Boxxy trudged into its home dungeon feeling especially irate. Though the withdrawal was part of it, the main reason for its sour mood was Stain. Or more specifically, the weird memories she had put into Rowana and Doris's heads. The mother-daughter pair seemed fine mentally, but were convinced they'd spent the last week or two doing nothing but playing cards and sleeping. No eating, no drinking, no going to the toilet, just poker and naps. Needless to say, if that slime was going to do something like this again, she'd need to put a lot more effort into those fabricated visions.

Thankfully the women themselves didn't seem at all perplexed by their implanted memories, which gave Snack plenty of time to spice them up a little while they slept in the coming nights. The triplets had all met their respective tutors and had started their individual training with only minor issues. Keeping track of Lydia was going to be a bit awkward since she had left on a trip around the countryside, but Boxxy felt confident Claws could handle that task.

The biggest problem was just how much gods-damned attention Arms drew to herself whenever she walked in public. The shapeshifter had initially intended to have Fizzy escort Robin, but the dynamo golem refused to do so. Though she agreed that it was important to keep those girls safe, there was someone else that was far higher on her priority list. A certain someone named Boxxy T. Morningwood.

"Come on then, let's get busy," the radiant construct demanded. "My HERPES isn't going to test itself."

"Yeah, yeah…" the shapeshifter grumbled.

The two monsters walked over to the dungeon core platform, which was the brightest part of the cavernous tree trunk. Boxxy sat cross legged on the floor with its back to Fizzy. The metallic Artificer then proceeded to stick a series of six mithril clamps into the gray flesh covering its spinal column. She linked them together with some wiring that fed into a small half-collar, which was attached to the base of the doppelganger's skull. She then flipped a tiny switch, causing Boxxy to shudder reflexively as the machinery sprang to life.

"Alright, all set on my end," Fizzy reported. "Let's start the first trial."

The shapeshifter groaned affirmatively while the golem walked around it to face it with a sealed vial of Honeydew in her grasp. Its hand twitched as if it was about to make a grab for it, but Fizzy's arm-cannon was pointed at its head before it could even make the attempt. Keeping a vigilant eye on the greedy monster's spotty impulse control had been the main reason she had refused to help look after the girls. No mortal knew this creeper better than her, and she understood that not even twenty-four-hour supervision would be enough to keep it in check.

Which was where the Honeydew Exposure-Reactive Preventative Electrocution System came into play. The contraption's main function was to release a minor electric shock every time the thing it was attached to - in this case, Boxxy - came into contact with the narcotic substance in

question. Simply dangling a vial of the stuff in front of the monster was not enough to set it off, of course. However, it started beeping quietly once Fizzy uncorked the container and let the drug's fragrancy wash over Boxxy. The closer she brought the sample to its face, the faster it beeped. She then poured a few drops of it on top of the monster's cranium.

The HERPES responded instantly by letting out the loudest and longest beep yet, followed immediately by a painful zap of electricity that was funnelled straight into Boxxy's spine. The monster shrieked and shuddered in pain before collapsing, its body paralyzed by the invasive current. Fizzy walked over and checked on the controller unit on the shapeshifter's neck, noting the values on the tiny gauges that she had built into it.

"Okay, seems I over-tuned it a bit," she reported casually. "No, Plus, that's not how that works. Null, can you please tell her? I'm busy… Yes, I know it's pointless, just do it. Thanks."

The golem continued chatting with her alter egos as she fiddled with the delicate device. The payload it was supposed to deliver was intended to bring discomfort, not outright paralysis. She had simply underestimated just how vulnerable a doppelganger's spinal column was to its Bane. This sort of thing was why the testing phase was arguably the most important part of developing a new invention.

However, the golem had forgotten about the glob of Honeydew on Boxxy's cranium. The HERPES picked up its presence the instant it had finished charging back up and went off before its creator could finish tweaking it. The repeat shock was just as powerful as the first one, incapacitating the shapeshifter mere moments after it had regained control of its body. Fizzy realized her mistake and wiped the narcotic substance from its skin to prevent any more… misfires.

"Were you **trying** to kill me?!" it complained a short while later.

"Relax, the HERPES monitors your vitals. It will avoid shocking you if there's a chance it might drain the last of your HP."

"Doesn't that mean I can just leave myself near death and-"

"You really don't wanna do that."

As expected of Boxxy, it had immediately figured out a way that security feature could be exploited to circumvent the device's automated disciplinary action. However, Fizzy had also thought of that.

"Honeydew takes a few days to completely work itself out of your system. What do you think the HERPES will do if you actually manage to swallow some?"

"… It will keep zapping me, won't it?"

