did not help matters at all.

"How do we know which train to take?" he asked.

"Well, the one we want goes to the Sky Dome. That's where Krug was earlier, and it's where Pants Man will be tracking his trail from."

"Okay, so we wait for the announcement for Sky Dome?"

"Actually, it'll come on that screen with the lights." She indicated a digital display board on the wall, next to a map of the subway system.

"Oh."

After a moment of patient silence had passed, the loudspeaker started again.

**"THE TRAIN IS APPROACHING. PLEASE KEEP AWAY FROM THE OPEN TRACK. STAY CLEAR OF THE DOORS AS THEY OPEN. THANK YOU."**

Leo panicked on the first sound and almost lost his grip of the rafter. Aeris had to steady him yet again before she could read the light-up sign and say, "Look, this is our train. Get ready to hop down."

When the incoming train stopped, they jumped down to the roof of a car. It was slick, but their feet held.

Aeris said, "Grip one of these grooves here so you don't fly off when this thing starts moving."

Leo was still mildly shook up, to say the least. He said nothing and obeyed her command.

**"THE DOORS ARE NOW CLOSING—"**

At least it was not as loud from below. Leo tucked his ears down and braced himself as the train started moving.



--

Daylight was still lingering over Toronto as Scott walked away from the Sky Dome. He had enough leads to know that Krug had gotten away in a stolen vehicle, and he had a vague idea of what to do next. Pure detective instinct settled in his brain.

*Even a monster like that will need time to let things cool off after something like this happens, he thought. So he'll be hiding out somewhere. But what really gets me is, although I know Krug's barbarian enough to pull a stunt like eating a man on live jumbotron, I also know he's too stupid to have planned his escape so well. Smoke bombs and getaway cars just aren't his cup of tea. There must be someone ordering him around. But why would anyone send a monster to cause a huge scene at a Blue Jays game? To cause random chaos? In that case, I should be looking for an anarchist... but then, how could anyone explain all the computer store burglaries? Those were too specific in nature to be the work of a random anarchist; Krug even went for the same aisle in every store he hit: the aisle of CD-Rom and DVD-Rom drives.*

He crossed the street to a parking garage, in front of which Krug was said to have done his carjacking. *It just doesn't make sense, he thought.*

Just then, a light flickered from the fourth floor of the garage. To any passer by, it would have seemed a fluorescent light was simply flickering on as night came closer. Scott, however, saw a pattern to it.

*Wait... it's not Morse, but it looks familiar...* Each flicker was of equal length. The spaces in between were mainly what changed. Sometimes the light would be on for a split second and then off for five, and sometimes there would be several split-second intervals of light, separated by an even shorter off time, suggesting a pulse rather than a continuous light or dark. Then it occurred to him: *Binary!* The flickers were ones, and the off times were zeroes.

Scott went up to the fourth floor and stepped under the light. He looked up and caught its pattern. He recited: "A-Space-L-I-G-H-T-Space-S-H-I-N-E-T-H-Space-I-N-Space-T-H-E-Space-D-A-R-K."

The light turned on and stayed on. A figure walked away from a place on the wall where Scott figured the light switch would have been. It came closer, slowly, until Scott smirked in recognition of the shape.

"Glad you could make it," said the figure.

"Why, Commissioner, I had no idea you knew binary code."

"I worked computer surveillance as a detective for fourteen years. You've solved a

couple cases yourself with computer data. All I had to do was hope you hadn't given up this little crusade of yours; and lo and behold, you're at the scene of the crime, like any other detective on a trail."

Scott saw his former employer walk completely into the light. The man had aged subtly, but noticeably since their last visit.

"Monster got the boys at the station a little worked up, eh?"

The Commissioner sighed and ushered Scott to a side area where they could talk discreetly.

Commissioner: I'm sorry about our misunderstanding the other day. I had no idea what our forces would be up against. You know, after battling with that thing, you're lucky to be alive.

Scott: Luck had nothing to do with it.

Commissioner: Ha! Well, you've still got your sense of ego, Hot Shot, but how are your case-solving abilities holding up?

Scott: I got a few leads, but I'll admit some extra info would be appreciated.

Commissioner: Oh yeah? Well, tell me what you know, and I'll brief you on what we've figured out so far.

Scott: What, you mean right here?

Commissioner: Of course not. Get in my car over there. We'll talk it over at the station.

--

Krug knew his orders were to stay at the hotel for the night and all day tomorrow, so he tried to kill the time by watching television. The national news was broadcasting the Toronto monster story. Krug was intrigued; he was actually on TV! Of course, he had very little idea of the true significance of being the main news story in the country, but he liked seeing the replay of the massacre... To the monster, it was like reliving a happy, tasty memory.

Then he started paying attention to the words of the reporter...

"People everywhere are keeping their eyes out for this terrible creature from the netherworld. Some are calling it a sign of the apocalypse. Others don't know what to think. One thing is clear, though: citizens of the Toronto area had better watch out for this horrible, horrible monster..."

Krug's smile waned. "‘Terrible?’ ‘Netherworld?’ ‘Apocalypse?’ If Krug knew what those meant, Krug might not be happy..."

However, he *did* know what "horrible, horrible monster" meant, and he did not like being referred to that way.

"Krug not a horrible monster. Krug a GOOD monster! Krug do exactly what Krug told to do. Krug carry out his mission. How dare person in big plastic box with screen say Krug horrible at being a monster?"

The reporter finished, "This is Al Carton, reporting live from the Sky Dome. Back to you in the studio—"

Krug punched a hole through the screen. Smoke trickled from the wreck of the TV, and pieces of glass embedded themselves in his hand and arm, but he did not care. He felt his honor had been violated. There was only one thing to do: go back to the Sky Dome, talk to that reporter, and set him straight. People simply could not go to sleep tonight thinking the almighty Krug was a failure, after all. They had to know that he was in fact *very, very good* at being a monster... Perhaps he could even give them a demonstration, he considered, grabbing some discarded soy sauce packets from the hotel room's kitchenette.

Krug put on his street disguise—the frock coat had been hemmed back to its original condition—and walked out of the hotel room, soy sauce in pocket.

--

"...And that's all I got."

The Commissioner sipped his coffee nonchalantly. The only thing Scott seemed to know that the police had not known, at least up to this point in the investigation, was that the creature's name was Krug. Still, a name could be a very important thing to know.

"Well?" said Scott impatiently. "I did my part in the deal. Now, what do you know about the case?"

The Commissioner sighed. "You know how there are some times when it's best not to let an agent know all the particulars of an assignment? Especially when the work done is supposed to be top secret, that is."

Scott raised an eyebrow.

"Well, I have a confession for you, Pants Man: in several of your past missions, you were doing a lot more than you thought you were."

Now Scott raised the other eyebrow.

“The elderly man you caught in the nursing home was not a mere citizen on bail. He worked for the largest crime syndicate in Toronto. He was extremely close to the top.”

