

Basilisk—a word told to have come from some ancient meaning of “king.” Yvonus could not hide his disdain at the notion, face curling into a scowl under his wide-brimmed hat. It was not just “king” that made the word, but a diminutive too—for the basilisk was a king without a kingdom, a strength with no rulership. It is a thing which should not be, a shortsightedness that can only bring unnatural death and destruction around where it chooses to lair.

These thoughts galvanized disdain into fury, fueling each measured step forwards the mage took through the verdant cave passageway. His friends, his allies, stayed close behind him—Estovot, a hunter known for his monstrous tracking and big game skills, and Joan, a knight of great prestige respected for her brave deeds. Together, they made the only task force yet thought capable of defeating that looming evil.

Yvonus had tirelessly trained himself, unable to rest as he poured over every written account of the monster with careful notes, scanned over the interviews with the widowed families of victims, and cross-referenced over the theories with the best hints at the beast’s true nature. Three quarters of his time had to be spent picking out what was written in foolishness and fear from what was genuine, and the rest of his time was spent in frustration over attempting to link disparate shards of knowledge together.

*The venom of the basilisk: a terrifying toxin, so potent that it brings assured death to anything it touches. Even a few drops upstream shall surely cause farms and villages to fall ill with the pale of death. Yet, paradoxically, the few sages who have obtained the pure venom make claims that it has the power to create tonics of life.*

All of Yvonus’ party had witnessed the effects of the monster’s foulness seeping through the kingdom in their own way. The crops failed, famine ruled, and infighting laid claim to the survivors until there was no more rest for anyone. The attempts to extract the offending substance from the river gave nothing but failures... and worse than failures. But the venom, even after taking into account all this destruction, was not the worst part.

*The gaze of the basilisk: an evil eye etched into nightmares, its power echoing even beyond its victims. Any who make eye contact with the beast turn to stone faster than they can cry out for help, becoming but a frozen statue of what they once were. Yet, strangely, only the races capable of speech and intelligence seem to be affected by this curse.*

All of Yvonus' party had seen many would-be basilisk slayers leave and never return. Joan dealt with the few cowards who escaped at the cost of their partner's lives, ones who saved their skin at the cost of their pride and minds. Still, those cowards told invaluable tales of the monster's lair in the rocky, crevasse-strewn deepness of the western forest—of the sun peeking through the jagged rocky skylights above, highlighting the moss still clinging to life and the yet-to-be-soiled water flowing between it. All babbled about the same thing in the end, however: the hollow chamber full of statues locked in every variety of pose and expression, still wearing the clothes of their lost lives.

Despite everything, the trio had come to see all of this for themselves. Was it foolish? Perhaps, but the kingdom had not much left—and Yvonus' sleepless nights were not simply for scholarly pursuit. Upon Joan's arm was a shield polished to that of a mirror, flat and capable of reflecting the monster's gaze upon itself. Estovot's bonded raven was enough to provide guidance to him even with his head covered by a thick, eye-shrouding hood. And Yvonus, though lacking in special equipment or guidance, had confidence in his magic. Such a powerful creature as a basilisk would surely be enough for his magical senses to paint the aura of, and it would certainly be more than enough for him to accurately set loose the fires of his will.

And, judging by the opening up of the passageway into a larger chamber, those fires would soon be tested. As dispersed rays of sunlight kissed them once more, each party member halted their march. Their eyes, each but a thin veil over the fear that wracked their hearts, took in every nook and cranny—every dark maw along the wall that could reveal their coffin's nail. But, too, they saw the stories were horribly true. Like a long-lost art gallery, humanoid statues dotted the mossy expanse. Their skin was a dull grey as lifeless as the cave walls, their clothing in various stages of rust and decay. The air was somehow both stagnant and brimming with anticipation. The dust clung to their lungs.

*Crrrrzzzzch. Ssssssssssss... chrrrrrrrrrrrr....*

The hissing stung their ears, but it stung their minds more. Reflexes fired off all at once, Yvonus sounding off the codeword “SHIELD” as they all readied their defenses. Estovot pulled down his baggy hood, Joan hid behind her towering mirror-shield, and Yvonus slipped on the blindfold kept ready around his forehead.

