

A Stroll in the Garden
By Elias Leventhal

If Marvin had learned one thing during his two years of trying to escape from the Garden, it was that potential dangers were color-coded. Anything that was red or green signified impending doom, anything blue or orange was an unfailing indicator of peril, and all of the other colors were equally deadly. Marvin knew this, but his reaction to seeing the purple cloud of smoke was still completely reckless.

The smoke was entrancing, an ethereal cloud that pulsed with dull light as it hovered above the surface of the reception desk of the warehouse that Marvin, Ash and Jordan had been searching for supplies. Slowly, Marvin started to move toward the cloud, ignoring Ash and Jordan's looks of shock.

Marvin reached his hand into the smoke, and his fingers closed on a piece of cool metal. As he pressed down carefully, a crisp ringing sound split the air.

The smoke instantly cleared away to reveal a small silver bell, and a wooden sign next to it: "Please Ring for Service." A door swung open in the back of the room, and a demon in a three-piece suit strode out of it, clutching a sheaf of papers.

"Hello there!" the demon said. "I hope that you are enjoying your time in this beautiful TAO warehouse, but it *does* happen to be my job to kill you now. Corporate ethics, am I right?" The demon turned to Marvin expectantly, grinning, and then started to spring towards him.

"Wait!" Marvin called out, stopping the demon just as it was about to leap forward.

"You're a Garden Demon, right?" he asked desperately. "Aren't you the ones who die whenever someone says their name?" The demon nodded slowly, looking annoyed. "Yes," it said in a patronizing tone. "That is how it works. But in case you were wondering, I'm not going to stand here politely while you guess every name that you can think of. Do you have any other questions, or can I eat you now?"

Suddenly, Marvin saw something on the creature's chest. He grinned in relief, amazed by his good luck.

"Well, you could start by taking your name tag off," he said triumphantly. "Khamikhaga." The demon looked down in disbelief at the cheerful red-and-white square on its chest.

It muttered something unintelligible and vaguely apologetic about "demon office parties" and "why I even bother going, anyway" before disappearing in a flash of purple light. The packet of paper that it had been holding fluttered to the floor.

For a moment, Marvin and Jordan stood around the newly demon-less space in disbelief.

Marvin turned to Ash, still buzzing with adrenaline. She was kneeling on the floor, reading one of the papers that the demon had dropped. An expression of horror was spreading across her face.

"What is it?" Marvin asked, confused. Ash shoved the paper to him wordlessly.

At the top of the page was the name and logo of TAO, or "The Affluent Outdoorsman." Marvin's eyes briefly scanned over the classic logo - a cheerful man looking at the stars from his tent, situated on the deck of a luxury yacht - then he began to read:

Hello, Demon Sales Representatives!

It is disconcerting to remember how humbly this glorious episode of human history began - with the small startup that I founded so many years ago: a small company with the goal of selling overpriced camping gear to the 1%. This company was TAO, and the reception that it got from America was beyond my wildest hopes. Business was booming, but one day, a trend came along that changed everything: A wave of end-of-the-world paranoia that swept across America in the early 2020s. The trend sparked a near-insatiable demand for any piece of camping gear that was advertised as survival gear for what our customers were convinced was the upcoming end of the world.

Sales were sky-high, but the brilliant team at TAO HQ had an idea for making them even higher: staging the *actual* Apocalypse, in order to bring the trend to the next level.

The method of doing this was beautifully simple: starting the Garden; a demon-infested forest, controlled by TAO, that would grow rapidly until it overtook the world. This is the place that you all now live in. And the rest, as they say, is history.

But enough reflection. Sadly, I am addressing you today with a problem, one that could threaten the existence of TAO itself. The Garden has been a great way to increase Apocalypse-themed sales. However, it now seems like we are getting to a point of diminishing returns - the higher percentage of Earth's population the Garden kills off, the *lower* our sales seem to get!

You can rest assured that we will hire an overpriced team of experts to tackle this paradox, the cost of which will be directly debited against your own salary. But in the meantime, it is clear that the only way to go forward is with the Garden's immediate destruction.

However, it is here that we run into a problem. One nagging law is going to stop us from ending the Garden with any degree of efficiency. Here it is:

No. 12,587, Part Z: *In the event that a company wishes to destroy a structure or development belonging to it, they first must check for any people who may still be inside.*

Horrible, right? This purely obstructionist piece of red tape is going to force us to completely clear the Garden of people before we can destroy it and put an end to TAO's decline. And that, my demonic friends, is where you come in.