“Crime syndicate? You mean we have a mafia problem?”

“Not mafia, no; much worse.”

Scott discovered he had run out of eyebrows to raise, so he perked his ears up instead.

“This is an association simply known as ‘The Firm.’ Their dealings are wrapped so tightly, even the feds do not know much about them. The feds would rather leave anything they can on the matter to local law enforcement; they gather the same information we do, but for some reason they expect me to do all the work. It’s as though, since The Firm chose Toronto as headquarters, it’s somehow completely under *my* jurisdiction, no matter the actual scope of the crime committed.”

“Must be either an extremely formidable or extremely weak Firm you speak of; usually the feds can’t *wait* to take a case from the locals. They love getting credit for the arrests.”

“Call it the extremely formidable side of the coin. These people run massive money laundering scams. They do business in every form of underground paraphernalia you can imagine. They also do assassinations. So in those respects, it is like the mafia. But The Firm works for some of the wealthiest and most powerful people in the world. The crime you stopped in the nursing home was really a multi-million dollar American drug company scam aimed at turning the current U.S. black market for cheap Canadian medications into a means for corporate profit. The Firm thought it could help turn these underground sales into just another sector of company resources.”

“Like the tobacco companies,” said Scott. “You lobby the US Congress to stop illegal sales, but since there’s going to be a black market no matter how many Senators you pay off, why not have a share of that black market for yourself?”

“Bingo.”

“But that drug company mission failed, because—”

“Because The Firm never expected a superhero with boxer shorts on his head to come along and do a solo number on one of their highest agents.”

Scott smiled.

The Commissioner continued, “We have reason to believe that The Firm is also

behind the making of Krug. A pure lack of information about the agent they've assigned to this mission tells us that someone very high up is taking care of the project. There's even a possibility that more than one top agent is on the case. This monster must be their top priority. But we do not know who is hiring The Firm this time, or what their end goal may be. All of our conventional methods are coming up short on this matter. The fact that citizens of Toronto are fearing being eaten alive right now doesn't help. We are failing, I believe, because we are doing everything The Firm expects local law enforcement to do. Meanwhile, Krug is completely unpredictable, and his every move catches us off guard. Simply put, we need you back, Pants Man, and we need you on this case, pronto."

"Any special weapons I should use?"

Sighing, the Commissioner pulled the Super Soaker 200 from under the desk. "Anything else?"

Scott picked up the gun and caressed it lightly. He said, "Just a point of curiosity: where do we meet for the next briefing?"

"Same garage as tonight; the place is as secure as any I can think of. I'll give you the same signal."

"Heh. You mean the binary code." Scott laughed as he stood. "With all that knowledge of computer language, it's a shock you turned out a policeman and not a total geek."

The Commissioner pointed at him and said, "I let you back on the force, Pants Man. Don't press your luck with smart remarks."

"Gotcha."

"Now, the next time I see you, you better have some boxer shorts on that head of yours, understood?"

Scott left the station with new determination. Somewhere in the city, a heartless, furry fiend lurked in wait of its next instructions, whatever they may be. Pants Man was Toronto's only hope.

## Chapter Six: In the Right Mind

*Aeris, as Lara Croft, Tomb Raider, carries a torch through a mysterious cave. In the darkness, she can see yellow eyes glaring at her. She is visibly tense.*

*A hand taps her shoulder from behind. She turns quickly to see who's there, but she sees nothing. The hand taps her other shoulder. Again, she turns around and sees nothing.*

*The camera angle changes to reveal that a mummy is tapping her shoulder, then scuffling behind her as she turns. Just as the mummy is about to tap again, Aeris thinks, Either this level has some sort of confusion curse cast over it, or I know some videogame programmers who had way too much time on their hands...*

--

Aeris silently watched the last bit of daylight leave the city. The search at Sky Dome had been fruitless, and now the cats would have to decide what to do for the night. Leo was still combing the area for clues, but she took it on herself to be more realistic. Eventually, they would need food and a place to sleep.

These concerns only half occupied her mind, however. This was the first time she had ever seen the city at night. The electric lights intrigued her; each one was like a television set, whose image never changed. Instead, it was the people and cars that were in motion, as though they were living under a fluorescent backlight. The effect mystified her somewhat, and she could not help but feel a bit homesick.

Leo approached her from the side, and she turned to listen as he reported his findings.

“I found a hobo over in that alley. He has a burger that he never finished. I figure there’s enough for both of us, if you want to check it out.”

Aeris looked toward the alley and said, “Alright. Just remember not to talk, okay? Humans might get a little freaked out about that sort of thing.”

“Really? I just talked to him, and he seemed to take to me pretty well.”

“Leo!”

“What? I had to ask him if he was going to eat the rest of his burger; it’s just polite.”

Aeris shook her head and closed her eyes. “Whatever. Let’s just eat.”

The bum was currently sitting, leaning against the brick alley wall, checking off something on a list.

Hobo: Hm, let’s see here... *(The list is labeled, “Signs of Doomsday A’comin’,” and half of the numbers below have a check mark next to them. He reads from the list aloud.)* Ah, here it is: “Talking Cat asks for a favor.” Right between “Four Horsemen go on a killing spree” and “David Lynch sweeps the Oscars.” *(He checks off the cat listing.)* By gum, I swear the end is near...

*(Leo and Aeris come around the corner and sit next to him.)*

Hobo: Oh, hi, little kitty! (*He quickly puts the list in his pocket.*) So you brought a friend with ya, eh?

Leo: Hobo, meet Aeris. Aeris, Hobo. Now, uh, about the burger ya promised...

Hobo: What? Oh, yes, of course. Here ya go. (*hands over the burger, puts it on the ground*)

Aeris: Thank you so much, sir. We really appreciate it.

Hobo: Oh, the pleasure's all mine! Just put in a good word for me to the Big Guy, okay? You tell him little old Jim's a good man, right?

Leo: (*between bites*) "Big Guy?"

Aeris: I think he means God, Leo.

Hobo: Yes, that's the one, no doubt about it. Ain't no guy bigger.

Leo: Ah. Yeah, well, we'll pass on the message when we get the chance.

Aeris felt a bit uneasy talking to a human; she felt the need to strike up a conversation, but did not know what subject to touch on.

"So... you live here every day?" she finally asked, when the cats had just about finished the meal.

"Oh, more or less, that I do. I spent many an hour here recently, because this is as good a spot as any of my sort could ask for. I mean, it's good to finally have a whole alley all to myself. Nothin' like Montreal, mind."

"Were you here earlier today?" asked Leo.

"Yup, I spent the last several months here."

"Did you hear about what happened at the stadium?"

The hobo's eyes widened, and he took the list and pencil from his pocket once more. He solemnly asked, "Was there a six-winged flying moose harassing the second-base umpire?"

Said Leo, "Uh, no, I don't think so... There was a big red monster, and it ate a fan in the bleachers."