"Exactly. And it won't ever run out of juice since it powers itself by sapping some of your MP."

Boxxy had to admit, the idea of being zapped every few seconds for days on end sounded far more unpleasant than the withdrawal symptoms. It could, of course, just rip the thing from its body, but the rational side of its mind recognized the need for it. The HERPES was there to dissuade Boxxy should it have a moment of weakness and there was nobody else around to keep it from reaching for the hylt-derived drugs. It was just thankful that Ambrosia was supposed to be napping for at least another month, otherwise it would likely never be able to clean up its act.

“Boxxy, you’re drooling,” Fizzy pointed out.

“Yes, and?”

“… Nevermind. So, what’s on the agenda for tonight? You mentioned you had something important to do while the meatbags were asleep.”

“Right. I think it’s high time our little group held a more in-depth training exercise.”

“What, another instant dungeon run?”

“Not exactly. Those are good for getting used to working as a group, but I noticed a certain flaw with that method when we fought Erena.”

“Really? I think we did pretty good.”

“Perhaps, but ‘pretty good’ won’t cut it on the Shattered Isles. We need to be **flawless**, and what I saw back there was anything but.”

Boxxy, being the control freak that it was, made sure to regularly take note of the strengths, weaknesses and abilities of each member of its posse. This was vital information to have if it hoped to utilize them to their fullest. However, it felt that something was missing during the encounter with the old God of Destruction. It had spent most of the next two days analyzing its perfect recollection of the fight, courtesy of the Legendary Intelligence Perk. This had allowed it to notice a lot of small things that it couldn’t pay any attention to during the battle itself.

The conclusion it reached as a result of this retrospective was that Boxxy appeared to be the only one who knew everything about its allies. While the monster-demon coalition had certainly performed well considering this was their first real fight together, there were a lot of missed opportunities to deal heavy damage. Snack, for example, was not mindful of Claws’s highly flammable webbing when flinging her Spells, nor did Jen give Fizzy any opportunity to imbue her with Holy Infusion.

“We, as a group, lack information about one another,” the shapeshifter declared. “And by ‘we’ I mean ‘you.’ None of you seem to be aware of any Skills, Jobs, Perks, Spells or Martial Arts outside your own. You’ve always just sort of assumed what the others were capable of and sort

of went with the flow. It's worked so far, but relying on improvisation alone will get us nowhere if we plan to challenge the scores of veterans and VIPs that will be attending the Dragon Festival."

Though the golem naturally disliked having her shortcomings dragged into the open like that, she couldn't help but see Boxxy's point. Fizzy herself was just one of many examples of how combining Skills and abilities from multiple Jobs could produce a result that was greater than the sum of its parts. However, she had never even bothered to think of achieving something like that with beings other than herself and her Parallels. But the people that would attend the Festival? They've already had decades to not only figure out which synergies worked best, but also practiced executing them to the point of it being second nature.

Therefore, not only was the meeting Boxxy proposed likely to be quite beneficial, but it was also a perfect excuse for her to strut her stuff.

"Alright, so how do you wanna do this?" she asked, eager to begin. "I mean, you still need to look after those three meatbags and one of them is out of town."

"Nrgh," it grumbled. "Will need to wait until things calm down."

It would have loved to just kidnap all the people under its protection and stuff them inside the dungeon while they slept, but the FIB security detail was going to make that tricky. Truthfully speaking it really didn't want to engage their services, but it just seemed like something Keira would do. As such it needed to postpone the meeting until all of its minions and allies could attend it in person.

It wasn't until a week later that the opportunity finally presented itself. Lydia had returned after a 'misunderstanding' with her tutor, so all the nephilim were currently in Azurvale. The FIB had also completely bought into the scapegoat Boxxy had given them, giving Keira an excuse to rescind her request regarding their guard detail. The Sandman's familiars would still stick around 'just in case,' but the elf operatives were allowed to attend to other matters.

However, it was a bit odd that they delayed informing the public about having captured the 'culprit' behind the Great Collapse. A brief bout of investigation later revealed this was due to political reasons. The government was determining the best time to publicly condemn and execute the man-puppet in order to garner the most approval from the populace. Apparently the ones in charge were concerned that revealing they had caught the mastermind too soon would make people think they were merely putting on a show to mask their incompetence.

The shapeshifter was perfectly alright with that decision since its primary Facade would only benefit from a larger and more well-received public event.

For the moment, however, it focused on its internal information exchange. Picking out a quiet evening, it had Rowana, Doris, and the triplets taken from their hotel rooms and safely deposited in the dungeon's prison block without anyone noticing. The women themselves were sedated through magical or alchemical means, leaving them blissfully unaware of the way they

were treated as luggage. With them handled, Boxxy fetched Jen from its ‘branch office’ in Velos, summoned up all three familiars and tore Fizzy away from her projects, gathering all of them underneath the glowing dungeon core.