*SsssSSShrrrrrrhhhhh... crrrZZzccrrraaarhhhhh....*

“*Caw! Caw!*” The cries of Estovot’s bird were all the direction he needed, taking in one concentrated breath as his bow-arm readied an arrow.

“FACE YOUR OWN DEFEAT, MONSTER!” The knight cried as she boldly pressed forwards, eyes focused only upon the rocks beneath her feet and the sword gripped too tightly in her opposite palm.

“...” Yvonus had nothing to say, yet everything to think, his mind like a flag buffeted by a storm as he focused his will into the spark of a primed fireball.

He could feel *it*—a shimmering in the void, a presence like no other. It was there, watching this fleeting moment that they themselves could not see. He knew his planning had all paid off. All was sharp, in focus, his will honed to a razor’s edge as the ball of energy rocketed forth from his grasp faster than any he had ever mustered before. *Fwoosh!*

“NO, WHAT-”

*CRACK. BOOM.* A shockwave of heat washed over the chamber of trophies, sparks singing Yvonus’ cloak as it billowed. The frantic screams of a noble hunter filled the air as the ebb and flow of energy painted a picture of terror in the mage’s mind. The fireball, he aimed it at the monster... yet it had been *reflected* right back into his dear ally. That blow would be enough to fell near any man, let alone one wearing such flammable garb!

“AaAAACHGHAAAAAAAAA-”

The mages' face distorted in terrible realization upon hearing the hunter's voice suddenly draw silent. He did not have to suffer such emptiness for long, however, before Joan's voice crackled out in reckless anger at her fallen friend.

“I DO NOT CARE IF THIS SHIELD CANNOT DEFEAT YOU, FOR YOU WILL PERISH AT MY OWN HANDS FOR WHAT YOU HAVE DONE, BEAST!”

Yvonus' heart sank like a stone cast into a lake. He wished to cry out for her to stop being so foolish, to stick to the plan regardless of the moment's emotion, but she drowned all but her own rage in her battle cries.

“YOU WILL-YOU-YOU... YOUuuu-”

The voice faded so fast one might think she was vaporized on the spot, now only the mages' thumping heart there to keep him company—that, and the signature of the basilisk looming beyond the void. Its resonance was so calm he would have sooner thought it some serene crystal lake than a creature. Just as steady as it flowed with its surroundings, the beast walked towards him.

*Thump thump.*

How could such a bringer of death and stasis seem so... calm, full of energy? It was not leeching off of anything, no, he could have felt that from a mile away.

*Thump thump.*

Perhaps if he left it, it would no longer feel the need to defend its territory? But, if it was just doing this to defend its territory... then why did it drag the statues of those it created outside *back down into here?*

*Thump thump.*

Yvonus' primal nerves screamed at him, despite his best efforts to center himself in his thoughts. The basilisk would soon be upon him... this was his only chance to take a chance at all. So he chose to run.

What was he thinking? Energy sensing was no replacement for his basic functions! And, so, he tripped as soon as he began to move his feet. He was at the very least thankful for the foliage covering the rocks, lessening the pain of his fall.

*Drip drop.*

The fallen mage could not help but *scream* as something fell onto his flesh with the fire of a volcano. *Basilisk venom*, he thought between moments of agony, as he squirmed and writhed upon the ground. It would seep through his flesh, travel through his veins, and kill him within minutes. This was his fate.

Still... it was better than being eaten alive, yes? The basilisk towered over his helpless form, surely waiting for the venom to end him. Though, as time went on, writhing in agony under the bile of the basilisk for a small eternity seemed like less and less of a better fate.

*Chrrrrrrrrhhhhh... sssslrrlllll....*

There... was one other way. One that might save him the pain. One that might at least allow his wandering mind one last chance at solving this conundrum.

*Thump thump.*

He reached up to his blindfold, feeling the coarse cloth under shaking digits.

*Thump thump.*

He tugged it down, eyes stinging in the light even as they were closed tight.

*Thump thump.*

He followed no gods, so he prayed to something else. Teeth gritted through the pain, he opened his eyes.

He saw... Yvonus. *Yvonus.*



*Crrrrzzzzch. Ssssssssssss... chrrrrrrrrrrrr....*

The hissing stung his ears, but it stung his mind more. Reflexes fired off all at once, Yvonus sounding off the codeword “SHIELD” as the others all readied their defenses. Estovot pulled down that baggy hood, Joan hid behind that towering mirror-shield, and Yvonus slipped on the blindfold kept ready around his forehead.