The bum looked at the list briefly, disappointed. Without checking anything off, he started to put it away again and said, "No, I don't think I heard about that."

Leo shrugged and said, “Oh well. It’s not all that important. But if you see a big red monster with yellow eyes, run away, okay? You don’t want to mess with that thing.”

“Yes, well, and if you see a six-winged moose, you come and tell me about that, too, eh?”

Aeris stood up and got ready to leave. “Deal.”

“If ya don’t mind my askin’, where are you kitties headed tonight? Got a place to sleep? Cuz if ya need a place to stay, I got some extra newspapers lyin’ around here. They’ll keep ya nice and warm. Just don’t believe anything ya read in ’em—bunch a baloney the Neptunian overlord wants ya to think.”

Leo was about to speak, but Aeris gently put a paw over his mouth and said, “Thanks for the offer, but we really need to get going.”

“Well, so be it. Just remember, tell the Big Guy that old Jim was good to ya.”

“We’ll do that.”

When they had left the alley, Leo whispered, “Why’d you have to do that? We just missed out on a perfect opportunity for a place to sleep.”

“Nah, that guy’s too crazy. Now he thinks we’re a godsend; by midnight he’ll be thinking we’re sacrificial lambs.”

“Oh, come on, Aeris. He’s a nice guy. A little out there, but not in a bad way.”

*(Meanwhile, back in the alley...)*

Hobo: Dagnabbit! Why did those cats have to leave? It been four years since I last had cat stew, and I might not get that good a chance at it for the rest of my life!

--

Krug stood at an intersection, fully cloaked. This was the place the reporters had been, he was sure of it. They must have gone away. He was just about to get angry, when he heard two voices behind him.

“Well, so what are we going to do, keep searching for Scotty and this Krug thing all night?”

“Leo, I thought I told you to keep your voice down. Any human could hear us right now.”



“Fine, fine.” The first voice had become softer, but Krug sensed it approaching him.

The monster turned around. There were no humans on the sidewalk, though there were plenty of cars in the street. The only things approaching him were two little furry creatures. Krug had not seen anything like these before. He could tell that they were whispering to each other, though.

Krug waited for them to come under the lamplight. Then he said, carefully, “You looking for Krug?”

The cats simultaneously looked up. Both of them thought the figure in front of them was the right size for a human, but the yellow eyes glaring at them seemed to portray something else. It did not take long before they saw right through Krug’s street disguise. They did their best to hide their sheer astonishment, but it showed through plainly enough anyway.

Leo got up the courage to speak first. “Actually, we’re looking for a human. His name is—”

“Pants Man,” said Aeris, interrupting. “His name is Pants Man.”

Krug growled and said, “Pants Man... Krug trying to get revenge on Pants Man... Pants Man almost ruin Krug’s plan.”

Aeris thought it wise to play along. If Scott were looking for Krug, then Krug was their key to finding Scott. She would have to try and make friends with Krug in the meantime.

“He ruined our plan, too,” said she. “We want to find him for revenge, just like Krug. That’s why we’re trying to find him. Hopefully we can team up and give Pants Man what he deserves.”

It took a moment for Leo to catch on, but when her idea occurred to him, too, he looked at Aeris wide-eyed. His expression said plainly, *I hope you know what you’re doing...*

Krug took the bait. Here were two creatures, furry like himself, and trying to find the same man he was after.

“Listen,” said he, lowering his voice. “I Krug. If you want, you stay with Krug, we find Fleshy One together.”

“Sounds great,” said Aeris.

Leo tried to smile. Krug started walking, saying, “Follow Krug.”

So they followed him through the streets of downtown Toronto, still too dazed to wonder at the coincidence of them finding the monster before Scotty did. All they knew was that either they were extremely lucky, or extremely unfortunate. Which, only time would tell.

--Chapter Seven: Mind Games

*Leo, in Tony Hawk: Pro Skater III, does a few tricks in the level, "Canada." He reverts into another technique and takes a brief look at his score: 85,000 x 36. At that moment, he runs into the guy whose tongue is stuck to a flagpole. Leo falls down and the score is erased.*

*The guy runs away from the flagpole yelling curses. Thinks Leo, Stupidity works in mysterious ways...*

*Leo gets up and starts a simple trick, but the running guy, still cursing, bowls into him and knocks him over again.*

--

Leo and Aeris gazed about them in Krug's hotel room. They were a long way from home. A broken TV set, a nightstand, bed and kitchenette were the only objects in the room.

The cats stood in the doorway and hesitated while Krug took off his coat and threw it on the floor. While Leo stood, he looked for the room's exits, should Aeris and he need a quick escape. He saw only the one far window, but at least that was something.

Aeris was caught up in different thoughts altogether. Primary among them was the consideration of fear. There was no telling just what she had gotten herself into. That Leo came along was both a blessing and a curse right now, because although she was glad for his company, she feared for his safety, as well.

At last, Krug gestured them to come in, so they walked over to him. Both managed to keep a smile on their faces, since neither knew how long it would be before Scott arrived, and until that moment, they would have to keep the monster believing that they were his allies.

"Kitties come on bed, Krug read bedtime story."

The cats obeyed, each a bit curious, though still cautious, as Krug lifted a large-print book from the nightstand. The title read, The Good Beast by Dr. Daniel Doe.

"This Krug favorite bedtime story," announced the monster. Then he read, "Once upon a time there was a world of Fleshy Ones. Most of the Fleshy ones were evil. The few good Fleshy Ones wondered if anyone would ever save them from the evil

ones, but years passed, and no one came.

“Soon there were only a few good Fleshy Ones left, so they used their Powers of Good to create a beast, which would protect them from the evil fleshy ones. This beast was named Krug, and he was very powerful. He could eat anything, but he especially liked to eat evil Fleshy Ones.’

“Hahaha,” said Krug, deviating from the narrative. “Story so true to life.”

He was on the verge of shedding a tear when he continued, “One day, the good ones told Krug to eat metal things in a metal store, because these metal things were evil tools. Krug did this, and the good ones were happy.

“Then, the good Fleshy Ones let Krug eat an evil Fleshy One in front of many other evil Fleshy Ones. Krug did this, scaring off the evil ones, and the good ones were happy.

“Now we get to the good part,” said he, flipping a page. “The good Fleshy ones then put Krug to his final test. The evil ones met together at an evil “convention.” Krug trapped the evil ones and ate them all, one by one. It was the greatest feast ever. The end.”

Krug closed the book and smiled. The cats were speechless.

“Okay, Krug tell kitties bedtime story. Now kitties tell Krug story.”

The monster enthusiastically rested his hands against what would have been, had he a neck to support it, his chin.

Leo looked at Aeris instinctively. She would have to tell the next story, since Krug was looking at her. She had to think quickly.

“Well, there’s a story I like called ‘The Good Beast: Vice City...’”