It briefly explained its concerns regarding their lack of cooperation and then flat out ordered them to participate wholeheartedly in the meeting, even if some of them thought it stupid or boring. That said, the shapeshifter recognized that going over everything itself and its underlings were capable of would require far too much time, effort and concentration. Its monstrous troupe possessed nearly three hundred Skills, at least seventy Spells, around thirty Martial Arts, and a few dozen Perks in total. While it personally could keep tabs on all of those, none of the others shared its mental faculties.

That was why it had spent the past week preparing concise summaries of the most important and crucial aspects of each of those things, which it gave out to everyone in attendance.

<INSERT TABLE HERE>

The provided reading materials were a comprehensive list of each of the group’s abilities, including its own. The shapeshifter had of course omitted certain things for brevity’s sake, such as Mastery Skills or those related to Artisan Jobs. While it was true some of those were potentially useful in combat, such as Boxxy’s Alchemical Fortitude giving it a higher tolerance for ingesting potions, they were superbly passive and relatively low impact. It was the same reason why non-Legendary Perks were also excluded from the list.

“Question,” Jen raised her hand.

“What?” Boxxy replied.

“Isn’t Fizzy a superbly unfair existence?”

The harpy had almost instantly noticed that the golem could generate MP with Engine of Destruction and heal herself with Parallel Plot while in the middle of combat. Not to mention that certain Paladin Skills were ridiculously beneficial to her mechanical constitution.

“Yes, she is,” the monster confirmed. “You can’t overpower her with brute force, the only way she can be defeated is if she gets obliterated by magic in an instant or if her Spell-casting is silenced for long enough.”

The harpy-griffin hybrid lowered her hand, her tight-lipped micro-expressions hinting at either jealousy or envy. Though she had known the golem to be a powerful entity after fighting both against and alongside her, this was the first time she’d been able to grasp just how absurd her Skill synergies were. Though her own monsterfication had given her similarly potent combinations, they were not quite at the level of ‘functional immortality.’

“You sure it’s a good idea to give this bird-brain so much info, boss?” Kora spoke up. “She used to be our enemy, you know.”

“And now she’s not,” Boxxy pointed out. “She needs to understand all of our weaknesses if she is to cover for them, and vice-versa.”

“… If you say so, boss.”

The hoarder demon clearly had some misgivings about this whole thing. The stubborn, pig-headed attitude all fiends suffered from was no doubt going to be an issue. It wasn’t as if ‘be more of a team player’ was an order that could realistically be forced on someone like that. Thankfully her newly awakened desires gave Boxxy an opportunity to motivate her.

“Do your best to cooperate with others and I’ll give you suitably shiny things in return.”

The demon’s eyes lit up and she turned her attention back to the list of Skills, eager to earn her keep. The rest of Boxxy’s posse were already taking this seriously enough, so ideas on how to best utilize their combined skill sets started flowing almost immediately. Jen realized that she could benefit immensely from Fizzy’s Holy Infusion, which amplified the effects of the FTH, WIS and MNT Attributes. This would not only greatly improve her Ki-based Skills, but also help lessen the impact of mental attacks and stun conditions. It might even counteract the debilitating side-effects of Boxxy’s Dark Infusion, though she was loathe to actually partake in that. Even if the Warlock’s temporary physical boost would be immense given her Attribute scores, getting immobilized for even half a second would prove deadly in high-Level combat.

The golem herself already had a number of combination moves planned, usually involving either Kora or Boxxy. Hiding in either their Vault or Storage and leaping out for a surprise attack had been something she had already grown used to. If the hoarder wore her armor or the shapeshifter was using Metal Mimicry, then she could use her Magnetize Skill to propel either of them at high speed towards a target. Xera’s fire-based Spells and Skills, on the other hand, could rapidly bring her body temperature up after a Heat Exchange had cooled her down. Doing so would allow her to keep generating MP, enabling her alter ego to keep pumping out support Spells. She could also use Drea’s Steel Thread as an improvised conductor to shock people from afar with her Static Field, provided the spider silk didn’t catch fire in the process.

The webstalker in question didn’t have much to add to the discussion. She knew she could rely on the others to help set up her ambushes, and was certain they counted on her to ‘gift-wrap’ troublesome targets in her sticky thread. It was the sort of teamwork that did not rely on gimmicky Spells or Skills. Or at least that’s what she thought until Xera pointed out her illusion could help mask both Drea and her webbing. Combined with Arrow Traps, Spell Crystals, Glyphcraft, and two monstrous Artificers’ worth of explosive devices, she could help create death traps the likes of which she had never thought possible. That notion appealed immensely to her arachnid sensibilities, and she suddenly found herself quite excited to start exploring and experimenting.