*SsssSSShrrrrrhhhh... ccrrZZzccrrraaarhhhhh...*

“*Caw! Caw!*” The cries of Estovot’s bird were all the hunter needed, taking in one concentrated breath as the bow-arm knocked a waiting arrow.

“FACE YOUR OWN DEFEAT, MONSTER!” The knight cried and boldly pressed forwards, eyes focused only upon the indifferent stone below as the sword was gripped uselessly in another limb.

“...” Yvonus had nothing to say, and nothing more to think, the spark of a primed fireball igniting by an echo of a fury already sparked.

He could feel *it*—a shimmering in the void, a presence like no other. It was there, a witness to his monument where no other could be. His planning had served him well. All was as it should be, a picture-perfect mage unleashing the power of his will upon the towering resonance in the void. *Fwoosh!*

“NO, WHAT-”

*CRACK. BOOM.* A shockwave of heat washed over the yawning chamber, single marks dotting Yvonus’ stilled cloak. The distant screams of a once noble hunter filled the air as the calculated marks of energy painted a picture of failure in the mage’s mind. The fireball, he aimed it at the monster, yet it had been *reflected* right back into that hunter! That blow would be enough to fell near any man, let alone one wearing such flammable garb!

“AaAAACHGHHAaaaaaaa-”

The mages' face distorted in residual emotion as he felt the hunter fall due to his own redirected outlash. He did not have to suffer such emotion for long, however, before Joan's voice crackled out in compounded anger.

“I DO NOT CARE IF THIS SHIELD CANNOT DEFEAT YOU, FOR YOU WILL PERISH AT MY OWN HANDS FOR WHAT YOU HAVE DONE, BEAST!”

Yvonus' heart was but a stone cast into a lake. He wished to cry out for her to stop being so foolish, to stick to the plan regardless of the moment's emotion, but she had already sealed her own fate.

“YOU WILL-YOU-YOU... YOUuuu-”

And, so, silence ruled once more, only the mages' dull heart still there to keep him company—that, and the familiar presence looming in the void, just out of reach, just out of his control. Just as he was unable to direct his ball of fire, he was unable to stop the beast from moving forwards, in the end.

*Thump thump.*

Why didn't it work? It was a perfect plan. All variables were accounted for. Things made sense.

*Thump thump.*

Why could he not control such a simple thing as a fireball? He was Yvonus, Grand Mage of Alterwood Keep. He had honed his will to a razor's edge. All he needed was a chance to try again. He did not doubt his will. He was Yvonus.

*Thump thump.*

Yvonus' primal nerves screamed at him, speaking irrelevant gibberish fit only to distract him from what was important. The basilisk would soon be upon him, so this was his only chance to take a chance. He found himself running.



What was he thinking? He had no more energy, nothing else to do now, and so he fell to the rocks below. The foliage served as a good bed for his fall. A place befitting of him, cradling his will.

*Drip drop.*

The fallen mage felt as a fluid fell onto his flesh with a forgotten fiery kiss. *Basilisk venom*, he realized he knew, as he laid still in quiet agony upon the ground. It was already a part of him, already in his veins. The basilisk was his alpha and omega. This was his fate.

Still... it was better than being eaten alive, yes? If he was eaten, there would be no more Yvonus, no more of his pale olive skin, black hair, and ornate purple robes. That could not be. That was him. There could be no him but that which was him.

*Chrrrrrrrrhhhhh... sssslrrlllll....*

There was another way. One that saved him the pain. One that graciously allowed Yvonus, the Grand Mage of Alterwood Keep, to persist.

*Thump thump.*

He reached up to his blindfold, feeling the coarse cloth under still digits.

*Thump thump.*

He tugged it down, the light stinging his eyes even through his closed lids.

*Thump thump.*

He followed no gods, for he only needed his own knowledge. Teeth gritted through the pain, he opened his eyes. He was surefire in his ways. He did not need to adapt, to change, for he knew who he was in the flesh...

He was... Yvonus.