Leo sighed as Aeris went on. He tried to think about just what Krug’s story meant for their adventure. Krug was going to attack a convention—the same one Scott was attending? Perhaps—but why? Because Krug was told to—but by who? Maybe this Dr. Doe, the book’s author, was behind it, but then, that did not fit Krug’s story, since he had mentioned multiple “good Fleshy Ones.” What was it about the “good” ones that would make them tell Krug that convention-goers were evil? And besides, how could one monster eat an entire convention crowd? Even with Krug’s ferocity, the task could take days. There had to be more to the situation than met the eye.

Aeris finished up her story:

“And then the good Krug ate all the evil ones who had created him for their evil

purposes, thus proving to all the good people of the world, who indeed had been the truly good ones all along, despite the lies the evil ones told Krug, that Krug was indeed on their side after all. The end.”

It took all of Leo’s effort to keep from raising an eyebrow. Aeris was actually trying to play a mind game with Krug. When a being has the general intelligence Krug had in the first place, one usually does not try and reason with them. For the second time tonight, Aeris’s gamble on Krug’s mental reactions would likely decide their fate.

Krug’s expression was unreadable, but the way in which he had one eye opened wider than the other suggested a sort of confusion.

“Krug only eat few people in that story. Why Krug no eat many people?”

Aeris answered, “Because if Krug eats many people, he will eat good ones along with the bad. Conventions are mostly for good people. Krug would not want to eat there.”

Krug almost pouted. “Krug don’t like that story. Krug go to sleep now.”

With that, the monster collapsed on the bed. He was snoring instantaneously.

Leo gave Aeris a sharp look. She looked back and said in a whisper, “What?”

“How many chances are you going to take tonight?” he whispered back.

“Oh, come on, Leo. Like you talking to a crazed hobo wasn’t a risk in its own right.”

Leo closed his mouth and thought for a moment. She had a point. “Look, just be careful, okay? You’re not Freud; there’s no way either of us can know this... this... thing’s intentions. What twisted things might be going through his mind, even now...”

Krug mumbled in his sleep, “Yes... Fleshy... mmmmmmm... Ooh, bunnies!”

“Point taken,” said Aeris. “Now let’s get some sleep.”

“Good call.”

Eventually, Krug did remember Aeris’s story in his dreams, and thought about his current mission. If the people who made him were the evil ones, then what was he to do?

The way he saw it, he had only two options: eat many, many good people, or eat just a few evil people. This in turn presented a moral dilemma he was not

prepared to deal with. He would spend the rest of the night in an uneasy sleep, his conscience and his appetite in a duel with each other.

--

Scott went to a local discount store that was open until eleven p.m. there he bought a pair of cargo pants and boxer shorts, along with some fabric scissors. It took some creative cutting, but in a back street alley he turned the pants into a cape by cutting a hole through the seat and tying the legs together close to the top. Then he cut two eyeholes in the boxer shorts and made a mask.

Once he was in full costume, Pants Man set out to follow his leads. It was plain enough to him that today's unfortunate baseball event was just a bluff, a distraction meant to lead suspicion away from a bigger target. Otherwise, there would have been more than one death. At the same time, though, Pants Man was sure that the main event, whenever it should occur, would be public. The Firm behind this whole mess felt no more need for secretive pillaging operations in computer stores; instead, it was now flaunting its monstrous weapon in the faces of all Toronto citizens.

Pants Man deduced that the next attack would come at an event at least the size of a baseball game, probably bigger, but this time, the attack would be more closely related to computer hardware, like that which was destroyed in stores citywide. There was only one local event of that description that crossed the hero's mind: the very convention he was scheduled to be at in only a couple days. It was supposed to be a large, general convention for Internet comic artists, role players, and online gamers: Toronto Intercon.

With this in mind, he made his way toward the downtown convention center. Overlooking the building from a nearby rooftop, he saw one figure by the main entrance. The man was reading a sign on the door. Pants Man, having forgotten to buy binoculars at the discount store earlier, went down to the street level to get a closer look.

--

Number Three read the advertisement posted on the convention center door. He had finished his check of the premises, making sure to lock off all emergency exits in the process. Now he was enjoying a brief moment of self-congratulations before he would have to leave the premises.

The sign simply read, "Toronto Intercon," along with the dates and time information for the event. Below that, it boasted that the "newest wave of computer hardware" would be unveiled in the Dealers' Room. Number Three chuckled to himself and walked away.

Pants Man stepped out of the shadows when the villain had gone. Then the hero

took a look at the sign for himself. There was no doubt in his mind; Krug would strike there next.

The cargo-caped crusader went around the building to the nearest emergency exit door. He found it welded shut. He sighed and walked across the street to a payphone, making sure, to the best of his ability, that he was not followed or watched.

It was time to give the Commissioner a progress report.

--Chapter Eight: Game Plan

*Aeris (as Tetra, the pirate from The Legend of Zelda: Windwaker. Aboard her ship, she talks with "Link" (Leo)): Your sister was taken to that fortress up ahead. You'll have to go in there if you want to rescue her.*

*Leo: Wait, won't you guys be going with me?*

*Aeris: One, it would arouse too much attention from all the guards they got there. Two, there's only one way you'll ever get in, and there's no way I'm taking that route.*

*Leo: Oh, I see—hold up, why did you say, "no way?"*

(Flash to minutes later. Leo is sitting in a barrel, at the end of a catapult.)

*Aeris: Don't worry. We're at least forty percent sure you'll land in water. Now keep your paws inside the barrel, and enjoy the flight. (She cuts the rope to send Leo flying.)*

(Leo lands in the water. When he gets out, Aeris contacts him via the Pirate's Charm.)

*Aeris: Any famous words you want to remember your landing by?*

*Leo: (shakes off some water) Oh, you may jest now, Tetra. When my dry cleaning bill arrives, you shall pay.*

--

Pants Man's call was a simple one.

"Commissioner?"

"Yeah."

"P.M. with a progress report."

“Shoot.”

“Found the target. Call it a TGIF at the Convention Center. A bogey corked the bottle and something’s fishy.”

“...And in English, that would mean...”

Pants Man sighed. “The Firm will be at the Convention Center this weekend. Someone welded all the emergency exit doors shut. Whatever they’re planning, It’s going to be big.”

“Ah. You need any help getting those things unstuck?”

“Nah, I can handle the doors. But send for some backup in case they’re still watching the place.”

“Will do.”

With that, Pants Man crossed the street once more. The nearest police patrol would be there within minutes to give him some protection. Meantime, he could get a head start.

He went around to the nearest welded exit door and took his super soaker out from behind his back, where it hung hooked to a belt over his shoulder. He then took a flask from his pocket and checked the label.

“Always smart to keep some of the good stuff with ya,” he said to himself as he poured the flask contents into the squirt gun. He pumped the chamber a few times and aimed for the top of the door’s edge at point blank range. The gun shot a stream of liquid directly onto the welding.