Xera then chimed in to remind everyone yet again of her own supportive magics, limited as they were. Amplify Magic was the most potent ability among them, though it could very well be a double-edged sword if used inappropriately. Fiery Weapon could add that extra spice to nearly all of them, while Fire Ward and Backdraft would be immensely useful should they attract a dragon's ire. Which, considering where they were going, seemed quite likely.

Jen, who had felt a bit left out thus far, politely informed the djinn that she was mistaken. Apparently the idea that dragons on the Shattered Isles only breathed fire was a somewhat common misconception. Dragons could wield any of the primordial elements depending on their species, with some even using holy or necromantic energies. This also meant that the aforementioned Fiery Weapon might prove far more useful during the festival than the djinn had been led to believe.

The harpy also inquired whether Boxxy was capable of feeding Xera's Sins of the Flesh Skill, which the slutty demoness answered with a negative response accompanied by a look of infinite sadness.

Kora, on the other hand, was her usual blockhead self and was having trouble thinking of any new tactics or strategies. To begin with, she didn't like any plan that was more complex than 'hit things really hard' or 'toss the shiny gnome at people.' She was a front-line fighter whose job description was to turn herself into a target that was impossible to ignore. From then on it was a simple matter of letting Fizzy keep her as near death as possible so her Berserker Skills could exhibit their full power. She also wasn't going to complain if a certain ice-spider kept her targets from moving around as she pummeled them into a thick red sauce, but those sort of things went without saying.

That said, all three demons had a lot to think about thanks to the Warlock Skill Boxxy had gotten in the aftermath of Eren's defeat:

[window]**Summoner's Grimoire**
Description: The unbreakable bond between master and servant allows the Warlock to lend a portion of their arcane might to a bound familiar.
Requirements: Level 85 Warlock, Malefic Union
Type: Active
Activation Time: 3 seconds
Cost: 30% of max MP
Range: 2 Meters
Effects: Conjures a semi-autonomous grimoire and binds it to a summoned familiar.
The grimoire will follow its bonded familiar and respond to their mental directions.
The grimoire cannot recover MP and starts with 60% of the MP used in its creation.
The grimoire can use any Spell its creator knows of at 30% of their regular effectiveness.
Increases the grimoire's Spell effectiveness ratio by 3% per Level of this Skill.
Increases the grimoire's MP by an extra 2% of the MP used in its creation per Level of this Skill.
The grimoire persists until its MP is exhausted, it is destroyed, or a new one is created.[/window]

Even with the hefty MP cost and reduced magic power, these ethereal books would no doubt prove immensely powerful. For one thing, they allowed Boxxy's arcane might to be put to use while it was otherwise occupied. Xera would have an entire spellbook's worth of toys to confuse and befuddle her opponents, though Drea was far less enthusiastic. Something about having a talking book floating around her at all times just didn't sit right with her, mostly since it would give away her position. The upside was that she found the conjured grimoires to be rather flavorful. Kora's one-track mind only saw the thing as a source of Dark Infusion. It was still quite the invigorating incantation, even at a third of its normal potency. Still, she admitted it would be handy to have one of those fancy books around should she face a ranged combatant that was able to give her the run-around.

The six-armed demon's biggest problem thus far, at least in Boxxy's opinion, was her pitifully low reserves of mana. Her new Hoarder Skills were significantly thirstier in terms of MP costs than her Fiend or Berserker abilities. Her master used this opportunity to inform her that it would be lending her one of its fifty two Artifacts. The article in question was a glowing crystal vial on a string meant to be worn as an amulet, and was aptly called a Portable Mana Battery. It could raise the hoarder's maximum MP by a staggering 500, nearly doubling her magical reservoir. It was worth noting that the Battery did so by directly affecting the MP total without going through the INT Attribute. Which was a good thing in this particular case, as it circumvented the downside of Kora's Idiotic Strength Skill.

The shapeshifter also used this opportunity to declare that Arms was not the only one who would get this treatment. When the time of the Dragon Festival came, it would use its vast armory to completely gear up all of its minions and allies in as many Artifacts. It had already picked out the optimal equipment to distribute to each individual, including the demons. Snack, for instance, would have the Crust Controller staff to massively amplify her Pyroclasm magic. It had a Spectral Cowl set aside for Claws to let her phase through solid matter, though doing so would drain her HP. The Divine Decree was a ring oversaturated with holy energy that would be of huge help to both Jen and Fizzy. It even had a staff called Branching Path that Ambrosia's spriggan vessel would find most useful.