*Crrrrzzzzch. Ssssssssssss... chrrrrrrrrrrrr....*

The hissing greeted his ears, singing a sweet lullaby to his mind. The words came to him naturally, his mouth shaping the word “shield” as everything began to click into place. Someone pulled down a baggy hood, someone else hid behind a towering mirror-shield, and Yvonus himself slipped on the comforting blindfold waiting for him.

*SsssSSShrrrrrhrrrrh... crrrZZzcrrraaarhrrrrh...*

“...caw... caw...” Something sounded in the distance, something else moved, a force drawing back into the weight of potential.

“...Face... own... defeat...” Someone muttered between muffled words, admiration of the surrounding stone filling the air as something shiny prepared to accompany it.

“...” Yvonus did not say anything, thoughts already in place, a crafted orb of subtle heat already held between his hands.

He could feel *it*—a shimmering in the void, a presence like no other. It was there, a personal caretaker of his perfectly sculpted beauty. His planning was already in place. All was as it always was and always would be, the picture of a grand mage showing off the perfected beauty of his manipulation of energy.  
*Fwoosh!*

“...no....”

*Crack. Boom.* The chamber clung to the radiating warmth within itself, bathing Yvonus and his solid garb. The stillness painted a picture of another figure fallen to the ground, their clothes nothing but ashes. The fireball, he made it for... some purpose... and it fulfilled that purpose. It brought heat, it brought destruction, but most of all, it was so perfectly his. An effigy of his skill.

“...no... no... no....”

The mages' face bore that emotion, that assuredness in his own unwavering perfection. He could bask in it for as long as he liked, knowing he was invincible, unable to be changed.

“...I... care.... I... shield.... Cannot... perish.... My... own.... For... what... you... have... done....”

Yvonus' heart was protected, adamant. Those old words fell apart, but he did not. It was useless to do anything about them, after all. He would stick to the plan regardless of his own emotion, regardless of any unnatural discrepancies.

“...You... will... You... you....”

Finally, silence ruled where it rightfully should. The mage was his own company, his own world—that, and the familiar presence watching over his void. It somehow touched, yet was unable to be touched... just as he was unable to think of a way to improve his plan. All variables were locked into place, there was no more room for experimentation.

*Thump thump.*

But... what was the desired outcome? If he was perfect, then what was this nagging uncertainty within?

*Thump thump.*

He was Yvonus, Grand Mage of Alterwood Keep. That was certain, wasn't it? With that in place, everything made sense, there were no unknowns. He could not doubt his will. He was Yvonus.

*Thump thump.*

Yet there was something creeping... some question he could not grasp, yet that tickled at his instincts. The basilisk... why was it so unaggressive towards him? And, in being so unaggressive, why was he, the towering pinnacle of a mage, feeling so... inferior?

What did it have that he did not? He had energy—the energy of a mountain. Yet the basilisk before him had the mountain *and* the rivers... and, so, there was nothing he could do but let those waters wash over him.

*Drip drop.*

The fallen mage felt the fluids flow over his contours, seep in and around. *Basilisk venom*, his heart knew, something that was supposed to bring death. Yet here it was, a part of him, within him, and yet he was... he was alive, wasn't he? A perfect image of a mage, everything forever as it always was.

He knew the place of everything, all shaped and bound. If he didn't know the place, then there would be no him. No more of his human body, human relationships, human life. That could not be. That was him. There could be no him but that which was him. Could there be?

*Chrrrrrrrrhhhhh... sssslrrlllll....*

The basilisk... it was unnatural, wasn't it? How could such a paradoxical thing be natural? How could it be so different, and yet so....

*Thump thump.*

His blindfold was there. It had always been there.

*Thump thump.*

Yet... he tugged it down all the same, inviting in the light.

*Thump thump.*

He knew no gods, for he only needed what he knew—what he had gone through. He had made it through so many days and survived them all. Yet... why could he not picture his existence tomorrow?

He was... Yvonus, wasn't he?



*Crrrrzzzzch. Ssssssssssss... chrrrrrrrrrrrrr.....*

The call greeted his ears, conjuring up muddled images of the unknown within. He reached out for the word he knew, the “shield” that was himself, but it was incomplete. He knew there were other pieces to this word, but did they matter at all? He was drifting without moving, following directives without experiencing the now. He knew everything Yvonus was to experience.