Though the door was solid steel, its metal instantly rusted. The liquid flowed downward via the path of least resistance, which was along the welded edge. Soon the attachment was weak enough to cut through with a butter knife. Not having a knife on hand, though, the hero used a simple credit card. The edge easily tore through the disintegrated rust.

Pants Man checked his ammo once the job was done. He had enough for at least four or five more doors, but the convention center was much larger, he knew. Well, he could go home and prepare some more of the formula if he needed it. For now he would simply conserve what he had and get done what he could.

It was while he was cutting open the fourth door when something caught the corner of his eye...

--

Number Two received his partner's page, and from coded text messaging he learned that Number Three had taken care of the doors. *Good*, thought the former. *I'm afraid I'll have to check that, though.*

While his partner had been securing the outside of the building, Number two was on the inside, wearing a full-body suit designed to make himself invisible in the electronic eyes of countless motion detectors in various halls of the building. His job was simple: rig the building's alarm system so that it would fail on the day of the convention.

He was done now, and he was ready to go, except that he wanted to test the integrity of his partner's work on the emergency exits. He picked a one at random and approached it from the inside.

The door's clash bar was hooked up to an alarm, so he cut the necessary wires before pressing on it. At first, the door jammed. Then, part of it moved, and suddenly the whole thing opened. The only sign of any tampering to the exit was some rust powder that fell from the side that should have been welded.

He stepped out into the night air and looked back at the open door. The spring on the clash bar must be broken, he thought, because the bar was still pressed in on itself.

"Now why would Three do that?" he asked himself, collecting his thoughts. "I can understand betrayal, but... just leaving the door open? Honestly, Three, you disappoint me. It's a huge mistake to betray someone's trust and leave them alive, and I thought you knew that." Sarcastically he added, "The least you could have done was plant a bomb in the door..."

Then the clash bar popped back to its original position, and Number Two gained a whole new level of respect for the term, "ironic cue."

--

The blast turned a good portion of the building to rubble in an instant. Pants Man ducked around the side and hid his face from the debris. When the dust cleared, there were already sirens sounding in the distance.

The hero ran to get a closer look at the explosion. He would not have the Commissioner blame him for the mess *this* time. If there were a villain in the near vicinity causing this trouble, then Pants Man would track him down.

However, instead of finding the explosion's perpetrator, he found only the victim at the scene. The man did not look good. He was already missing an arm, and multiple pieces of debris were scattered about him.



Pants Man took off his makeshift cape and used it as a bandage for the wound at the shoulder. He rolled the man over and checked to see he was breathing; the sound was very faint, but the man was still alive.

The sirens were only a block away. Pants Man hurriedly shook the man's face and tried to wake him up. He got a grumbled response.

"Hello? Can you hear me?" said Pants Man.

Grumble.

"Who did this to you?"

Grumble, grumble.

"Don't be afraid. I'm a good guy."

Number Two got up the strength to open his eyes. He saw the boxer shorts with eyeholes and almost gasped.

"Pants..." he said weakly.

"Yes, I'm Pants Man. Who did this to you?"

But the police and ambulance had arrived, and by the time the paramedics reached the body, Pants Man escaped.

The hero ran into the building heedless of the motion detector alarm that went off as he flew through the halls. He made his way to another emergency exit, one he had not broken the welding on from the outside. The clash bar, he noticed, looked like it had been repaired or replaced recently. He shot through the metal with his gun until he could see clearly enough that a trigger mechanism rested on the inside of the bar. He guessed that some plastic explosives were at work here.

Pants Man made his final exit through a window instead of a door, and he silently walked through the shadows until he was well out of earshot of the sirens. He thought to himself whether or not to give the Commissioner another call, then decided against it. He needed more information than was currently available. That, and he needed to sit and think things through for a while.

--Chapter Nine: The Makings of a Showdown

Sonic the Hedgehog. Leo, as Sonic, confronts RoKrugnik.

*Leo: I've got you now! All your minions could not stop me from getting to you eventually!*

*RoKrugnik: RoKrugnik SMASH! (He shoots a laser beam. It misses.)*

*Leo: Ha! Now I'll just jump in a little spiked ball and...*

*(Leo attacks. RoKrugnik catches him and starts bouncing him like a basketball.)*

*Leo: Now I remember why I hate sports games so much...*

*RoKrugnik: You think this bad, someday RoKrugnik show you hedgehog rugby!*

--

Pants Man found a cheap hotel to stay in, and when he woke up, he gave the Commissioner another call. While the superhero had not found any more clues in the aftermath, he had come to a few conclusions while thinking:

First, he kicked himself for not leaving a warning at the crime scene last night. If all the emergency exits were rigged, any innocent person may have tripped them. It was not natural for a superhero to neglect such a detail.

Second, the victim he found had to be there for a reason, and Pants Man would have to find that out.

*The man had to set off the bomb via the door. It's the only way... and that means he had to be inside the building while I was breaking the welding. He thought about this for a while. When I ran through the building, I set off a loud alarm. He didn't set that alarm off when he was inside, though. He even pressed the clash bar and the alarm stayed silent. Therefore, he must have been there on devious purpose. But what would a cat burglar be up to in a convention center? It's not a museum, after all. There's nothing of value there... at least, not until the convention, that is.*

Then he remembered the other person he had seen at the center that night: the one looking at the convention ad. *He could have set the bombs... then would he weld the doors afterward? It was possible, but he would have to do it before the blast victim entered the building... easy enough to do if he knew when the victim would arrive. Perhaps they were enemies... but that doesn't pan out; the bomber had anticipated his victim's actions too well.*

When the bomber exited the building, if he left via doorway, then there should have been at least one door that was not rigged. That was probably the front, since it was also the only door not welded. How did the bomber know that the victim would try to exit through a side route? The victim had to be testing the welds. Yes... they were on the same side, and one had knocked out the other. What's more, that could not have been in either's superior's plans, since all evidence pointed to the event happening at the convention that weekend.

Scott, out of costume in the new daylight, called the Commissioner's Office from a street payphone. The Commissioner was not in yet, but the secretary said she had a message for Pants Man to come to a hospital... The victim of last night's bombing said he wanted to talk with Pants Man...

--

"It kitties' lucky day!" proclaimed Krug with a smile as he threw open the curtains in his hotel room, letting in some fairly bright morning sunlight.

Aeris and Leo took a moment to wake up. They were in a bundle at the foot of the bed, Leo curled in a ball and Aeris resting her head and forepaws on his back. Krug could not help but widen his smile and say, "Awww, kitties so cute."

Aeris got up and yawned.

Leo, with his eyes still closed, asked, "You said it's our lucky day?"

Krug grabbed his coat and hat. "Today Krug take kitties to work day."

Leo opened his eyes and exchanged a look of curiosity with Aeris.