In the past, your highest duty has been to sell TAO products to those in the Garden, killing them only as a last resort. However, now that we must remove all people from the Garden if we are to end the profit-draining monstrosity that it has become, your only job is the immediate death (although for PR purposes you are forbidden to call it anything other than "nonvoluntary and indefinite cessation of life") of everyone found within the Garden.

At the bottom of the page was the extravagant signature of Marco Stoneman, the CEO of TAO. Marvin put down the letter, shocked. "Wow," he said softly, handing the pages to Jordan. Marvin started to walk aimlessly, mulling over what he had just read. He began to absentmindedly look over the disorganized pile of papers on a nearby desk. Suddenly, his eyes widened as he suddenly saw what looked to be the handwritten first draft of the letter that he had just read.

“Wait a second,” he exclaimed. “I think this is *Marco Stoneman’s* desk!”

In an instant, all three of them were clustered around the small desk. “You’re right!” Ash breathed. Marvin walked around to the other side of the desk and inspected the clunky computer resting on it.

“This looks important,” he observed, booting it up. Once the computer finished loading, it opened to a screen festooned with buttons and menus.

“TAO official computer system,” Jordan said, reading from the top of the screen. “This really is Stoneman’s desk!” Marvin nodded, laughing as he clicked around the screen. “This is incredible,” he agreed, amazed at the power he suddenly had. “We could practically destroy TAO with this thing!”

“I’m glad that you’re enjoying yourselves,” a cold voice came from across the room. “But that *is* my computer, and I don’t recall giving you permission to use it.” Marvin spun around to see Marco Stoneman standing across the room, surrounded by a small army of large, intimidating demons who trailed behind Marco as he began to move forward.

“What are those?” Ash asked nervously.

“Breadwinners,” Marco said proudly. “The best demons I have. Whenever they see any form of money, they will attack it and absorb it into themselves. They’re perfect for collecting money from Garden travelers like you. But in the meantime, I’m sure they’ll do fine at their current job - getting you off of my computer, and then killing you as efficiently as possible.” At Marco’s cue, and the demons started to approach.

Marvin’s eyes flitted over the computer screen frantically, trying to find something he could use. Suddenly, he saw a green dollar sign in the corner of the screen, with the caption “Unlock TAO funds.” Marvin clicked on it quickly.

“Why are you still on my computer?” Marco asked angrily. “You’re not going to -” He was cut off by a loud grinding noise coming from the back of the room. The back wall began to sink into the floor, revealing a huge room beyond. As the new room’s fluorescent lights flickered on overhead, Marvin saw a huge vault filled with tall metal shelves, which were completely stuffed with every imaginable form of money.

After a long, silent, pause, a Breadwinner broke off from the group and tentatively edged into the room. As it neared the money, it started to run faster and faster. Several other demons followed its lead, plunging into the boxes of bills, coins and pieces of paper. Every piece of money that the demons touched seemed to dissolve into them, filling every demon with a bright green glow.

Marco dove out the way as the stampede picked up in speed and power. He pressed himself against the wall next to Marvin, disdainfully watching the demons charge forward.

“You’re annoying, you know,” he said to Marvin, “But it isn’t going to save your life. The whole point of Breadwinners is that I can harvest the money that they absorb and put it back into my vault.” Suddenly, Marvin saw one demon shove another out of the way to get at a box of money. The shoved demon flew into the air, smashing into the vault wall and dying in a flash of light.

“Wait a second,” Marco said, shoving himself off of the wall. “That demon was carrying money! Where did it go?” More flashes popped on and off as the demons continued to attack each other in an attempt to get at the money. Every time a demon died, the green glow that it had been carrying was gone.

“They’re making it disappear!” Marco exclaimed in panic. “They’re going to make the money go away!” Casting a desperate look to Marvin, Marco plunged into the throng of Breadwinners, arms extended. As soon as he got into the room, he bent down, frantically trying to shovel money into his arms. Marvin could just make out another demon jumping onto Marco’s back, the two of them struggling on the ground, and then the CEO was obscured by the writhing mass of demonic bodies and green light.

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Marvin shoved himself off of the wall numbly. The shelves of the vault were bare, and the demons and Marco were gone. “Wow,” Marvin said, walking over to the others on the other side of the room.

“Marco’s gone?” Ash asked.

“I think so,” Marvin said, nodding. He glanced into the depths of the room one more time, then turned away.

Wordlessly, the three of them gathered around the computer.

“Well then,” Jordan said, looking at the explosion of options on the screen, the potential available to them. “It seems that we have our work cut out for us. Let’s get started.”