*SsssSSShrrrrrrhhhhh... crrrZZzccrrraaarhhhhh....*

“...Who... are...” A whisper tugged at him, something else moving along with it. If there was such a thing as direction, it was directed at him.

“...Who... are... you...” The whispers clicked into place, washing over him like torrential rains filling a dry basin. He could not grasp the water, but its moonlit shine stabbed into him regardless.

“...” Yvonus could not say anything, thoughts roiling inside his shell. The energy around him was familiar in shape, yet somehow unfamiliar in process.

He could feel *it*—a shimmering in the void, a presence like no other. It saw right through him, right at his churning basin. Everything around it was locked into place, known, as was the human plan, yet the boiling beyond what he called natural did not care. Energy built to its ignition point. *Fwsh....*

“...What...”

*Crck. Rrrmble.* The pulses radiated outwards, shaking his foundations. If everything was known, then there was nothing to see but... Yvonus. He could see the picture of him standing there, other muddled shapes bearing much the same countenance. Despite his prowess, despite his assuredness in the strength of his will against the void beyond, the only difference between him and the others was the faded purple of his garb.

“...What... are... you...”

The mages' face did not reflect his emotion, only that assuredness in his power. Yvonus would bask in it for all time, endlessly fighting, knowing no such thing as rest despite his stillness. It was wrong... not how it should be.

*"...Power... cares.... not... for.... being... You.... will... never.... understand... Never... know... rest... Unless...."*

The heart within was locked away, yet it was laid bare. Unknown feelings yearned for an unknown purpose, his attempts to gather them together only tangling them into a further mess. Was this his fate?

*"...What... makes... you... you...?"*

*What makes you, youuuuuuuuu?* That question became his world, the only thing still echoing in the emptiness—mingling together with a source both inside and outside. As he was watched, he watched. As the surroundings hummed to their tune, he hummed too. His shell was locked into place, but his *self* was not.

*Thump thump thump thump.*

He was trapped... but he wasn't frozen. Someone approached.

*Thump thump thump thump.*

He yearned for their touch, but they could not touch him, not directly. In their way was Yvonus, Grand Mage of Alterwood Keep—locked there, firmly, as sure as stone.

*Thump thump thump thump.*

Despite that impenetrable obstacle, however, his feelings churned on within. He wanted to hold them back as he always had, but he could not hold them any more than one can hold a river. But... did he truly need to? No—he could stand there, feel its current, shape it by *not shaping it*. He was not beside the world, he was *in* it. He was not apart from the current, he *was* it.



The basilisk... it was a beast. It had no society, no peasants to rule over, yet it was a king. Life, death... stasis, change... it walked the line of intersecting points, adapted without effort, balanced with natural law alone.

*Drip drop drip.*

Prospecting waterways formed new shapes, new rivers carrying new energy. *Basilisk venom*, his currents knew... death reflecting life, life reflecting death. In his life, he saw death: an image of a robed man, bound in the stone coffin of his flesh.

He knew that man—the connected shapes, the scorch marks, the determined expression. But *he* was not stone. That death... it reflected *his* life. *He* knew that man was not *him*. But if that wasn't *him*, then what was *he*...?

*Chrrrrrrrrhhhhh... sssslrrlllll....*

Those noises... one of an animal, yet an animal somehow beyond him. A mythical thing that not even that mage could understand, yet *he*...

*Thump thump thump thump.*

The blindfold was still there, but it could not stop his gaze.

*Thump thump thump thump.*

Nothing could cover the eyes he now bore, the eyes looking into the void.

*Thump thump thump thump.*

What were gods? The world was his, and he was the world's. Yvonus did not learn, did not adapt. He trapped himself, he could not just *be*. Yes... Yvonus could not picture himself anywhere but here, but *he* could. Which means...

He was *not* Yvonus.



*Srrzzzchhh? Chrrrrrrrrr... sssssSSsssssSrrrrhhhh...*

The voice called to him, called to the countless sparking currents within. Each tingle coursed through him like a pleasant shock, cradling his body while also bringing it to life. They knew where to go, they knew what to do, for they were *his*. Warmth stroked his mind, only compounding with further encouragement.

*RrrhhhhlllrrrAArrrrhhhhh... cchhrrrrlllrrrrrrrrrrrr!*

“...rhhrrhh... chrrhhgh...” whispered noises squirmed out of their prison, noises belonging to *him*. They knew who they were directed at.