"Krug going to teach Evil Fleshy Ones not to lie to Krug. But Krug not know when Fleshy Ones lie, so kitties come along and help Krug."

"Okay," said Aeris.

Then all three of them left.

--

Number Three was in high spirits as he walked through the hallways of Firm headquarters. He entered the boardroom spotlight and did not so much as flinch at Number One's immediate question.

Number One: Did you succeed in wiping out Number Two?

Number Three: He is in critical condition at St. Something's. The report is that he doesn't have enough blood in him to see noon. He's requested to see "Pants Man," but we all know how absurd that is. Two will be cremated by nightfall.

Number One: That means you're up for a certain promotion, then.

Number Three: (*sly grin*) Thank you.

Number One: I must warn you not to make the same mistake your predecessor did, stealing company funds for personal use. I'd let him do it for years, but in the

end, I had to... make an example of him.

Number Three: Of course.

Number One: The issue of the merchandise still remains. The convention will likely be canceled or moved to a new location.

Number Three: But this is why we ousted Two with time to spare, right? Instead of welding the night before the convention—

Number One: Our target is in a truck on its way to Toronto. Tell Krug to... take care of the merchandise, as well as the truck driver. I'm sure you can make such arrangements.

Number Three: Certainly.

--

Three walked down the hall again, this time through the door where Dr. Doe supposedly kept Krug detained.

When he closed the door behind him, it locked automatically. He checked: it would not unlock from the inside without a key.

Outside the door, Aeris pulled the key out of the lock and dropped to the floor. She picked up the key ring in her mouth and walked innocently away from the scene.

Three surveyed the room in which he was locked. The fluorescent lights were all on. Steel prison bars, on the other side of which should have been Krug, partitioned the room. Krug was not there, though; the barred-off side of the room was empty.

In front of Three stood a sterile metal table, a high-backed swivel chair at the head, across from the entryway. Currently it turned around to reveal Krug, sitting and stroking a gray cat.

Krug: Greetings, Fleshy One.

Number Three: (*tense, trying to hide nervousness*) Greetings, Krug.

Krug: Now tell Krug: Are you a good Fleshy One, or an evil Fleshy One?

Number Three: I'm good, of course.

Krug: Ah. So what you do that makes you good?

Number Three: I—uh, I do stuff that’s... good, I guess.

Krug: It good to breed monster and tell it to kill people?

Number Three: (*thinking quickly*) Why, yes! That’s one great deed, as long as the people killed are evil ones.

(*Leo, sitting on Krug’s lap, growls*)

Krug: (*petting Leo*) Mr. Leosworth does not like that answer. He think that people make monster to kill people are evil.

Number Three: “Mr. Leosworth?”

Krug: It best not lie to Mr. Leosworth. Lies make Mr. Leosworth upset. And when Mr. Leosworth get upset, Krug get upset. And when Krug get upset, people DIE!

Number Three: Okay, okay, I’m not trying to make Mr. Leosworth angry. Now, what do you want?

Krug: Krug want to know what Evil Fleshy Ones want and why they really make Krug for doing it.

Number Three: But I told you, we made you so that we could kill Evil Ones—

Leo: GROWL.

Number Three: Um, er, but uh, it is possible I left out a detail or two...

At length Number Three told them all about the truck and the plot to kill Number Two, and whatever Krug could not catch of the fast conversation, Leo was sharp enough to pick up. The subject eventually got to Pants Man, and the gray cat turned uneasy on mention of the name. *Krug still thinks Pants Man is one of the bad ones!* he thought.

Then Krug said, “Wait. If evil ones are against Pants Man, then Pants Man good... why was Mr. Leosworth against Pants Man last night?” The monster looked down at Leo for the moment.

*Best to tell the truth*, Leo considered, *or something close to it, anyway*. Then he said, “Aeris and I are Pants Man’s pets. He forgot to feed us before he left to stop the evil ones. That’s why we were out looking for him.”

Krug’s memory of the previous night was as hazy as one would expect for a monster with an IQ of seventy-one. For now, the big red thing accepted the cat’s answer.

Number Three was stunned. The cat was... talking? What other things was Dr. Doe doing in his spare time, anyway? Soon there would be mutant fish roaming the halls here...

“Krug say, Krug not hurt Fleshy One this time.”

Number Three sighed relief, but only briefly.

Krug pressed a button on the table, and the prison cage door opened. “Now Fleshy One go in!”

Three grinned. There were a million ways he could pick the lock after Krug left the room, so he was not afraid to get behind the bars.

The door closed and locked automatically behind him. Then Krug pressed another button. This time, a trap door opened in the floor, and with an electric whirring of gears in motion, a platform elevator came up and rested at floor level.

Standing on the platform was the most hideous human being Three had ever seen. It was extremely large and well built, but its clothes looked to be so tight as to cut off any chance of blood flow.

“Fleshy One, meet Major Payne. He Doctor Doe latest experiment. You two have fun together.”

Krug and Leo left the room, the former unlocking the door with a spare room key. The last sound Leo heard from that room was a low grumble from Major Payne.

“Have a nice day,” said Leo under his breath. After hearing the evil agent’s full scheme in such first-hand detail, he felt no pity for Number Three at all.

--Chapter Ten: Enemy Territory

Pants Man learned all he needed to know from Number Two, who lay on his deathbed with not too much on his mind except revenge for the treachery he suffered. The hero left the hospital with new resolve, but he took his new information with a grain of salt.

Scott, in normal street clothes, was now getting out of a taxi in front of a skyscraper. He studied the building carefully; Number Two had told him plenty about how to get into the “secret” headquarters, but there was no information to indicate how to get out.

Scott took the elevator to the seventy-eighth floor, then went down the stairs one floor—according to plan, the building’s secret floor had no elevator access and was easy to overlook from the ground.

He slid into a broom closet when he saw the first security camera—lucky it did not see him first. When he emerged, he was Pants Man. Now he only had to get past security...

--

*(Further down the hall and around a corner...)*

Security Guard 1: Say, Jake...

Security Guard 2: Yeah?

Security Guard 1: You heard about what happened to Number Two, right?

Security Guard 2: Well, I hear what I hear...

Security Guard 1: You know what I mean. It just makes me think, you know? Every now and then I wish I had a position higher up, like one of the Bosses. But then, something like this happens, and I'm glad to stay just where I am.

Security Guard 2: What, does a "cutthroat" atmosphere intimidate ya?

Security Guard 1: That's not funny.

Security Guard 2: Or are you just not ready for a job that's "to die for?"

Security Guard 1: ...I swear, Jake, if I ever get the chance, I'll rid the world of all its bad puns.

Security Guard 2: *(sarcastic)* Ha! There's a noble ambition. While you're at it, you can wear a mask and cape...

Security Guard 1: Jake...

Security Guard 2: *(still sarcastic)* ...And you'll have your own kids' TV show, Pun Man: The Adventure Begins...