A heavy silence hung in the air the instant Boxxy mentioned the slumbering dryad.

"How do you plan to deal with the treacherous shrub, Master?" Xera was the first to speak.

"Calling her 'treacherous' is a bit harsh, don't you think?" it argued.

"No, it really isn't," Fizzy coldly rebuked it. "She led you on for years, intent on turning you into her drug-slave. And she will no doubt try to do so again once she wakes up. That is not something I will permit."

"Indeed," the djinn nodded. "If it were up to me, I would see this entire tree turned to ash and cinders. However, it is not up to me. So tell me, oh wise Master of mine, how will you deal with the whorish vegetable when the time comes?"

“… I don’t know,” Boxxy finally admitted. “I want to stay on her good side if at all possible, but I have no idea how she will react if I decline her invitation to drink her nectar.”

“Question,” Jen raised her hand once again.

“You don’t need to ask permission,” the shapeshifter admonished her. “Asking is free.”

“Alright,” the harpy nodded. “From what I can gather, the dryad in question owns this tree and is responsible for your Honeydew addiction. Is this correct?”

“… That’s one way of putting it,” it answered evasively.

“More like the only way,” Fizzy grumbled.

“Was it her intention to cause this affliction?” Jen pressed on.

“Don’t be stupid, of course it was,” Xera rolled her eyes. “She practically demanded my Master partake of the stuff on a regular basis. How could it not be?”

“Well, she might not know this ‘nectar’ of hers is habit-forming,” the Monk suggested. “Could be she’s following some instinct without being consciously aware of its impact.”

Jen was not actually aware of just how ancient the dryad in question was, nor did she know that it was one of Ambrosia’s peers that revealed this addictive property in the first place. She was, however, intimately familiar with how insistant a monster’s instincts were. The harpy had been steadily coming to terms with her own new and strange urges, so it wasn’t hard for her to imagine something similar was happening to Ambrosia.

“That is… a very good question, actually.”

Jen’s perspective, though partially born from ignorance, had nevertheless given Boxxy something to think about. It had just assumed the dryad was doing all this on purpose because it never truly trusted her ever since she broke out of the dungeon’s influence. Come to think of it, this whole thing had started well before that particular incident. It seemed odd that Ambrosia would willfully endeavor to poison Boxxy’s mind under those circumstances. After all, a dungeon master was programmed to revere the core’s owner and despise outsiders by default. Lavender was living proof of that.

“You can’t be serious!” Fizzy exclaimed. “You’re seriously buying this bird-bag’s delusions!?”

The harpy in question couldn’t help but take offense to the golem’s words and tone, though Boxxy stepped in to deescalate before things got out of hand.

“Look, I’m not saying that’s what happened,” it stated firmly. “I just think it would be unwise to ignore that possibility. Stranger things have happened.”

“Ugh… You know it’s stupidly unfair when you use that excuse, right?” the golem complained with a groan.

“And you should know I don’t play fair,” it said jokingly. “In all seriousness, however, I wish to at least speak with her before making a judgement. I’ll prepare everything beforehand, just in case we need to leave this place for good.”

“… Alright,” Fizzy conceded. “But if the first thing you do when you see her is latch onto her nipple, I’m zapping you unconscious and dragging you out by force.”

“Deal.”

Jen’s hand shot up yet again despite Boxxy assuring her she didn’t need to ask permission, though the shapeshifter was fairly certain what her query was.

“Dryad nectar comes out of their nipples,” it informed her. “The only way to drink it is straight from the source, as it were.”

“… Okay?” she tilted her head in confusion. “That’s not what I wanted to ask about, though.”

“… It wasn’t?”

“I just wanted to know when this Ambrosia person is supposed to wake up.”

Boxxy sighed deeply as it hid its featureless face in its palms.

“Don’t have an exact date, but in a month or so,” it finally answered.

“Understood.”

Having been constantly accompanied by one pervert or another for the majority of its lifetime had made the creature expect vulgar questions and remarks at every turn. That realization made it feel a bit defeated and depressed, which certainly did not help its current volatile state of mind. Thankfully Jen wasn’t like that. Though unexpected, her presence was something of a grounding factor that helped remind Boxxy that the company it kept was a collection of extremes and exceptions. Whether the harpy realized it or not, her peculiar sensibilities and simplistic personality made her the most normal and well-adjusted member of the group.

Which was saying something considering she was a harpy-griffin hybrid who had faced an old god in combat just a few weeks prior.