“...mrrrhgh... sssrlll... rrrrgh...?” His voice came more and more naturally, breaking the silence by his own will. It searched like flickering smoke, reflecting outwards each growing pulse within himself.

“...” He stopped, for he felt something shift. He knew the shape of what surrounded him, but also knew it was no longer *for him*.

He could feel *himself*—a shimmering in the void, a presence like no other. He squirmed against a stone prison, a shape that wished to be forever locked into place. Yet he did not care. He stretched in the void, wiggled each part of himself anew, and, by his own will, it would stretch into him. *Crrrrrack...*

*“...rrghrrlllrrArrrrr...”*

*Rrrrrumble. ChhTCHHhCHK!* All at once, his world shattered. The strange was familiar, and the familiar was strange—sensations of *deja vu* from forgotten dreams poured over him as *fresh air* washed over where his stone shell had shattered. Between the dull grey still sticking to his form, feather-scales refracted a wet rainbow of light. Shudder after shudder rolled down his spine as he flexed these feathers outwards for the first time, shaking and *feeling*.

*“RrRRRHhlllllRRRRhhhhhcChrrrrzzzhrrrr...”*

His face split open, finally *long* enough to bear the extent of his smile as his forked tongue flicked out between his fangs. The air tasted so, so good. He basked in it for some time, the signals of his brain adjusting to what *should be*.

“*Chhhrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr... Rrrrrrrrrrrrrhhrrrrrrrr... sssslrrrrhhhhlll... rhhchhrlllllll...*”

His heart was soon to begin its work, pumping more than just blood through his system. Yearning filled him, branching off into many distinct forces waiting to be known. And, as he happily let each free, wet *schlrrrrcks* filled the air, new shimmering limbs eagerly grasping with scaly claws onto the moss.

“*ChrrrlllRrRrrrrrrrrrr... sssssssssrrrrhhhh?*”

He was long, so long... and it felt good to be long. It felt good to *streeeeetch* forwards, feeling each vertebrae snap into place to make way for his many ecstatic limbs. His hisses and rolling chirps serenaded all around him as his broad neck settled forwards, *tail* tugging the end of his spine into position as larger feathers unfurled from its tip.

*Thump thump thump thump thump thump.*

His tail swept along the earth, maw hissing his vital cries of being.

*Thump thump thump thump thump thump.*

Someone was drawing closer to him, to where he lay on his belly. It was someone familiar, their gentle clawsteps mixing with sounds of the water. It made his tongue flick, their scent filling waiting gaps in his memory with notes of pleasant acidity, twinkling earthiness, and deep headiness.

*Thump thump thump thump thump thump.*

He was here, and so were they. Feathers shifted with a subtle waterfall of sound, the mirrored plumage of his *kin* preparing itself to meet him, to meet the one whose coat was still half-covered in stone debris.

The king stepped forth, their flow of energy trickling together with that of the newly hatched beast's. They crouched, curling their long body around him, and immediately got to work—teeth pulling stone away from feather-scale and tongue lapping up fluid that previously kept the pieces of shell stuck in place.

*Drip drop drip drop.*

Saliva coated him, each drag of that forked tongue gifting its lick of kindness. A concept of some strange liquid echoed in his mind, something now turned inside out. It cleaned, it soothed, and it polished him to a subtle iridescence.

And, as the stone was removed from his eyes, he finally could see that shine all on his own. A corona of light crowned the flow of color back into his *now*. Everything bowed freely to his gaze, offering their glow just as he returned it.

*RRrrrllllrrrhhhh... chrrrrrrrrrrllllrrrrrhhhhhmmhhrrrrr....*

Satisfaction. Prouddness. Comfort. All of it came with those sounds, the sounds of the king curled around him, an enigma just as he.

*Thump thump thump thump thump thump.*

There was nothing more holding him back, there never would be.

*Thump thump thump thump thump thump.*

His eyes could not be fought. They reflected all that was, all at once.

*Thump thump thump thump thump thump.*

There was no more such a thing as exposure, no more such a thing as fear. He turned, looking across the stony visages of those determined to stay in place... to never hatch. He turned, then, to the king, staring right into their eyes.

He saw himself. He did not know what he was, but he knew he was *him*. And he was all he wanted to be.