Security Guard 1: *(sigh)*

Security Guard 2: Oh, and you'll have your own theme song, too! *(sings)* "You may think you're being funny, but he thinks you're being punny, dun-dada-dun, beat his ass, Pun Maaaaaaaaaan!"

*(Pants Man sneaks past them in the overhead air duct.)*

Security Guard 1: I would too beat your ass, man. Just shut up already.

Security Guard 2: Heh. You take everything way too seriously, man. It's not like we have anything to do but stand here until the shift's over, anyway.

Security Guard 1: Whatever. I guess you have a point...

Security Guard 2: Of course. I mean, honestly: who's going to try and walk past us without a permit, huh? The only other way past is the air duct, and there're a million alarms on that thing.

Pants Man released his finger from the trigger of his Super Soaker and watched the alarm wiring on a laser detector fry and short out. *More like, "a million minus one,"* he thought.

He looked down through a vent into a room that, according to Number Two, should have been Number One's private office. Number One, sitting with his feet up on his desk, talked on the phone...

"I'd like to help you, Mr. Gates, I really would," said he. "But The Firm has way too many projects on hand already. Right now we've got the RIAA deal, the USA Republican Party assassination schedule, the USA Democratic Party assassination schedule, and Saddam Hussein's hideout fund to consider. I'm afraid that killing the Linux penguin will have to wait for another day... unless you're willing to up your offer a bit..."

He waited for a second and continued, "What do you mean, 'price gouging?' Of *course* I'm gouging you for prices! It's not like you don't have the money. You're Bill freakin' Gates, dammit! How much is this job really worth to you? ...Fine, two billion it is, then."

With a satisfied smile, Number One hung up the phone and walked out of the room, saying to himself, "Another day, another dollar... I think I'll take lunch early to celebrate."

Pants Man surveyed the room for signs of alarm systems, then planned his entry to the office.

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As Number One left the room, Aeris entered it. She dropped the key ring on the floor and shoved it aside once she was sure she was alone. The cat was going on an instinct developed from several hours of videogames: in the main office there would be some incriminating evidence she could conveniently turn over to either the police or Pants Man later.

As Aeris jumped on top of a file cabinet, a soft metallic sound came from above. She looked up and noticed something moving... a hand reaching from above the duct, unscrewing the grill from the ceiling. The hand had no screwdriver,



though... rather, it looked to be using a belt buckle.

The cat patiently watched all four screws come off. They landed in the hand's open palm. Whoever was unscrewing the ensemble had enough foresight to hold onto the grill and keep it from falling to the floor.

Pants Man thought to himself, *There's no security camera or motion detector in the room. That means the alarm must be in floor sensors... or something like that, anyway.*

In reality, there were no alarms or security devices guarding the room itself, but there were plenty on the file locks and computers storing sensitive information. Aeris had already discovered one of the alarm triggers from her perch atop one of the smaller cabinets. The setup was meant so as not to sound an alarm if someone accidentally entered the room; instead, an alarm would catch the perpetrator red-handed, fingers on the computer keys and everything.

Aeris watched Pants Man's entrance into the room, and it was all she could do to keep from laughing aloud. The hero lowered himself using a pair of belts tied together for rope. These were attached to two more belts around his torso and waist. He may have meant it to look like a *Mission Impossible* scene, but Pants Man's clumsiness with the belts made it far more ridiculous.

Finally he lowered himself into a level position and returned to scanning the room. He then took out yet another belt—Aeris started to wonder just how many of those things he had—fastened it so as to create a lasso, and hooked it successfully around a wall lamp. Using this, he pulled himself toward the files. He did not notice the cat sitting on top of the cabinet at first.

Aeris found herself at a crossroads here. On the one paw, if Pants Man triggered the alarm, it was all over. On the other paw, she had her precautions about talking in front of humans... how would Scott take it if he knew his cats could talk? She would find out soon enough...

Pants Man reached for the handle, but a loud "MEOW!" caught his attention before he could open it. He looked up and could hardly believe his eyes.

Pants Man: Aeris?

Aeris: (*ahem*) Look, Pants Man, you really don't want to open that file cabinet. It's got an alarm on the handle.

Pants Man: (*stupefied*) ... Aeris? You talk?

Aeris: Wow, you took that better than I expected!

Pants Man: Oh? And how did you expect me to take it?

Aeris: Well, you know, I thought you'd completely freak out at seeing a talking cat and whatnot.

Pants Man: Aeris.

Aeris: Yes?

Pants Man: I'm a would-be superhero who carries a squirt gun full of detergent, wears boxer shorts on his head, and sneaks into illegal organization offices via the air vents. It'd take a hell of a lot more than a talking cat to freak me out.

Aeris: Ah. Good point.

Pants Man: So what should I do to deactivate the alarm?

Aeris: Well, first things first. There's no alarm on the floor; you can come down safely.

Pants Man: Okay... *(Reaches behind his back, undoes one belt buckle, then the other. Then he looks up, twitches the belts from up in the air vent, and catches his squirt gun as it falls, attached to the end of the belts.)*

Aeris: Impressive.

Pants Man: Yeah, I just had the thing wedged in there and unwedged it to pull it down. Bad news is, I'm almost out of ammo.

Aeris: Bummer.

Pants Man: *(as he examines the file lock)* So how are you able to talk, anyway?

Aeris: Years of radiation from all the electronics in the apartment altered my intelligence.

Pants Man: I see. And Leo?

Aeris: Yeah, he can talk, too. He's around here somewhere with Krug—who, by the way, is actually an ally now.

Pants Man: So how come you guys get super-intelligence and I don't? I live in the same apartment, after all.

Aeris: Maybe you do have a superpower and just don't know it yet.

Pants Man: *(picks around the file cabinet lock with a belt buckle)* How did you discover you could talk?

Aeris: (*shrugs*) I started purring one day and noticed my voice had changed. Then I tried talking, and it just worked.

Pants Man: Interesting...

Just then, the door opened, and a fat figure walked in. Pants Man and Aeris both recognized him: Number One.

“What in the name of all things evil—” began the villain.

It took a second, but Number One figured out from the look of the hero that this was Pants Man, the maverick crusader who had defeated Number Twenty only last week.

Number One instantly ran out of the room, slammed the door, and locked it from the outside. Seconds later, an alarm went off.

Aeris ran over to where she had left the keys. Then she jumped up to the doorknob. *One of these has to work*, she thought.

Pants Man, meanwhile, used the last of his ammunition to shoot through the file cabinet and grab the papers. At least he would get what he came for. His mind was caught up on the concept of superpowers, though. He internally ran through the list of possibilities: *x-ray vision, superhuman strength, animal instinct, flight, weakness to kryptonite...*

As Aeris fiddled with the lock, he tried each of these. Could he fly? No. Could he see through things? As far as he could tell, no. Could he run through walls? ... Well, he was not desperate enough to try that yet, anyway. Could he—

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The security guards were outside the door, debating which one would enter the room first to kill off the intruder. Then a flash of light and sound of thunder came from the office, and suddenly the door burst from its lock and hinges. The wood sailed into the guards, knocking them over. Aeris, stunned and singed as if by a flame, stumbled off the door and walked away.

The guards got up quickly but cautiously. Immediately they raised their guns and rushed into the room. There was nobody in sight, though... just a pair of footprints on the carpet by an open file cabinet. Looking up, the guards saw the opened air vent and jumped to a conclusion: Pants Man had made his escape.

Pants Man had indeed made an escape... but he was nowhere near any air vent... He looked around himself and wondered at his surroundings: the landscape was flat, blue tile, with various printings on it at places. He still held in his hand the

confidential folder of evidence, but it looked strangely two-dimensional...

Then he figured it out: he was on a computer desktop. *How did I get here?* he wondered. *All I did was stare at one of the room's computers when I was trying X-ray vision... Then I tried telepathy, and—I guess my thoughts are part of the source code now...*

He could worry about getting out later. Right now, though, he had access to all the computer files in The Firm's most securely guarded computer. He made preparations to send all the computer's hard drive contents to the Commissioner via e-mail, but then he reconsidered; the file size would be too large. Maybe he could compress it in a zip drive or two...

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Meanwhile, Aeris caught up with Krug and Leo in the hall. Intent on hiding, they walked into the conference room. They turned on all the lights to make sure the place was empty. It was. Then Aeris briefed the other two on the situation, as far as she knew it: Pants Man had zapped himself and caused a near explosion in the office, but there was nothing to indicate that he had actually been hurt yet.

Krug flipped the lightswitch to return the room to its eerier previous state, one spotlight by the entrance and total darkness elsewhere. They would wait in the shadows for news of both Pants Man and the confidential files before attempting an escape.

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Pants Man sent the zip files, then checked out some of the computer's programs for himself. From here he could access the security cameras (where they existed in the building, since there were none in Number One's office, of course), and he noted that Leo and Aeris were both talking congenially with Krug just before the monster turned the lights out in the conference room.

From the security cameras' program, it was easy to access the floor-wide PA system. The pixilated hero announced soundly, "Emergency meeting in conference room. All available numbers report."

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Outside the building, the Commissioner was waiting with the entire Toronto City Police at his command. His cell phone rang, so he looked at it briefly: someone was trying to instant message him. He first made to turn the phone off; he did not need distractions right now. Then he saw the message, though... it was Pants Man's screen name, and the words "evidence sent by email, come in and I'll give directions" flashed before his eyes.

“Alright, boys!” he said to the officers nearest him. “We’re going in! I want the elevators, all exits in the building, and all streets in the vicinity secured. Don’t let anybody through, even people from the other floors, you got it? It’s complete lock-down until we catch these guys!”

So Pants Man gave the directions to the floor, and from there, he directed them to the office. Any security guards that tried to stop the incoming police were caught by surprise and shot on sight. More than twenty police secured the conference room. One of them found the room’s lightswitch and flipped it...

A very fat Krug lay sprawled out on the table. The monster was short of breath and clearly in no shape to put up a fight.

Pants Man’s voice over the PA said, “That’s enough, Krug. Good job. Officers, do not, I repeat, do *not* try to attack Krug. Trust me, more than ten people just tried, and well... look for yourselves.”

The bloody spork dropped from Krug’s hand, and all the police officers simultaneously shuddered.

Krug spoke with a weak voice. “Krug a good monster... Krug eat evil ones... Krug do good... All Krug life, Krug eat and eat and eat... But Krug never full... Krug want eat more and more and more... Then Krug realize... Krug hurt people when Krug eat them... Evil ones need be eaten, but... Krug no like that... Krug was made to eat, so Krug eat... but Krug no want to eat no more... Krug no want to be monster no more... People, good and evil, they think all monsters evil... But Krug do good... Krug good monster...”

“What should we do?” one of the officers asked the Commissioner.

“Well, we have to at least take him in for questioning. But don’t hurt him or make any fast moves, okay?”

The officer gulped. “Okay.”

Krug let himself be carried into the paddy wagon on stretcher.

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The Commissioner was just cleaning up the last bit of work at the crime scene when he saw something run around a corner. He went to investigate. Suddenly, an obese man with comb-over and dark suit pulled a gun up to the Commissioner’s head.

“So you escaped Krug, eh?”

The fat man grumbled, “If I need a hostage to get out of here, I might as well take

you. Now march toward the exit, and don't try anything stupid."

Pants Man saw over the camera what Number One was doing. The hero thought quickly—too quickly, in fact, for The Firm's ringleader to catch up to what was happening.

There came a flash of light, followed by a loud cracking sound, and by the time the Commissioner turned around, all he saw was Pants Man holding a belt-lasso and a strangled Number One on the end of it.

The Commissioner smiled. "Well, I'll be damned: Pants Man catches a criminal, *and* the building's still standing this time! How did you do it?"

Pants Man let the dead crime lord drop to the ground. He glanced at the cell phone on the Commissioner's belt, the same phone he had just sent himself to in a file attachment...

"Let's just say I work at the speed of light," said the hero.

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The evidence found in the files was enough to convict the felons, but it was of little use, since most of The Firm was dead anyway. The police never found out what exactly was the target at the convention, and they never traced it back to see who was hiring The Firm for that job... but nonetheless, the convention went smoothly, and all was soon more or less back to normal in Toronto.

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Two weeks later, in apartment 14A...

*Scott: (as Roy from Super Smash Bros. Melee) Dang, you guys are good!*

*Leo: (Marth) Hey, what did we tell you? We've had months of practice time.*

*Krug: (Jiggly Puff) Krug not like this game... Pixels make Krug fat...*

*Aeris: (Sheik) Next time pick a character that fits you better; I recommend Bowser. (Knocks Krug off the screen with a baseball bat homerun.)*

*Krug: KRUGGILY PUUUUUUUUUUUUUUFF!!! (splats on the screen) See, that just not sound right...*

The phone rang, and Scott pressed pause on the videogame controller so he could pick it up.

"Yes, Commissioner? ...A mission, eh? ...Alright, I'm on it!"

Moments later, Pants Man was just about to leave, when Krug approached him and said, “Look, fleshy one, um... Krug not know how to say this, but... thank you for letting Krug stay here while Krug get back on his feet, what with going legit and all...”

Pants Man patted him on the back and said, “No problem. Just keep the cats occupied while I’m away.”

“Krug do that.”

Krug turned around when Pants Man had left. He announced to Leo and Aeris, “Alright, turn game box back on... Krug gonna play meanest Jiggly Puff kitties ever knew!”

As the monster sat down to play, the sun set over Toronto. The Khaki Crusader struck a vigilante pose from atop a building as twilight and a wintry wind set in, rustling his denim cape. A new night had begun.

The End